

*A Biblical Investigation of Foreknowledge and Free Will*

# DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

MICHAEL R. SAIA

WITH A FOREWORD BY GREGORY A. BOYD

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Know  
the Future?*

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by Michael R. Saia

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## Foreword

When confronted with tragedy, it is customary to hear Christians try to reassure themselves or others with clichés like, “There is a reason for everything;” “God is in control”; “God’s ways are not our ways, we simply have to trust him.” The assumption behind all such remarks is that every event, however tragic, somehow fits into a divine plan. There is a divine reason for everything.

This assumption has been prevalent in the Christian tradition since the time of Augustine (b. 354). It has been worked out by theologians in a variety of ways. Some have held that God unilaterally controls the world. Hence all events, including human decisions, unfold exactly as God wills. In this view God ordains all that comes to pass. This view is usually associated with classical Calvinism. Others have granted that humans (and perhaps angels) have free will and thus make choices that God does not ordain. Yet they have held that, on the basis of his foreknowledge, God orchestrates how these decisions fit into his providential plan. He specifically allows each event to take place for a divine reason. This view is usually associated with classical Arminianism. The views are obviously significantly different, but they both agree that the ultimate reason things go astray as they do is because, at the very least, God willed not to prevent them.

This view is as pervasive as it is old. Indeed, most Christians today, as throughout history, fall into one of these two camps, whether they know it or not. But as old and revered as this traditional perspective is, it must not be accepted uncritically. For it is beset with a number of difficult biblical, philosophical and practical problems. I wish to say a brief word about each of these sets of difficulties.

As Mike Saia masterfully demonstrates in this work, the traditional perspective is at odds with major portions of the biblical witness. For example, Scripture frequently depicts God as speaking and

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thinking about the future in terms of what may or may not be, not in terms of what will certainly be (e.g., Exodus 3:18-4:9; 13:17; Ezekiel 12:3). How is this consistent with the view that the future is eternally settled in the mind, if not the will, of God? Moreover, Scripture frequently depicts God as changing his plans in response to changing circumstances (e.g., Exodus 32:10-14; Jeremiah 18:1-10). Indeed, God's willingness to change his plans is held up as one of his glorious attributes (Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:12-13). How is this consistent with the view that God's plan for every detail of the world is eternally settled?

Moreover, the Bible often portrays God as testing people to see what decisions they will make (e.g., Genesis 22:12; Exodus 16:4; Deuteronomy 8:2; 13:1-3; II Chronicles 32:31). If people's decisions are eternally foreknown, or foreordained, what meaning can these passages have? The Bible also repeatedly speaks of God's regretting how things turn out (Genesis 6:6; I Samuel 15:10, 35), expecting certain things to happen that don't come to pass (Isaiah 5:1-5; Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20), and being frustrated and grieved when people resist his attempts at bringing them into alignment with his will (Ezekiel 22:29-31; Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30; cf. Hebrews 3:8, 15; 4:7; Acts 7:51). How is any of this consistent with the view that God knows and/or wills all that comes to pass an eternity before it happens? How can God regret something if everything unfolds just as he knew it would (or willed it to be)? How can God expect things to go one way if he knew or willed from all eternity that they wouldn't go that way? And how can God be genuinely frustrated with people if they always behave exactly as he knew (or ordained) they would? Indeed, why would God even try to do something he knows (or ordains) would not be done?

The traditional perspective is also encumbered with a number of philosophical and practical problems as well, as Mike Saia also demonstrates. Among its most difficult philosophical problems is the classical problem of evil. Put simply, it is hard, to say the least, to accept that every evil thing that happens in the world is allowed (let alone ordained) for a good reason. Just this morning I read in the newspaper about a five-year-old girl in California who was kidnapped, raped, and suffocated before having her body dumped alongside of a highway. How are we to believe that God deemed it better to allow this to happen than to prevent it?

We can easily see why God gave agents free will, for without it love would not be possible. But the traditional view requires that we also

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accept that God has a specific good reason for allowing free agents to do what they do. We must therefore accept that it was better to allow (or ordain) this event to take place than to prevent it. And this, I submit, is exceedingly difficult to accept.

Another difficult philosophical problem for the traditional view is how we are to reconcile God's foreknowledge or foreordination with human and angelic free will. For a person to have free will and be responsible for what they choose, they must have the capacity to turn possible courses of action into actual actions. If their decisions are settled from all eternity, however, then it is not really possible for them to choose other than what God knows (or ordains) we shall choose. If everything is eternally settled, we never really face possibilities.

On top of all this, there are a host of practical difficulties that attend to the traditional perspective. For one thing, the view that everything unfolds according to a divine plan has tended to foster among Christians an attitude of resignation rather than revolt. Rather than living and praying to bring God's will "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), many are more inclined to accept everything that happens as already revealing God's will. Whereas Jesus uniformly confronted afflictions and hardships as coming from the devil, not God, many Christians accept them as coming from God. This not only confuses God's will with Satan's will - no minor theological mistake! - it also undermines the passion and urgency with which Christians engage in kingdom work.

This is especially evident in the area of prayer. Under the influence of the traditional perspective, people frequently say that prayer is for our sake, not God's. The purpose of prayer is to affect the person praying, not to affect God or change things. This is light years removed from the biblical perspective, for the Bible teaches that prayer is powerful and effective at affecting God and changing things (James 5:16). And this is why prayer is consistently depicted as an urgent activity. Things really hang on whether or not the people of God pray. For example, in Ezekiel 22:29-32 the Lord says, "The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them." (Ezekiel 22:29-31)



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It's clear the Lord didn't want to judge his people, despite their unjust practices and neglect of the poor. This is why he sought for someone to prevent it. And the way they could have prevented it was through intercessory prayer – “standing in the breach.” Scripture is full of examples of individuals and groups changing God's plan to judge people through intercessory prayer (e.g., Exodus 32:10-14; Numbers 11:1-2; 14:12-20; 16:20-35; Deuteronomy 9:13-14, 18-20, 25; II Samuel 24:17-25; I Kings 21:27-29; II Chronicles 12:5-8; Jeremiah 26:19). Unfortunately, in the situation the Lord is addressing in Ezekiel, there was no intercessor to be found. And this is why judgment came upon Israel.

We see that things really hang on whether people are willing to pray or not! But if we believe that the future has been settled from all eternity, our prayer really doesn't change things. The only purpose it can serve, therefore, is to change the people who pray (though even this has been settled for all eternity). People who believe this will tend not to pray as urgently and as passionately as they should.

In the light of these biblical, philosophical and practical problems, it is incumbent on us to take a fresh, critical look at the traditional perspective. Foremost among the issues that need to be considered is the one Mike Saia investigates in this book. Does God foreknow each and every free decision agents make an eternity before they make them?

To many, of course, the very question is out of bounds. It seems to imply a limitation on God. In point of fact, it does not. As Mr. Saia shows, the issue is not about whether God knows everything, for all who believe in the Bible agree that he does. The issue is rather about the contents of the “everything” God knows.

More specifically, the issue is about the kind of world God decided to create. Does it include future possibilities or not? The view advocated in this book is simply that it does. By his own sovereign decision, God created a world that was not settled from all eternity, but was open. To be sure, God settles ahead of time whatever he wants to settle, but he leaves open whatever he wants to leave open, leaving it to the free agents he has created to decide how this openness - the possibilities of creation - will be resolved. This view, Saia argues, is the one most consistent with Scripture, reason, and experience.

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Ironically, it is also the view that most glorifies God, for it presents God as one who uses unimaginable wisdom in anticipating outcomes that are not eternally settled. It presents God as one who is so confident in himself that he does not need to control or foreknow everything in order to steer the world toward the goal he has for it. And it presents God as one who genuinely wants a personal, give-and-take relationship with us. He is so in love with us, he allows us to affect what he does and thus influence what comes to pass.

The traditional perspective is old and revered, but for all who hold Scripture as the final authority in matters of faith, it must not be deemed unassailable. We must be willing to have an open mind and a bold spirit to align our thinking with the Word of God, whether it agrees with tradition or not. This is the challenge this work presents us with. One may not agree with all of the arguments and conclusions presented, but out of faithfulness to the Word, one cannot avoid wrestling with them. With exegetical skill and astute reasoning, Saia presents a case for the open view of God that demands our careful consideration.

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Author of *God of the Possible*, *Letters from a Skeptic*, *Across the Spectrum*, and *God at War*.



## Introduction

“We never worship God as he truly is.”

The congregation sat in stunned silence contemplating the worship leader’s pronouncement. He continued, explaining, “This is because we can never fully comprehend God with our finite minds. Rather, we worship God up to the level of knowledge we have of Him, and must constantly change our worship along with our changing knowledge of his character and ways.”

The worship leader’s shocking statement made perfect sense when he compared the worship of the infinite God with the finite knowledge of man. As man grows in his knowledge of God, his worship will change accordingly.

The primary source of this knowledge is the revelation God has given of himself in the Scriptures. If we are not open to having our concept of God continually molded by his self-revelation, we are doomed to spiritual stagnancy. On the other hand, if we allow our doctrine to be continually honed by the “sharp, two-edged sword” of the word of God, we grow daily in our knowledge of Him and how to worship and serve Him acceptably.

There is nothing more crucial to our Christian theology and practice than our concept of God. The ideas we have about God’s nature and character are central to all other aspects of our Christian life. What we believe about God will surely be reflected in our relationship with him. If we believe God is a distant, unresponsive being, prayer will be extremely difficult, but if we conceive of God as a loving Father waiting to hear and answer his children’s petitions, we will be eager to pray. Because our ideas affect our actions, there is nothing which can raise more intense emotion or cause more controversy, than an idea about God which does not fit our pre-conceptions.

While it is true we must be careful not to be “blown around by every wind of doctrine,” it is also true we must constantly test the teachings we hold by the plumb line of Scripture to ensure their biblical accuracy. Thus, there is a tension between “holding fast to the faith delivered unto us” and “growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”

In any discussion of theology there are doctrines pivotal to individual salvation and doctrines which are not crucial to salvation

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knowledge. The Moravians have a motto that beautifully expresses what our attitude should be regarding this difference:

In essentials—unity.  
In non-essentials—liberty.  
And in all things—charity (love).

In our desire to “keep the faith” and yet “grow in grace,” we need to decide which doctrines we will cling to as essentials and which we will hold in liberty as non-essentials. Beyond that, we must be loving towards all of our Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree, if we are to be called his disciples.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy in our pride to assume that we have an inside line on the true knowledge of God, and any differing ideas must automatically be false because they challenge our doctrines. This pride in our knowledge can establish a false sense of security based on the assumption that our doctrine is complete, and need never be adjusted to accommodate further revelation from God’s Word. We must cling to the truth as we know it, and yet be willing to change our concepts of God when necessary, humbly submitting ourselves to the Word of God, trusting the Spirit of Truth to “guide us into all truth” as Jesus promised.

This is a book about the foreknowledge of God and the free will of man, and as such is bound to cause controversy. This controversy will not be simple, but multi-faceted. Some people will have intellectual problems with this book because it challenges their pre-conceived ideas about God. Some will find the book emotionally uncomfortable because it threatens their sense of security. Others will grapple with the aspects of biblical interpretation, while others may find the implications for their daily Christian life particularly challenging.

Most people in the Church today would not consider reconciliation between the foreknowledge of God and the free will of man to be a “problem.” This may be because many people simply accept all they are taught in church without any question as to its biblical veracity or philosophical consistency. Some Christians may think merely bringing up the topic is unacceptable, since they believe controversy is to be avoided at all costs. There are many, though, who are not satisfied with spoon-fed doctrine and are eager to think about, research, and challenge everything they hear in an effort to increase their biblical understanding of God.

In the past few years there has been a growing interest in the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge. Much of the published material on this subject is highly philosophical in nature, and while this is

## INTRODUCTION

helpful, a sound scriptural basis for this view of God's nature and character must also be presented. Our doctrine of God must be biblically accurate as well as philosophically consistent. This book attempts to supply some of the missing Biblical arguments for the idea that God may not know the future choices of human beings. Discussing God's relationship to time becomes a necessary part of the effort, since timelessness in God is often used to support the idea of absolute foreknowledge.

Since those who hold to the timelessness of God and absolute foreknowledge have marshaled various scriptures to bolster their position, it is necessary to respond to these references in two ways. First, the verses *supporting* the ideas must be investigated to see if they are being properly interpreted by the application of good hermeneutical principles. Second, the *opposing* verses must be presented and tested to see if they constitute a valid support for the opposite view. Together with these two purposes, it is also necessary to prove the philosophical and practical validity of the biblical conclusions.

It is not necessary to associate these discussions with any particular "view" of God. While labels for theological persuasions may be useful in making general references to concepts ("This idea sounds Calvinistic"), their accuracy fails when applied to people ("He is a Calvinist"). To describe it in the vocabulary of S. I. Hayakawa—Calvinist<sub>1</sub> is not Calvinist<sub>2</sub>.<sup>1</sup> That is, every Calvinist will have a slightly different definition of Calvinism, so we must be careful not to label people, but to speak of ideas, and whether or not those ideas are biblical.

One of my Baptist pastors did not believe in predestination or eternal security, but proudly proclaimed himself a "Calvinist." Was he then a Calvinist or not? The answer would probably depend on the theological persuasion of the person answering the question.

Attaching labels to people can also make it easier to dismiss a person's ideas or arguments out of hand. One does not have to bother with the specific details of another person's theology, if he can use a label to associate the other person with a negative philosophy and therefore ignore him. Unfortunately, this kind of labeling has been happening in the discussions about God's knowledge in recent publications. Hopefully, we can move past this kind of labeling into fruitful discussion of the biblical issues.

Sometimes people may also accuse others of having ulterior motives in interpreting the Scriptures. "You're just interpreting the

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<sup>1</sup>S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964).

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Bible in that way because you can't handle the truth. You want God to be like you so you don't have to deal with him as he really is." Such arguing against the person, rather than against the person's ideas (called an *ad hominem* argument), is both arrogant and rude. The implication is that the opponent reasons the way he does because his motives are self-serving. This kind of argument never accomplishes anything productive. It is simply a means of dismissing others and their ideas without taking them seriously.

It is time to lay such arguments aside and begin applying ourselves to diligent study of the Scriptures to discover God's true nature and character as revealed in his Word. If, after all our study, we end up with different viewpoints, we can respond as the Moravians suggest, with liberty in the non-essentials, and love in all things.

I did not begin my investigation into the subject of the foreknowledge of God because of the influence of any other person. On the contrary, I was well versed in the common teaching that God has absolute knowledge of all events past, present, and future.

Neither did I embark on the study because I was in the midst of some personal theological struggle. I was quite content with my relationship with God and my service in his kingdom.

Rather, my journey began as I was reading my Bible as part of my daily devotions. As I read Genesis 18:21, the phrase, "and if not, I will know" caught my attention. God said, "and if not, *I will know!*" I knew immediately I was faced with a dilemma. This concept of God did not agree with what I had learned about him. Would I believe what I had been taught by men, no matter how well meaning, or would I believe the word of God alone? I made the commitment to put God's Word before any teaching of man, and that decision launched me into a thirty-year study on the foreknowledge of God. This book is a result of that research.

It is not my intention to cause any brother or sister undue doctrinal discomfort. Rather, my desire is to stimulate thought, Bible study, and discussion about an important aspect of God's nature. In this investigation into an age-old dialogue, we can only humbly acknowledge that we do not have complete understanding of God, and that we all need to learn more about him from his Word.

My hope is that this work will take the Church one more step in the direction of a radically-biblical concept of God. If this purpose is accomplished, I will be grateful.

**Part I**

**Philosophical**





# Chapter 1

## The Two Positions

Does God live outside of time? Does God know what people will choose to do in the future?

These questions, and the logical consequences of the answers to these questions, have fostered a long-standing debate in the Church.

If God is outside of time and knows the future, there are philosophical problems which spring to mind for many people:

Does the Bible actually teach that God knows the future, free will choices of human beings?

If God knew before he created that the vast majority of people would be separated from Him in eternal punishment, why did he make us at all?

If God knows who will be saved and who will be lost, doesn't this mean the outcome is already fixed?

If a person's salvation or damnation is already an actual future event, does it do any good to preach the gospel to that person?

Does it do any good to pray if God already knows whether or not the prayer will be answered? Is prayer only for *our* good, or does God really respond and change circumstances in the world because of our petitions?

If God knew Adam and Eve would sin and thus plunge the world into a fallen state, but proceeded to create the world anyway, isn't God responsible for the presence of evil in the world?<sup>1</sup> Or, to put it another way, if the entire history of the universe was known to God before he even created, is he not responsible for all of the events in history and thus responsible for evil?

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<sup>1</sup>An argument of this kind is used by Bertrand Russell in his book *Why I am Not a Christian*. See chapter 13 for details. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: and other essays on religion and related subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 29-30.

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Does God know the future because he lives outside of time? If so, is this idea supported by the Scriptures?

If God knows our future choices, do we really have a free will? If God knows today what I will do tomorrow, when the time comes, am I free to do something other than what God has already seen will happen, or will I simply do what he has foreseen? If I can only do those things he has already seen, do I have a free will?

On the other hand, if God does *not* know what we will choose in the future, there are other questions which must be answered:

What does the Bible say about the knowledge of God? Does the Bible indicate that God may not know the future, free-will choices of human beings?

How does God prophesy future events with such accuracy?

How does God declare people's choices before they happen (as in the case of Peter's denial of Christ)?

When the Bible talks about foreknowledge, doesn't that mean God knows everything that will happen in the future?

What about the doctrine of predestination? Doesn't the Bible teach that people are predestined to be saved or lost? And what about Judas? Was he predestined to betray Jesus and then be lost forever?

Is the doctrine of election true? Are some people chosen beforehand to be saved and others not?

And what about the sovereignty of God? If people can choose something God has not foreseen, is he truly the sovereign governor of the universe?

If we say God does not know the future, are we limiting him by saying he is not omniscient?

Though many people simply accept what they are taught and think no further about it, there are many Christians who are troubled by these questions. As they think the doctrine of God's absolute foreknowledge through to its logical conclusions, they realize that the results do not always fit with the character and nature of God as described in the Bible. These conclusions also appear to conflict with the free will of man and the justice of God.

Either God knows all our future choices or he does not.<sup>2</sup> Though there are various explanations as to *how* God would or

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<sup>2</sup>Gregory Boyd, in his book *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), makes a helpful distinction here. He points out that God does determine, and thus knows, some of the future. God also says that some of the future is not determined, and can turn out differently depending on the free-will choices of God and man. Dr. Boyd describes these two aspects of history as the "motif of future determinism" and the "motif of future openness" (p. 13). Since both of these

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would not know our choices, knowing or not knowing are the two fundamental positions. But knowing or not knowing, in itself, does not cause any real difficulties. The philosophical, biblical, and practical problems arise when we assert *both* that God knows our choices *and* that we are free to choose between two possible alternatives.

It does appear, however, from both a biblical and experiential viewpoint, that free will truly does exist. Thus, if we assert both that God knows our future choices *and* that we are truly free to choose, we fall into various biblical, philosophical, theological, and practical dilemmas.

In defining the two major ways of looking at the nature of God with respect to time and knowledge, we will not be attempting in this section to fully defend the positions—but to simply outline their differences.

### **Position #1 The “Eternal Now” or Timeless God**

There appear to be five major ways commonly taught in the church today as to how God could know our future choices. Two of these methods are related to God’s predetermination (predestination) of events, and three are connected with God’s relationship to time.

The first of the “how’s” is one we will not consider extensively in this book. This is the position that God has absolutely predetermined every event which takes place in the entire history of the universe. Good choices, bad choices—yes, every event in all of history—all were determined by God before he spoke his first creative word. Thus, God can know every choice people will make because God has determined they will make those choices. Since this position automatically eliminates free, there is no conflict between the foreknowledge of God and the free will of man. Of course, one still faces questions about the justice of God in the eternal damnation of most of the human race, but there is no philosophical conflict between the foreknowledge of God and the free will of man in this view. Free will is simply eliminated by God’s determination.

Although those who hold to the absolute predestination of all events may redefine free will to be “free to do what God has

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“motifs” are found in the Scriptures, the issue is not if God knows *any* of the future, but if God foreknows *absolutely every event* in the future, including all of the free-will choices of man.

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determined” rather than “free to choose between two alternatives,” this redefinition does not solve the basic problem. Redefining free will out of existence solves the foreknowledge vs. free will conflict, but only by eliminating free will as we experience it in our daily lives and as God speaks of it in his Word. Solving the problem in this fashion will not be intellectually satisfying to the majority of Christians.

Others try to preserve free will in the light of total predestination by describing our choices as both free (contingent) and fixed (certain) at the same time. But any talk of “fixed freedom” or “certain contingencies” is just verbal and logical inconsistency and will only cloud the issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Several examples of this kind of statement occur in Dr. Norman Geisler’s *Creating God in the Image of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997). On page 109, he says, “That is to say, what is willed by *conditional necessity* does not violate human freedom, since what is willed is conditioned on their freely choosing it.” (emphasis mine) Not only does Dr. Geisler use the confusing and illogical term “conditional necessity” (contingent certainty?, free fixity?), but the argument seems to be that God wills something to take place because someone freely chooses it. Did this event happen because someone chose it or because God willed it? It seems Dr. Geisler would answer, “Yes!” But this kind of confusion in thought and language will not answer the question of whether man’s choices are conditional or necessary. And when did God will this “free” choice to take place? Could it be after the choice was already made? This is illogical. God’s willing of the choice had to be either before or at the same time as the choice, which makes the choice the result of the willing of God and not the choosing of man. Thus, the choice is determined by God, regardless of our incomplete perspective as finite human beings.

When Dr. Geisler says “conditional necessity,” note the subtle shift from the choice itself (it is *conditional* on the will of man) to the knowledge of God (it is *necessary* as a result of God’s knowledge). Thus, though Dr. Geisler is applying both words to the same event, in his explanation he uses the first term to describe the choice itself, and the second term to describe God’s perspective of the choice.

On page 38, he claims, “...future contingents...are contingent with regard to their immediate cause (human free choice) but necessary with regard to God’s knowledge. ...it is not impossible for a timeless being to know a necessary end that is caused by a contingent means.” Besides mixing the terms “contingent,” “cause,” “end,” and “means,” Dr. Geisler here states that free will choices are both *necessary* and *contingent* at the same time. He divorces the idea of the “means” from the “end,” as if a “necessary end” could be produced by a “contingent means” with no logical or temporal relationship between the means and the end. If an “end” is necessary (must come to pass in only one way as a result of the means), the “means” cannot be contingent (may produce this or

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There are those in the church who define “predestination” to refer only to salvation and not to all choices we might make. This definition of predestination will be discussed later in the book along with a look at the actual references to the idea of predestination in the Scriptures. Even so, if the most important decision we can make in life—our salvation—is predetermined by God, we must still address the free will issue.

The second “how” is that God lives completely outside of time (having no sequence or duration) and thus can see the past, present, and future as if they are all happening now. This is sometimes referred to as the “eternal now” or “ever-present now” theory. Note that we have defined time as sequence or duration and not in terms of minutes, hours, days, years, etc.<sup>4</sup>

In this view, people commonly relate all of God’s thoughts, actions and emotions to this “eternal now,” declaring God has no sequence in his being. Rather, God’s personal activities are all happening now in the same way he perceives all events in history as happening now. Thus, God can know all events, past, present and future, because he is currently experiencing them as happening. “With God,” they say, “there is no past, present or future. Everything is now to him.” Or to put it another way, God has temporal position, a “now,” but he has no temporal duration, a sequence from one “now” to another. This position seems to fit best with the idea that God can act both outside of and within our time-related history.

Another variation on this theme is the idea that God is timeless. In this view, God does not experience or do anything “now,” but rather timelessly. There is no time at all for God, they say, so there

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that end). This reasoning is especially interesting in light of his own statement on page 111 that “forced freedom is a contradiction.”

The position Dr. Geisler takes that our choices are free and conditional from our perspective, but fixed as far as the knowledge and will of God are concerned, will also not answer the question. Whose perspective is true, God’s or man’s? Since they are mutually exclusive positions, they cannot both be true at the same time. Surely God, who is the Truth, has a more accurate perspective on history than we do. So, given these two positions, we will have to side with God and say that the choices are willed by God and are necessary in nature. This eliminates the free will of man. See chapter 3 for a discussion of the contrast of God’s vs. man’s perspective.

<sup>4</sup>Though interestingly enough, God is referred to as having years in his existence. Psalm 102:24—I say, “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Thy years are throughout all generations.” And Psalm 102:27—“But Thou art the same, And Thy years will not come to an end.” This latter passage is also quoted in Hebrews 1:12 as referring to Christ.

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is also no “now” in his existence. Though this would seem to solve the problem of God’s having a temporal position or duration, the end result is the same as far as foreknowledge is concerned. God knows all events timelessly and thus knows events before they happen.<sup>5</sup>

Third, God is presented as living both in and out of time, yet he still sees the past, present, and future at the same time. In this view, God is said to “transcend” time—he is both in time and greater than time simultaneously. This is essentially the same as the “eternal now” theory, but offers its proponents the opportunity to claim God is related to time in the same way we are when it suits his purposes to do so. Since God can see the future, though, it still leaves us in the same position as the “eternal now” theory with respect to foreknowledge.

Fourth, God may be living in time (sequence, duration), and yet, in some fashion unknown to us, he can see the past, present, and future. Thus, his knowledge of our future choices is not based on being outside of time, in some “eternal now,” but on some other innate capacity for knowledge which he possesses but has not revealed to us. Again, the main point is that this theory asserts both that God foreknows our choices *and* that we have a free will.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>To those who would object to the application of the word *before* to events known *timelessly* by God, we have to make the same argument as in footnote 3 of this section. Whose perspective is true? If God sees all things as happening “now” or even without respect to any time, still *we* have a duration in which we live, and in our history things happen now and then, before and after. Whose view of history is correct then, ours or God’s? No matter how God *views* history, the nature of the history remains the same. Thus, if God knows now (with respect to our time) what will happen tomorrow (with respect to our time), true *foreknowledge* still exists. If we want to say that God’s timeless knowledge of events means that his knowledge has no reference to our history, we will eliminate the *fore* in *foreknowledge* (as did Boethius, *Consolation*, Bk. V, sec. 6, ll. 65-75), and we will simply have knowledge. We will also make a confusion of our idea of history by saying that all events in our history are happening simultaneously. But *we* still have a before and after, so even if God knows all events in our history at all times, he knows events in our history before they happen, so foreknowledge is still a problem. Consider this. Did God know what I would choose today before he even created the world? Then he has *foreknowledge*. Ultimately, though, this discussion must not be decided philosophically but biblically. Our reasonings about God must be submitted to whatever God says about himself in his word.

<sup>6</sup>I have heard the interesting proposition that God chose at some time in the past to limit his knowledge. But this would imply that before God limited his knowledge, he did know all of our future choices. This would mean that God

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The fifth idea is that before God created he considered all the possible kinds of worlds he could make and all the possible beings which might inhabit those worlds. He also saw all of the possible consequences of all the choices these beings could make. Thus, God made our world—only one of the infinite number of worlds he could have created—knowing all of the beings who will exist, the choices they will make given certain circumstances, and the circumstances into which they will be placed. He can therefore know with certainty what each person will choose to do because he knows their propensities and the circumstances which will influence their choices. Some who hold this position would even claim God has also arranged all of the circumstances in which these beings will find themselves.

This theory is often called “middle knowledge.” If this theory sounds familiar, it is because it works out practically to be the same as the absolute predestination of all events. It would appear as if it does not matter if God causes a person to make certain choices, or if he puts them into circumstances knowing absolutely what the person will do when faced with those situations. Either way, the person cannot be said to “freely choose” because the outcome was determined either by God or by the circumstances God arranged. The result was fixed and free will was therefore eliminated. This is only a softer form of the determinism found in the first theory—the absolute predestination of all events.

We can see, then, that two of the theories (absolute predestination and middle knowledge) answer the question of God’s knowledge of our future choices by declaring that God has pre-arranged the outcome. This solves the foreknowledge vs. free will problem by eliminating free will and thus places these theories outside the scope of this book. We are only dealing here with theories which assert *both* the foreknowledge of God *and* the free will of man.

Two of the popular theories state that God lives in an “eternal now,” or lives timelessly, and sees human choices as happening simultaneously with no respect to past, present, or future. One of the theories pictures God as living in a sequence or duration, but relies on a special ability in God to see the future. This yields the same result as the “eternal now” position but without stating the basis for God’s knowledge of future events.

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chose to limit his knowledge so that he could be just and we could be free. This is tantamount to saying that God changed his knowledge in order to correct his character, which is, of course, refuted by many biblical passages asserting that God’s character never changes (e.g., Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8).

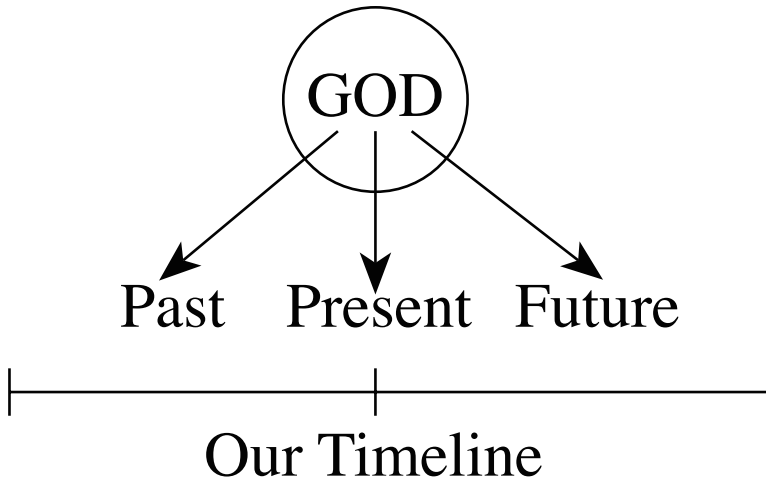


## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

Thus, the major theory backing the position that God knows our future choices is the “eternal now” or “ever-present now” God. Part of the purpose of this book will be to investigate whether or not the Bible supports the idea of a God who lives outside of time, in an eternal now, knowing all future events.

Graphically, this view of God and his relationship to time could be presented as:

### The “Eternal Now” God



Alternately, this picture could be changed to represent God as the entire backdrop on which our timeline is placed. Though it can be pictured many ways, the definition remains the same—God is outside of time and all times are “now” from his perspective. Thus, God can have knowledge of all events in history because they are all happening “now” to him.

### **Position #2 - God in Duration**

In contrast to the notion that God lives outside of time in some kind of “eternal now,” God can be viewed as living in a duration or sequence. This is not to say that God necessarily experiences time in the same way we do, but simply that He moves from thought to thought, from thought to choice, or from one emotional state to another in a sequence rather than experiencing all thoughts, choices and emotional states at the same time as is required by the “eternal now” definition.

## THE TWO POSITIONS

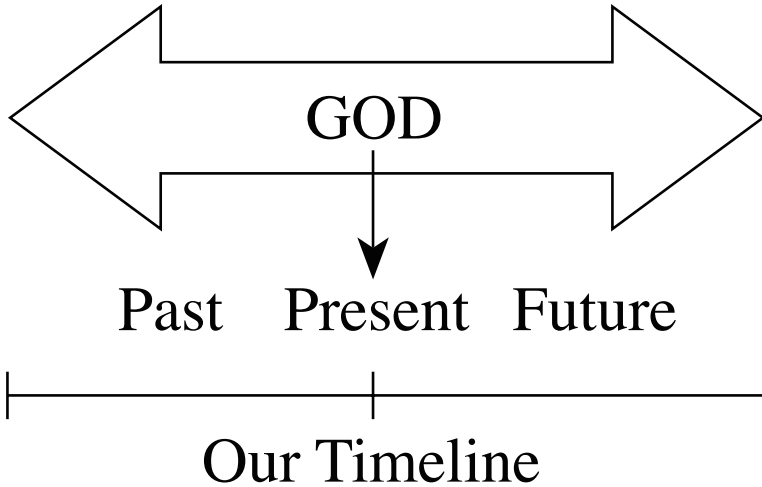
Viewing God as living in a duration would mean that at some point in his eternal duration (sequence without any beginning), he created “all things that have come into being” (John 1:3) to exist along with him in his eternal duration. This would not mean that finite, created things are eternal, but that they exist in the same duration which has always existed in the being of God. Another way to say this would be that our history parallels the duration of the being of God.

Of course, this idea of God and his creation requires a different definition of “eternal.” In the “eternal now” view of God, eternity is a timelessness which has no sequence or duration. Everything is now and happens now (with respect to the being of God). God is simply outside of, or apart from, time, and “eternity” is accordingly timeless.

In the duration view, eternity is defined as a sequence which has had no beginning, is now, and will have no end. Thus, both God and his creation have a past, present, and future. For God, there would be no time in the past where he did not previously exist, whereas for us there would be a beginning—a time before which we did not exist. In this picture of God, eternal duration is not something separate from God, something different from God in which he exists. It is part of his very existence as God—part of his nature. Thus, eternity only exists because God exists eternally. Duration is part of God’s nature in the same manner duration is part of the creation, not that God is like us, but that we are like him.

Graphically, this view of God and his relationship to time could be diagrammed as:

## God in Duration or Sequence



This diagram implies that God, who has always existed in a duration, created finite things to exist in that same duration. At any point in the existence of the creation, then, God is existing at that same “time” in his sequence.

Technically speaking, the arrow to the right of the present does not have to exist. Without it, the diagram would indicate the future does not currently exist. This proposition will be explored in the section on the existence of the future in a later chapter.

There would appear to be two alternatives as to the foreknowledge of God with respect to this view: 1) either God has some mysterious, undisclosed ability to see the future and thus knows our choices, or 2) God does not know the future because it does not yet exist as an object<sup>7</sup> that can be known.

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<sup>7</sup>Some might object to the use of the phrase “object of knowledge” because it seems to imply that the future exists as a *physical* object. But the use of the word “object” does not need to mean “physical object.” Thoughts are also “objects” of knowledge. Whatever can be known with absolute certainty is an object of knowledge, whether that object is concrete or abstract. The exact nature of the future is not important here, only that the future can, in some way, be known by God because it will certainly come to pass as he has “seen” it. So defining the future as only a thought in the mind of God does not solve any problems with foreknowledge, since, according to this view, the future will

## Foreknowledge in the Church

At least three things have kept the church from openly, honestly investigating the issue of God's foreknowledge and the free will of man.

First, the divergent definitions of God are not directly taught. Few churches have classes on the timelessness of God, God in duration, the foreknowledge of God, or the free will of man in light of the omniscience of God. Since people are not taught these ideas directly, they are not given a chance to contemplate the doctrines, search the Bible for themselves, and arrive at their own conclusions about the nature of God.

Second, the two positions are not clearly stated. Usually it is the conclusions of those views which come across in teaching or preaching. One will hear, almost casually, "since God knew what we were going to choose when we accepted him..." without any explanation as to how that knowledge could be so. We will also hear, "God knows what we will choose, but we are still free to choose something else," without any Biblical or rational support for the position. Thus, Christians absorb a view of God from the conclusions, but are not encouraged to think about the presuppositions from which those conclusions are derived.

Third, even when one position or the other is taught directly, the alternate position is usually not presented for consideration. Some churches do have classes on the foreknowledge of God versus the free will of man, but those same classes seldom have a full description of a God who lives in duration and does not know the future choices of human beings. While this may be understandable, since the person teaching the class believes his position to be biblical, it is unfortunate that students are deprived of the opportunity to hear an elucidation of the opposing ideas.

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certainly exist exactly as God has foreknown it. If the future can be *known*, it is, by definition, an object of knowledge, because one cannot know a "nothing."

Those who expound absolute foreknowledge often want to have it both ways. Because of the presumption of timelessness, they say God is actually living in and experiencing the future in the same manner as he is experiencing the present. But they also want to say the future does not really exist yet, and so cannot be called an "object" of God's knowledge. Proponents of absolute foreknowledge who deny timelessness are somewhat more consistent, but an absolutely certain future which exists in the mind of God is still an "object of knowledge," though it may not currently exist as a physical object.

# DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

## Summary

The dominant view in the church today appears to be that God is outside of time, living in an “eternal now” or “timelessness” and can thus see all future events including the “free-will” choices of moral beings.

The opposing view is that God lives in a duration or sequence, not knowing the future free-will choices of moral beings because they do not yet exist as objects of knowledge. This entails two questions: one about the nature of God and one about the nature of history, that is, how God relates to time, and whether the future is fixed or free.

A synthesis of these two positions is untenable. Any effort to affirm that God both knows and does not know the future is illogical and fruitless. So is any attempt to say that the future choices of human beings are both fixed and free. We will have to conclude one or the other; we cannot honestly and logically hold to both positions at the same time.

The central question, then, is whether or not God’s foreknowledge of future choices requires the necessity of those choices and whether or not the Bible supports that teaching.

Philosophical, theological, and practical issues are all relevant to this discussion, but the most important aspect of this investigation will be how the Bible reveals God to us. How does God relate to time? Does God foreknow our choices? Are we really free, or does it only appear that way to us?

## Chapter 2

### A Brief History of Timelessness

The idea that God exists in a timeless “eternal now” has a history that can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Plato, particularly in his discussions about “eternal being” in his dialogue *Timaeus*.

Plato’s ideas were adopted and developed by the church father Saint Augustine, bishop of Hippo, most notably in his works *City of God* and his *Confessions*.

Anicius Boethius, a Roman philosopher who relied heavily on Plato, repeated and refined the logic of timelessness and foreknowledge, which he preferred to call providence, a clear example of which can be found in his *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Much later, St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury continued the propagation of the idea of timelessness in his *Monologium* and *Proslogium*.

A century after Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, an Italian Dominican monk and theologian, wrote a great deal about the timelessness and knowledge of God in his *Summa Theologica*.

It appears as if all the modern references to timelessness in God are in some way derived from or related to this history. This is to be expected, of course, since the idea is a simple one, although the philosophical discussions and practical ramifications of the theory can become quite complex. The choices are very limited—either God is in time or he is timeless, he knows the future or he does not—so it is understandable that the arguments of those who hold to the timeless view of God will tend to be similar.

#### **Plato, Greek philosopher, c. 424-347 B.C.**

The origin of the notion of timelessness in God seems to reside in the teachings of Plato, though the idea may have been presented by others before him. In his *Timaeus*, he speaks of “eternal being”

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which appears to have been treated as a reference to God by later authors.

“They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to eternal being, for we say that it ‘was,’ or ‘is,’ or ‘will be,’ but the truth is that ‘is’ alone is properly attributed to it, and that ‘was’ and ‘will be’ are only to be spoken of becoming in time, for they are motions, but that which is immovably the same forever cannot become older or younger by time, nor can it be said that it came into being in the past, or has come into being now, or will come into being in the future, nor is it subject at all to any of those states which affect moving and sensible things and of which generation is the cause.”<sup>1</sup>

Here Plato not only intimates that “eternal being” must be timeless (‘is’ alone is properly attributed to it), but he proceeds from timelessness to an unchanging eternal being, that is, to immutability (that which is immovably the same forever). As we will see in a later chapter, the doctrines of immutability (changelessness) and absolute foreknowledge are closely tied to the notion of timelessness. It is not surprising, therefore, that Plato should link timelessness with immutability.

We do not expect Plato to support this view from scripture since he is not speaking from the Judeo-Christian framework or purporting to give an exegesis of biblical texts. He is engaged in the process of philosophy. It is good to remember, then, that in Plato we have a man, a finite human being, who is speculating as to the nature of reality, not a biblical scholar who is attempting to delineate the characteristics of God from his word.

Though Plato’s idea of timelessness was related to “eternal being,” and not to the biblical God, his ideas were developed later and applied to God by Christian theologians and philosophers. One of the most notable of these was the early church father, St. Augustine, whose thoughts were very closely related to those of Plato.

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<sup>1</sup>Plato, *Timaeus*, 37e-38a. From *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated with analyses and introductions by B. Jowett (4th ed., revised by order of the Jowett Copyright Trustees, Oxford, 1953; 1st ed., 1871). Quoted in *Plato, Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (Bollingen Foundation, 1961), p. 1167.

**Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, A.D. 354-430.**

Saint Augustine's ideas of timelessness in the being of God came directly out of Plato's philosophy. Augustine, coming to Christianity from a neo-Platonic background, tended to relate Biblical truths in Platonic frameworks.

It does not appear that Augustine was very concerned about judging everything he had learned in neo-Platonism by using the truth of the Scriptures as a guideline. Instead, we often see Platonic ideas recouched in Christian vocabulary and then the Scriptures are interpreted on the basis of these new formulas.

The two ideas most relevant to this study are the eternity of God and the foreknowledge of God. These two are inextricably related in Augustine's writings.

In reading Augustine we always seem to be left wanting more argument, for Augustine tends to state "truths" he believes will be self-evident for any thinking person. But these truths are not so obvious to every reader. Though he sometimes uses a series of logical steps to make a point, he often simply pronounces certain things to be true and expects that any reasonable reader will agree.

One example of this is the idea of the foreknowledge (prescience) of God. He states:

"For one who is not prescient of all future things is not God."<sup>2</sup>

So he defines God as having foreknowledge (prescience), and any attempt to argue that God does not have foreknowledge is fruitless because to deny prescience in God is to deny the definition of God itself. He expects the definition, on its own, will be enough argument, and anyone who argues with the definition is unreasonable.

This is different from saying, for instance, that God is the Creator of the world, and if a being is not the creator of the world, then that being is not God. This argument differs in that it does not begin with an arbitrary definition of God as creator, but rather depends on the revelation of God's word to us that he is the creator of all things. God is not arbitrarily defining himself when he tells us "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Rather, he

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<sup>2</sup>St. Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 9. Translated by Marcus Dods. From "Augustine," in *Great Books of the Western World*, volume 18, edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, pub. by William Benton, (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 215.



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is revealing to us who he is and what he has done. This gives us the right to exclude any being from the category of “God” if that being is not the Creator. Our conclusion is based on revelation from the mind of God and not constructed by our own imagination.

One could argue that Augustine believed the Scriptures taught the foreknowledge of God and thus he was working from God’s self-revelation to develop his doctrine of prescience. But Augustine did not approach the subject in this manner. He assumed that God must have foreknowledge and quoted a few verses to support his idea after he had presupposed it to be true. Foreknowledge seemed to be more of a logical result of timelessness to Augustine than a matter of biblical evidence.

Augustine also tended to be rather blunt in his reaction to those people or ideas with which he disagreed. In one place he responds to an imaginary inquirer who asks, “What did God before He made heaven and earth?” by stating, “He was preparing hell ... for pryers into mysteries.”<sup>3</sup> In relation to prescience he says:

“For he (i.e. Cicero) either denies that God exists...or if he confesses that He exists, but denies that He is prescient of future things, what is that but just “the fool saying in his heart there is no God”?<sup>4</sup>

In other words, if you deny the foreknowledge of God, you are denying God exists, and are in the same position as the atheistic fool who says in his heart, “There is no God.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. XI, chap. XII, ll. 14. Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey. From “Augustine,” in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins, pub. by William Benton, (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>*City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 9, p. 214.

<sup>5</sup>This attitude is not unique to Augustine. R. C. Sproul, in his book *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), pp. 25-27, recounts a classroom situation where he accused Christian students of being atheists because they did not agree with the Westminster Confession’s declarations concerning predestination. His argument for this accusation was that if you believe in God at all, you must believe he is sovereign. The definition of “sovereignty” he used was the Calvinist definition that God absolutely predestines and controls every event in history. He simply presupposes that God must be sovereign (in the Calvinist sense), and then accuses the person of atheism if he disagrees with the presupposed definition of sovereignty. In this accusation, he reflects the attitude of Loraine Boettner, who said, “There is no consistent middle ground between Calvinism and atheism.” In other words, if you do not agree with Calvinism, you are automatically an atheist.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIMELESSNESS

But despite his manner, and that his arguments were often lacking in biblical support, Augustine's writings have had a profound effect on the Church. His treatment of timelessness and foreknowledge have endured to the present, and it would probably be safe to say the majority of Christian churches teach some form of his ideas. His concepts of timelessness and foreknowledge have been some of the most influential of his philosophical legacies.

Augustine has this to say about the eternity of God:

“But Thou predest all things past, by the sublimity of an ever-present eternity.... Thy years are one day; and Thy day is not daily, but Today.... Thy Today is Eternity.”<sup>6</sup>

So how does God precede all things past? Not by existing for all eternity before those events, but by being outside of time altogether—an ever-present eternity in which there is only “today.” In this he is following the reasoning of Plato, who believed the eternity of God is a matter of the quality and not the quantity of time.

This is supposed to be an elucidation of the scripture which states, “Thou art the Same, and Thy years fail not,” but it seems to be more closely related to Psalm 90:4, “For a thousand years in Thy sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.” Or it may be a paraphrasing of II Peter 3:8, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Either way, the obvious reference to the element of time in “Thy years fail not” seems to have escaped Augustine's notice. He even takes the phrase to mean that God has no time, rather than that he has years which do not fail. This is a clear illustration of imposing a preconceived idea onto the Scriptures rather than letting the Scriptures reveal the nature of God.<sup>7</sup>

As for the context of the statement “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,” this verse is referring to a moral attribute of God—his patience. It is not a description of the relationship of God's being to time. II Peter 3 makes it very clear that Peter is referring to the patience of God in his not sending his Son back to earth. God is giving people more time to repent before the return of the Lord Jesus. This is because “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” Using the phrase “a thousand years as one day” as

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<sup>6</sup>*Confessions*, Bk. XI, chap. XIII, ll. 16, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup>That is, performing eisegesis (reading an idea into the scriptures) rather than exegesis (deriving an idea from the scriptures). See chapter 6 for a discussion of the problem of eisegesis.

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support for the timelessness of God is contrary to the verse's contextual meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Having defined God as timeless, Augustine moves on to the foreknowledge of God. If God is outside of time, he reasons, he can see all things past, present, and future as if they are “now.” And events in the future are not possibilities, but realities, for he argues:

“For where did they who foretold things to come see them if as yet they be not? *For that which is not cannot be seen.* And they who relate things past could not relate them, if in mind they did not discern them; and if they were not, they could no way be discerned. *Things then past and to come are.*”<sup>9</sup> (emphasis mine)

When he claims “For that which is not cannot be seen” he is using the same argument as many who have disagreed with the absolute foreknowledge of God. If the future does not actually exist, but is only a possibility, then it is not an object to be known, by us or by God. But Augustine is arguing in the reverse. He is saying the object must exist because it can be “seen,” in this case by the prophet who foretells the event.

He goes on to say future events are in the same category as past events. The past, present, and future are all real objects and are real in the same manner. Since God sees them as “now,” then the past and future are as real as the present. He is not claiming this is a memory of the past, but that the past is currently a real, existing object. To make this perfectly clear he states “Things then past and to come are.”<sup>10</sup>

Augustine is deducing the nature of history from the act of prophecy. But though the argument can be made both ways, the logic of the arguments is not the same. “If the future exists as a real object, it can be known” is different from “if the future is known, it is a real object.” The first is a statement about the nature of future

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<sup>8</sup>Since the context of this verse is the patience of God, what would “patience” mean to a timeless being? If everything is happening “now” to him, why would he need to be patient? And yet, to us, patience is one of the most comforting and encouraging attributes of God. But patience requires duration in time to be meaningful, so if God lives outside of time, what do all the scriptures which exalt God’s patience really mean?

<sup>9</sup>*Confessions*, Bk. XI, chap. XVII, ll. 22, p. 94

<sup>10</sup>It was not necessary for Augustine to determine the exact nature of the past and future, only that they exist in some manner which allows them to be known by God. Thus, they are objects of knowledge, though they may not be physical “objects.”

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history, the second is a statement about the prophesying of future events. To say an object can be known because it exists is not the same as to say a future event exists today because it has been prophesied. There may be ways the future can be prophesied which do not include the current existence of those events.<sup>11</sup>

It is not too surprising that Augustine declares later that whatever we are going to do in the future must come to pass. He writes:

“...and whatever (our wills) are to do, they are most assuredly to do...”<sup>12</sup>

Any view of the future which says coming events already exist as objects which can be known, even if only in the mind of God, is a future which must come to pass as it has been seen. Although Augustine tries to defend the free will of man in light of the absolute foreknowledge of God, it is most revealing that he concludes whatever we are going to do we must “most assuredly” do—the choices of our will are a “necessity.”<sup>13</sup>

Part of Augustine’s discourse on foreknowledge involves a rebuttal to the arguments of Cicero.<sup>14</sup> Cicero argued that if man has a free will, then God could not have foreknowledge of the choices man would make. In order to make Augustine’s recounting of Cicero’s argument clear, we will list it in order, separating the points of the argument:

“For we go backwards through all the steps in the following order:

If there is free will, all things do not happen according to fate;

if all things do not happen according to fate, there is not a certain order of causes;

and if there is not a certain order of causes, neither is there a certain order of things foreknown by God

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter 7 for further discussion on the subject of prophecy as it relates to the foreknowledge of God.

<sup>12</sup>*City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 9 (P. 215)

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, Bk. V, chap. 10 (p. 215)

<sup>14</sup>Marcus Tullius Cicero, 104-43 B.C., Roman orator, author, and politician. He is sometimes called Tully.

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—for things cannot come to pass except they are preceded by efficient causes—

but, if there is no fixed and certain order of causes foreknown by God, all things cannot be said to happen according as He foreknew they would happen.

And further, if it is not true that all things happen just as they have been foreknown by Him, there is not, says he (i.e., Cicero), in God any foreknowledge of future events.”<sup>15</sup>

Augustine does not refute this by proving God has foreknowledge of all free-will choices. He has already assumed, without proof, that this is the case. Rather, he attacks Cicero’s idea of causes.

Our wills are the cause of our choices, he says, but God is the cause of our wills. Now if Augustine were to stop there and say God created us with free-will, and we choose what we will do, there would be little debate. But after a long and very intricate argument about the causes of finite wills<sup>16</sup> and the causes of choices, he concludes the choices we make are “necessary” and will “most assuredly” come to pass.

Many use this same argument today to support the idea of absolute foreknowledge of free-will choices. The choices are fixed from God’s perspective but free from our perspective. The question remains, though, as to who has the accurate view of reality, God or man. There is only one reality, and only one view of it can be correct. Choices are either free or fixed—they cannot be both.<sup>17</sup> And if God is the cause of our choices, whether directly or indirectly, he can obviously foreknow what we will do, but we are not free. This dilemma only occurs because people hold two diametrically-opposed views of reality and attempt to claim that both are true simultaneously.

Another problem with this reasoning is if God knows the “sufficient causes” of my choices, then he has to know all of the actual choices, and not just the cause of those choices, which led up to the existence of my will as the “sufficient cause” of my choices.

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<sup>15</sup>*City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 9 (P. 214)

<sup>16</sup>Except evil wills, says Augustine, but we would then have to ask, “If God did not make all wills, who made the ones he did not make?”

<sup>17</sup>This and related arguments concerning fixity or freedom of the will are also discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

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My parent's choices which led to my existence must be known to God just as surely as the existence of their free wills if God is to foreknow the existence of my free will. Thus God must know actual free-will choices before they happen in order to know the causes of other choices. So the result is the same, God knows what we will do. The question is, "Does his foreknowledge of our choices eliminate our free will?"

Augustine's conclusion to Cicero's argument is that Cicero will cause people to deny the reality of God because they have denied the prescience of God.

"...and thus, wishing to make men free, he makes them sacrilegious."<sup>18</sup>

He also accuses Cicero of being an atheist, a fool who says in his heart, "There is no God," because he rejects the idea of foreknowledge. Augustine only says this because he has already defined prescience as part of the nature of God, so for him, to deny prescience is to deny God's existence.

While Augustine had much more to say about God's timelessness and foreknowledge, we can see from these excerpts that he attempted to assert the timelessness of God, the foreknowledge of God, and the free-will of man at the same time. These same arguments, in one form or another, persist to our time and are widely taught in our churches.

### **Anicius Boethius (or Boece), c. A.D. 475-525.**

Another contributor to the history of the timelessness of God is Boethius, a Roman philosopher, who expressed his views in his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

That Boethius saw God as timeless is clear from statements like:

"...who time From timelessness didst bring, unchanging Mover..."<sup>19</sup>

Note, too, the reference to the immutability of God.

Consider also this description by Boethius of the "eternal" God:

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<sup>18</sup>*City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 9 (P. 214)

<sup>19</sup>Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. III, Sec. IX, translated by V.E. Watts, (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 97.

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“...God is eternal. ... Eternity, then is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life;...”<sup>20</sup>

He defines this “everlasting life” as the ability to “embrace simultaneously the whole extent of its life” *at the same time*.<sup>21</sup> He then goes on to compare the “eternity” of God with the world, which, even if it were without beginning or end, would not be eternal because it goes from moment to moment and does not possess the past and the future at the same time as the present.

“Whatever, therefore, suffers the condition of being in time...is still not such that it may properly be considered eternal.”<sup>22</sup>

And of the “eternal” he says:

“Of necessity it will always be present to itself, controlling itself, and have present the infinity of fleeting time.”<sup>23</sup>

Boethius defines “eternal” as timeless, that is, possessing the past, present, and future in “one simultaneous present.” He then says that whatever is not timeless is not eternal. Typical of previous authors on the subject, Boethius simply defines eternity as timelessness and anything which is in time is automatically not eternal. This tautology is not helpful, and it certainly does not appeal to the revelation of God in the Bible for its authority.

For Boethius, it is a very short step from timelessness of being to timelessness of knowledge. He argues if God has the past, present, and future as one before him then,

“...His knowledge, too, transcends all temporal change and abides in the immediacy of His presence. It embraces all the infinite recesses of past and future and views them in the immediacy of its knowing as though they are happening in the present. ...it will be more correct to think of it not as a kind of foreknowledge of the future, but as the knowledge

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, Bk. V, Sec. VI, pp. 163-164.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, Bk. V, Sec. VI, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

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of a never ending presence. ...God sees all things in His eternal present.”<sup>24</sup>

He then goes on to reject the idea of “foreknowledge” for “providence” since an eternal (i.e., timeless) being cannot truly be said to know anything “before” it happens but only as it is happening.

This definition of “eternal” by Boethius is merely the construction of a finite human mind, and once that definition is assumed, Boethius then compares all things to this definition and excludes them on that basis alone. There is no attempt on his part to support his concept of eternity from the Scriptures. There is no appeal to revelation. There is only arbitrary definition.

Book V of the *Consolation* contains an extended example of the most frequently-used argument concerning the compatibility of the foreknowledge of God with the free will of man. God, says Boethius, sees all things as present, man sees the same events as future, and thus future events are not fixed because they are the same as present events from God’s perspective. It is just our human viewpoint of the events which makes them appear to be fixed. This reasoning is still used today by most of the proponents of the absolute foreknowledge of God. The validity of this argument is discussed at length in Chapter 3.

### St. Anselm, A.D. 1033-1109.

St. Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, followed the lead of Augustine and Boethius in his treatment of the nature of God with regard to timelessness.

In his *Monologium*, Anselm says of the eternal Spirit:

“...of this Spirit ... it can in no wise be said ... that it *was*, or *will be*, but simply that it *is*....”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>25</sup>St. Anselm, *Monologium*, from *St. Anselm Basic Writings*, Chap. XXVIII, translated by S. N. Deane, (Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), p. 133. The emphasis in this text is made by the translator. This is a puzzling statement for Anselm to make in light of the clear teaching of scripture that God is the One “who *was* and who *is* and who *is to come*.” (Revelation 4:8; cf. also Revelation 1:4, 8.)



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This puts God's being outside of time, and in so doing is clearly reminiscent of Plato's philosophy regarding "eternal being." Earlier in the *Monologium*, Anselm describes God as "the Being which, in no wise, includes its own existence in space or time"<sup>26</sup> and as one who cannot be "contained" by space or time.<sup>27</sup>

We see an echo of the ideas of Boethius in Anselm's declaration about God in the *Proslogium*:

"Or, in this way also dost thou transcend all things even the eternal, because thy eternity and theirs is present as a whole with thee; while they have not yet that part of their eternity which is to come, just as they no longer have that part which is past?"<sup>28</sup>

Just as Boethius viewed the eternal as embracing "simultaneously the whole extent of its life," so Anselm sees eternity as "present as a whole" with God, and the world, by contrast, as not being eternal because it has a past which is no more and a future which is not yet.

Again, Anselm's dedication to the position of timelessness is quite evident from statements like:

"Thou wast not, then, yesterday, nor wilt thou be tomorrow; but yesterday and to-day and to-morrow thou art; or, rather, neither yesterday nor to-day nor to-morrow thou art; but simply, thou art, outside all time."<sup>29</sup>

Anselm goes on to say God does "not exist in space or time."<sup>30</sup>

It is easy to see how the writings of Anselm are developed from the history of timelessness in the teachings of Plato, Augustine and Boethius. Though he may have expressed the idea in erudite fashion, the basic thought is the same—God lives outside of time viewing past, present and future as "now."

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, Chap. XXII, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, Chap. XXII, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup>St. Anselm, *Proslogium*, from *St. Anselm Basic Writings*, Chap. XX, translated by S. N. Deane, (Open Court Publishing Company, 1962), p. 72.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, Chap. XIX, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

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### St. Thomas Aquinas, A.D. 1225?-1274.

St. Thomas Aquinas, Italian Dominican monk and theologian, while extremely adept in thought and expression, seems to add little to the concepts of his predecessors with regard to the timelessness of God. While his arguments are intricate and, in large part, sound, his premise is still based on a concept of God more closely related to the philosophy of Plato than to the revelation of God's nature and character in the Scriptures.

Aquinas' arguments do differ somewhat from the others, in that he argues God must be timeless because he does not change ("the notion of eternity follows immutability"<sup>31</sup>), whereas the others tended to argue from timelessness to changelessness. Anselm's position was somewhat similar in that he argued from perfection to timelessness. Since whatever is perfect cannot change (or it would become less than perfect), and since time is the domain of change, then God must have no time in his being.<sup>32</sup> But regardless of the attribute used as a starting point, whether perfection, immutability, or "infinity" (as some do today), the result is still a timeless God in an ever-present now who sees all events, past, present and future as if they are only "now."

Accepting and defending Boethius' definition of eternity, Aquinas explains the difference between time and eternity as:

"It is manifest that time and eternity are not the same. ...there would yet remain a difference ... arising from the fact that eternity is simultaneously whole, which cannot be applied to time; for eternity is the measure of a permanent being, while time is the measure of movement."<sup>33</sup>

But all we see here is Aquinas' affirmation that God is immutable and thus timeless, because time involves change ("movement"), whereas eternity does not ("is the measure of a *permanent* being"). His arbitrary assignment of the attribute of

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<sup>31</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas," in *Great Books of the Western World*, Q. X, Art. 1, Obj. 4. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 19, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p. 41.

<sup>32</sup>See chapter 5 for a discussion of the logic of time, perfection, and change.

<sup>33</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas," in *Great Books of the Western World*, Q. X, Art. 4, Obj. 3. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 19, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p. 43.

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immutability is akin to the reasoning of Augustine who stated “truths” without proof and without support from the Scriptures.<sup>34</sup>

As a further illustration of St. Thomas’s rejection of revelation in favor of his own reasonings, consider his objection and reply regarding words denoting time as applied to God:

“Obj. 4. But words denoting present, past, and future time are applied to God in Scripture. Therefore God is not eternal.”

“Reply Obj. 4. Words denoting different times are applied to God, because His eternity includes all times and not as if He Himself were altered through present, past, and future.”

Again, immutability is the measure of all things. We need to keep in mind when Aquinas uses the word “eternal” in the objection, he means “timeless.” In his reply, though, note the rejection of the words of Scripture for his own reasonings. He applies his own definition of “eternal” to God, and even if the Scriptures describe God differently, they must be reinterpreted to fit his definitions.

But if the Scriptures refer to God as existing in a duration, where did Aquinas get his understanding that God is outside of time? He deduced timelessness as a result of presupposing immutability. And where did he find the idea of immutability? It appears as if he produced it from his own mind.

This tendency of Aquinas is relevant for its similarity to most exegesis today, namely that he often reduced the clear statements of Scripture to metaphor when it suited his purpose.

“As God, although incorporeal, is named in Scripture metaphorically by corporeal names, so eternity though simultaneously whole, is called by names implying time and succession.”<sup>35</sup>

Rather than allowing the Scriptures to speak for themselves, Aquinas accepted those verses which supported his position as literal and deemed “metaphorical” those verses which contradicted

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<sup>34</sup>Chapter 5 contains a discussion of how God can change choices without changing his essential nature or character.

<sup>35</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Great Books of the Western World*, Q. X, Art. 1, Reply Obj. 4. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol. 19, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p. 41.

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him. This would be acceptable if he proved the Bible clearly taught his position elsewhere, as it does with regard to the non-corporeal status of God's being, but he usually constructed the nature of God through philosophy and then used the Scriptures to prove his point. It was admirable that he quoted the Scriptures liberally, but whenever a verse opposed his ideas, he declared it "metaphorical" and accepted his philosophical explanation over the plain statements of the Bible.

The only reasons we should call verses metaphorical are if: 1) the writer of the passage has declared the text is metaphorical, as in the case of parables, or 2) the words themselves must be taken that way in light of reality ("I am the vine and you are the branches"), or 3) if there is clear evidence elsewhere in the scriptures that require us to interpret the verse under examination in a poetic fashion (e.g., "under His wings you may seek refuge" must be a metaphor, since Deut. 4 indicates that God does not have "the likeness of any winged bird") The problem with clear scriptural references to timelessness is that they are noticeably absent.<sup>36</sup>

If the Bible always speaks of eternity using "names implying time and succession," where did Aquinas get the idea eternity was anything other than endless duration? This notion of timeless eternity is an extrapolation of his idea of immutability, which is, in itself, an extension of the idea of simplicity and unity of being. And the idea of simplicity and unity of being is a philosophical and not a biblical construct.

While he tries to support the idea of immutability using the scripture "I, the Lord, do not change" (Malachi 3:6), it is obvious from the context of this verse that God is not referring to his essential being but rather to his moral attributes—God is the righteous judge who also forgives the repentant, and that is how he does not change. It is also why the sons of Jacob were "not consumed."<sup>37</sup>

By his writings St. Thomas Aquinas set the stage for some of the modern forms of the doctrine of a God who is outside time. He postulated God's immutability and followed the logic through to the timelessness view of eternity. In the process he treated verses as metaphorical which should not be interpreted as poetic. This combination of philosophy and poetic interpretation is still used today to support the teaching of a God who lives in an "eternal now" and sees all things in the future as if they were present.

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<sup>36</sup>See chapter 8 for a treatment of the scriptures which are purported to teach timelessness in God.

<sup>37</sup>See chapter 5 for a complete discussion on the exegesis of Malachi 3:6.

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### John Calvin, 1509-1564

Though he devoted more discussion to predestination than to the foreknowledge of God, the French Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, makes this declaration in his *Institutes*:

“When we attribute prescience to God, we mean that all things always were, and ever continue, under his eye; that to his knowledge there is no past or future, but all things are present, and indeed so present, that it is not merely the idea of them that is before him (as those objects are which we retain in our memory), but that he truly sees and contemplates them as actually under his immediate inspection. This prescience extends to the whole circuit of the world, and to all creatures.”<sup>38</sup>

Technically speaking, Calvin does not describe God’s *nature* as timeless, but rather his *knowledge*. Still, the phrase “under his immediate inspection” intimates he viewed God as living outside of time or in some state similar to the “ever-present now.”

He was quite aware of, and frequently quoted,<sup>39</sup> Augustine’s position on the topics of foreknowledge and predestination. But since he did not explicitly attempt to refute Augustine’s notions of timelessness, we must assume he agreed with them, at least to the extent they supported foreknowledge and predestination.

Calvin’s position contributed nothing new to the doctrine of timelessness, but the popularity and wide distribution of his works have had a great influence on the ideas of the modern Christian Church. Many churches with a reformed background are committed to the concept of the “eternal now” God, and this influence is due, in large part, to Calvin’s influence on the theology of his time and ours.

### Charles Hodge, 1797-1878

Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology*, alludes to the timelessness of God in his chapter on Free Agency:

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<sup>38</sup>John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Ch. XXI, Sec. 5. Translated by Henry Beveridge, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1989), p. 206.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* Sections XXI and XXII.

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“Whatever metaphysical explanation may be given of this divine attribute (foreknowledge), however we may ignore the distinction between knowledge and foreknowledge, or however we may contend that because God inhabits eternity, and is in no wise subject to the limitations of time, and that to Him nothing is successive, still the fact remains that we exist in time, and that to us there is a future as well as a present. It remains, therefore, a fact that human acts are known before they occur in time, and consequently are foreknown. But if foreknown as future, they must be certain; not because foreknowledge renders their occurrence certain, but because it supposes it to be so.<sup>40</sup>

Hodge here equates inhabiting eternity with not being subject to the limitations of time—that is, eternity is timelessness. His subsequent phrases define this lack of limitation to time as 1) nothing is successive, and, 2) there is only “present” with God. Though he is not explicit in his wording, the concepts of timelessness and the “ever-present now” are clearly included in his definition.

There is nothing new here, and it is interesting to note Hodge does very little to support the idea of timelessness with scripture. If he had looked closely at the Hebrew word “eternity” in the passage to which he alludes, he would have found the word “eternity” means “endless succession in time,” and may have opted for another passage to support his assertions.<sup>41</sup>

What Hodge does do is to continue the Augustinian tradition of timelessness and its logical consequent, the absolute foreknowledge of God. Thus, he passes this notion on to another generation of Christians as if it were the only viable alternative.

### **Loraine Boettner, 1901-1990**

One clear, modern example of the “eternal now” God can be found in the writings of Loraine Boettner. See how clearly he echoes the ideas of his predecessors:

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<sup>40</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Part II, Ch. IX, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1960), p. 299.

<sup>41</sup>See Chapter 8, “Is God Timeless?” for a discussion of the Hebrew word “Olam.”

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“That which appears to us as ‘past,’ ‘present,’ and ‘future,’ is all ‘present’ to His mind. It is an eternal ‘now.’

Time is a property of the finite creation and is objective to God. He is above it and sees it, but is not conditioned by it.

...He sees all events in history, past, present, and future at one glance.

...the complete process of history is before Him as an eternal ‘now’...”<sup>42</sup>

While Boettner’s view of the “eternal now” is clearly similar to those of Plato, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas, his view of foreknowledge differs due to his commitment to the doctrine of the predestination of all events. Every event can be foreknown, he says, because all events have been predetermined by God. In this he follows Calvin, who argued that foreknowledge cannot be used as the basis for predestination,<sup>43</sup> but rather, predestination is the reason for God’s foreknowledge.

But there is another interesting deduction Boettner reaches which many who hold to the absolute foreknowledge of God will not. He reasons that if an event is foreknown, it must be certain.

“The Arminian objection against foreordination bears with equal force against the foreknowledge of God. What God foreknows must, in the very nature of the case, be as fixed and certain as what is foreordained; and if one is inconsistent with the free agency of man, the other is also. Foreordination renders the events certain, while foreknowledge presupposes that they are certain.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus he reasons that to accept the absolute foreknowledge of God is to accept the absolute certainty of all events. In effect, he is stating that if one accepts absolute foreknowledge, one must also admit to absolute predestination. He accuses the Arminian of

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<sup>42</sup>Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), pp. 44-45.

<sup>43</sup>John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Ch. XXII, Secs. 1, 4, 8 and 9. Translated by Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 212-221.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

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inconsistency if he attempts to maintain freedom of will while promoting foreknowledge. It is probably only because so many Christians would reject the absolute predestination of all events that they cannot see the reasonableness of Boettner's conclusion.

### C. S. Lewis, 1898-1963

C. S. Lewis, the talented and well-known professor, author, and apologist, also subscribed to the idea of timelessness in God.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis includes a section called "Time and Beyond Time."<sup>45</sup> His belief that God is outside of time in an "ever-present now" becomes quite clear as we read statements like:

"Almost certainly God is not in time. His life does not consist of moments following one another. ... every ... moment from the beginning of the world—is always the Present for Him."

"God is not hurried along in the Time-stream of this universe...."

"But God, I believe, does not live in a Time-series at all. His life is not dribbled out moment by moment like ours: with Him it is, so to speak, still 1920 and already 1960."

"If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all."

In his statements about the reality of God, we can see the influence of Platonic thought on C. S. Lewis' views:

"But God has no history. He is too completely and utterly real to have one. For, of course, to have a history means losing part of your reality (because it has already

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<sup>45</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book Four, Section 3, (Fontana Books, 1952), pp. 141-45.



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slipped away into the past) and not yet having another part (because it is still in the future): in fact having nothing but the tiny little present, which has gone before you can speak about it. God forbid that we should think God was like that.”<sup>46</sup>

The clear implication here is that God is real and the created order is not (or is at least less real). This is reminiscent of the Platonic view of the physical world as unreal while the only real world is the spiritual or intellectual realm. This view of reality was illustrated and exemplified in Plato’s cave analogy, which we will discuss at length in Chapter 3.

The second thought in this paragraph is obviously influenced by the writings of Boethius. The idea that God must encompass his entire life at one time, not having a past, present, or future, is just another way of stating Boethius’ “complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life.”

Lewis then goes on to address the issue of foreknowledge and free will:

“He knows what you and I are going to do to-morrow. But if He knows I am going to do so-and-so, how can I be free to do otherwise?”<sup>47</sup>

His answer to this question is only a reiteration of Boethius’ arguments from his *Consolation*. God lives outside of time and sees everything as now, so it is not future for him. Thus he supposes our actions are free because God only sees them as now and not as future. Switching from the pre-existent choice as the problem to the “present” knowledge of God as the answer is probably the most common method of attempting to reconcile foreknowledge and free will. This confusion of the action itself with the supposed knowledge of God will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Referring to the idea of God’s timelessness, C. S. Lewis admits that though “great and wise Christians have held it,” still, “it is not in the Bible or any of the creeds.” What an amazing admission! He also wrote, “You can be a perfectly good Christian without accepting it...”<sup>48</sup> His honesty and graciousness were a refreshing exception to those attitudes often expressed in the world of theological controversy.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

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### Norman Geisler, 1932-

Dr. Norman Geisler, author of *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, stands squarely in the same tradition of presupposing timelessness as part of the nature of God. Though his book is an attempt to cover many aspects of Christian theology, when he touches on the relationship of God to time, he follows the “eternal now” proposition absolutely.

On pages 29-31, in the section titled “God’s Eternity (Nontemporality),” he agrees with Aquinas to make many claims such as:

“...God is not temporal. God is beyond time.” (page 29)

“Consequently, God must be timeless.” (page 30)

“God has no changing states, one after another. Therefore, God cannot be temporal.” (page 30)

“in other words, God’s eternity is not divided; it is all present to him in his one eternal now.” (page 30)

As is common with many people arguing for the “eternal now,” he does not quote any passages of scripture in this section to try to validate his position. He uses only presupposition and argument to support the idea that God is timeless. Later in his book he does try to support the idea with the scriptures most people quote to prove this point. He does this, however, *after* he has presupposed the timelessness of God based on philosophical, and not exegetical, grounds.

After assuming God is immutable and that immutability implies timelessness, Dr. Geisler goes on to review Aquinas’ ideas of the nature of eternity. Geisler enumerates Aquinas’ logical deductions as: 1) eternity is different from time because time has parts (before and after) and eternity has no parts (it is only now), 2) endless time is not eternity, it is just more time, 3) an eternal being cannot change, so since time involves change, and since God does not change, God must be eternal (timeless), and 4) the “now” of time is ever changing, whereas the “now” of eternity does not change. It would appear as if these are not really deductions Aquinas had made, but rather restatements of the premise he has assumed without biblical justification.

Of course, the outcome of this argument is a foregone conclusion since it begins by assuming its conclusion to be true. Basically, Dr. Geisler, following the reasoning of Aquinas, has defined eternity as timelessness and then concluded that because

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God is eternal, he must also be timeless. Geisler sets out to define “classical theism,” and, as part of that definition, espouses the traditional view of the timelessness of God in exactly the same way it was expounded by his predecessors.

### Summary

It appears as if a large portion of the literature on timelessness is rooted in Plato’s teachings. From there, through Augustine, the doctrine has been widely propagated by Christian philosophers and theologians up to the present day. The form of the doctrine has changed little through the centuries, though we may see novel arguments from time to time.

Nelson Pike, in his book *God and Timelessness*, reflects this same conclusion when he remarks:

“It is now my suspicion that the doctrine of God’s timelessness was introduced into Christian theology because Platonic thought was stylish at the time and because the doctrine appeared to have considerable advantage from the point of view of systematic elegance.... Once introduced, it took on a life of its own. But consideration of intellectual style cannot justify the substance of a theological doctrine; and it is unlikely that the doctrine of timelessness really has very much to offer in the way of systematic advantage.”<sup>49</sup>

Even given this brief history, it would seem apparent that timelessness is an idea purported to be biblical, but which appears to have originated in the finite mind of human philosophers. Though this concept is discussed by Christian theologians and philosophers, its origin is still from the mind of man, and any biblical basis for the theory is seldom presented due to the lack of scriptures which can be found to support it.

It appears as if a definition of the nature and character of God is imagined apart from the Scriptures and then read into them, thus interpreting the Bible by the idea rather than judging the idea by the Bible. The doctrine is not formulated from a good exegetical study of all scriptural passages related to the knowledge of God. Rather, it is a construction of the finite mind of man which is used as an interpretive principle to force the Scriptures to support a doctrine which they do not contain.

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<sup>49</sup>Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*, (Shocken Books, New York, 1970), pp. 189-190.

## Chapter 3

### God's vs. Man's Perspective of Future Events

One of the most common arguments used to support the notion of the compatibility of free will with absolute divine foreknowledge, is that of the difference between God's and man's perspective of the same future event.

The argument is often stated in this form: God sees future events as happening absolutely and of necessity, but from man's perspective the future event is conditional, dependent on the free-will choices of the person. Thus, the same event shares two different qualities simultaneously—certainty and contingency, necessity and freedom—and these are not incompatible because the event is being viewed from two different perspectives. God sees the event as necessary and certain, while we see the event as contingent and free.

While this line of reasoning may seem novel to some, it is certainly not new. It is actually about 1,500 years old. Boethius used this same argument in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (5th century A.D.):

“In the same way, if Providence sees something as present, it is necessary for it to happen, even though it has no necessity in its own nature. God sees those future events which happen of free will as present events; so that these things when considered with reference to God's sight of them do happen necessarily as a result of the condition of divine knowledge; but when considered in themselves they do not lose the absolute freedom of their nature. All things, therefore, whose future occurrence is known to God do without doubt happen, but some of them are the result of free will. In spite of the fact that they do happen, their existence does not deprive them of their true nature, in virtue

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of which the possibility of their non-occurrence existed before they happened.” *Consolation*, Book V, Ch. VI.

Note that Boethius does not deny that the future event must come to pass. He boldly proclaims its necessity. But he also claims this is only a matter of perspective—a matter of how God sees the future event. These events “do without doubt happen” and they happen “necessarily as a result of ... divine knowledge.” The problem here is he also claims the events maintain the “absolute freedom of their nature” and “the possibility of their non-occurrence” and so asserts the same event has two different qualities at the same time. The event is both certain *and* contingent, necessary *and* free, all at the same time.

The question, then, is whether or not events change their nature depending on the perspective from which they are perceived. Can one event be both conditional and certain at the same time? Is perspective the only issue here, or is the nature of the event important also?

While Boethius uses various arguments to support this thesis, his ideas are not his own. Though Boethius’ reasonings may be old, they spring from an even older source. Boethius was an avid student of Plato’s philosophy and frequently employed Plato’s ideas to bolster his own philosophical arguments. The example Boethius is following here is found in Plato’s *Republic*.

### Plato’s Cave Analogy

In Book VII of his *Republic*, Plato gives an illustration which has come to be known as “Plato’s Cave Analogy.”<sup>1</sup>

The analogy describes people as chained inside a cave so they can only see one wall. Shadows of objects are being projected on the way by means of a fire behind the people. Since they can only see the shadows and not the real objects, they believe reality consists of the shadows themselves, not realizing reality is actually quite different from what they observe.

Plato goes on to suppose that one of the people escapes his chains, observes the situation in the cave, and then exits the cave to

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<sup>1</sup>Plato. *Republic*, from *Plato: The Republic*, with an English translation by Paul Shorey (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1953, 1956; first printed, 1930, 2 vols), quoted in *Plato, Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Bollingen Foundation, New York, 1961), pp. 747 ff.

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behold the sun. The man then re-enters the cave and finds it impossible to convince the chained people that there is a reality other than what they see on the wall.

In the illustration, the shadows on the wall represent the objects we see in the world. We believe these things to be real, but they are not. They are only reflections of the real objects, or “forms,” which exist exclusively in the “real reality” of pure intellect. Thus, Plato presents physical objects as unreal and the intellectual or spiritual forms of the objects as real. This division between the unreal physical world and the real intellectual world is often referred to as “Platonic dualism.”

It is interesting to note that Plato never tries to say the objects on the wall are real. He is quite clear in many references to the analogy that the shadows are just reflections of reality and not reality itself. Here are a few examples:

“Then in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects.” (515c)

“...what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly?” (515c-d)

“...if, I say, freed from these, it had suffered a conversion toward the things that are real and true, ....” (519b)

“...a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the veritable day—that ascension to reality of our parable which we will affirm to be true philosophy.” (521c)

“And are not the other senses also defective in their report of such things?” (523e-524a)

“...but the ability to see the phantasms created by God in water and shadows of objects that are real and not merely, as before, the shadows of images cast through a light which, compared with the sun is as unreal as they....” (532c)

It is important to keep in mind what Plato does and does not say about the difference between the eternal's (God's) and man's perspective on the objects.

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First, Plato never claims the objects on the wall are real. They are a “cheat and an illusion.”

Second, he does not state the shadows or the “forms” are both real and unreal at the same time. The shadows are altogether unreal and the “forms” are real.

Third, the eternal’s (God’s) perspective, or that of the enlightened prisoner, is a true understanding of the situation and that of the chained prisoners is not.

Fourth, the senses of the human being are not to be trusted to perceive reality correctly, since they are “defective.”

Fifth, the perception of the object does not change its nature. That is, the enlightened prisoner’s perception of the shadows does not make them real and the chained prisoners’ denial of the reality of the “forms” does not make them illusory.

Sixth, and lastly, once the person is enlightened by true philosophy, he will understand the shadows are not real, but rather the intellectual or spiritual “forms” of the objects are the only reality.

Another important part of Plato’s analogy is the nature of the objects being perceived. Plato does not claim true knowledge will help the prisoner to see the shadows as both real and unreal at the same time. He concludes that the prisoner, once enlightened, will see the shadows are “a cheat and an illusion” and the intellectual forms are real. For Plato, difference of perspective does not change reality, it only helps one to see the difference between reality and illusion.

### **Boethius’ Use of Plato’s Analogy**

If we compare the statements of Plato to Boethius’ arguments concerning foreknowledge and free will, we see the conclusions Boethius makes are in opposition to Plato’s writings. While Plato never claims the same objects have two completely different natures at the same time (i.e., illusory and real), Boethius asserts future events are both certain (necessary) and conditional (free) at the same time. He makes this claim based on the different perspectives of God and man.

The argument Boethius uses to reach this conclusion is also from Plato. The argument goes something like this. Different creatures perceive the same object differently because of their varying abilities of perception. As the level of perception grows, the lower levels of knowledge are incorporated in the higher levels of intelligence, but the lower levels of intelligence cannot understand the higher levels. Boethius uses this example:

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“Mere sensation without any other kind of knowing has been given to animals that have no power of movement, like mussels and other shellfish which grow on rocks. Imagination has been given to animals which do have the power of movement and which appear to have some will to choose to avoid things. Reason belongs only to the human race, just as intelligence belongs only to divinity. The result is that that kind of knowing transcends the others which of its own nature knows not only its own objects, but also the objects of the other kinds of knowing.” (Book V, chap. V)

While we may disagree with Boethius' understanding of exactly what can be known by what kind of animal, still we can see how the lower kinds of knowledge are included in the higher forms of intelligence. Mussels can perceive things by sensation (such as touch). An animal with movement (such as a dog) can perceive things by touch, but also in other ways, such as by sight.<sup>2</sup> The human being, on the other hand, can perceive things by touch, sight, and reason. Lastly, if we wish to follow Boethius' analogy, God can perceive things with faculties higher than those of man.<sup>3</sup>

What happens, though, when we introduce a real object of knowledge into the argument? Let us use water as an example. The mussel can sense the water by touch and thus has a particular kind of “knowledge” of the water. The dog can also touch the water and have that kind of knowledge, but it can also see the water and thus perceive it as a river, a stream, or a puddle. A man can touch water, see water, perceive a river, stream or puddle, but he can also think of water as composed of molecules and atoms with particular atomic weights having specific, quantifiable properties. Lastly, God can know all of the preceding, but also knows water as something which can be brought into being from nothing, with a word.<sup>4</sup> And though the creation of water happened, humans cannot comprehend how that event took place.

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<sup>2</sup>Boethius uses “imagination” and “will” as cognitive abilities of animals. But since we can only guess at what he may have meant by those words as applied to animals, we will use the capacity of sight to make the argument simpler.

<sup>3</sup>Boethius' very Platonic claim that “intelligence belongs only to divinity” is well beyond the scope of this book. We will simply accept that God can know things in a way which is higher than our faculties permit, since he is described in the Scriptures as having greater capacities than we.

<sup>4</sup>At this point it would be tempting to speculate as to what other ways God might understand water. But since this would be purely conjecture, and since our knowledge of God should be limited to and judged by the Scriptures, it is best to leave the matter here.



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In every case, the higher includes the lower. Note that the higher includes the lower and adds to it, but that the higher form of knowledge does not make the lower form become untrue or something other than it already was. Note also that the water does not change its nature. The water remains water all the way through the argument. It does not become some other element because of the manner in which it is known.

A second part of this argument is that the lower intelligence cannot grasp what a higher form of intelligence understands. The mussel cannot understand rivers and puddles, and the dog cannot understand atomic structure. But this does not mean the object being observed has contradictory elements in its nature. It simply means the higher intelligence understands the object more fully than the lower intelligence.

At this point Boethius departs from Plato's conclusions. While Plato states the observer's opinion of an object changes as his knowledge changes, he never claims 1) objects change their nature depending on the ability of the observer to know the object, or 2) objects can have two completely self-contradictory qualities at the same time (real and unreal) and thus be known as exact opposites depending on the ability of the observer.

But Boethius accepts this second option. He asserts that God's knowledge of a future event indicates the event is necessary in nature, while man, from his perspective, sees the event as conditional by nature, so the event *is* both necessary and conditional by nature at the same time. Thus, Plato claims the observer's *knowledge* of an object can change, but Boethius asserts the *object itself changes its nature* depending on the perception of the observer.

If this way of thinking were applied to our water analogy, it would say the water can also be granite, or mercury, or some other completely different object, while it is still water. Water cannot be water and granite at the same time. Neither can an event be both fixed and free at the same time. Just because an object is perceived differently by beings of differing intelligence does not make that object change its nature relative to the knowledge of the observer.

Boethius makes a good point in stating the lower creature cannot comprehend the perception of the higher intelligence. A dog will never comprehend water as having a molecular structure no matter how hard a man tries to explain it to him. In the same way, he argues, a man will not comprehend how an event can be both conditional and free at the same time because he cannot understand the event from God's perspective.

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But this does not save the argument. My higher understanding of water will not make the water something other than it is, even though the dog cannot understand my perception. My greater understanding of water does not make the dog's perception untrue, it only incorporates the dog's lower form of knowledge as part of my higher understanding.

In the same way, God's "higher perspective" of an event cannot change its essential nature to be something other than it is. A higher knowledge will give God greater understanding of an event than a man will have, but it certainly will not make the event be two opposite things at the same time. Events are either fixed or free, certain or contingent, but they cannot be both simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> Anyone who wishes to make this assertion cannot do so philosophically due to its absurdity ( $A = \text{non-}A$ ). They also cannot do so biblically, since the Scriptures only present one view of choices—that they are free.

Boethius also uses the illustration of touching a sphere with the hand and seeing a sphere with the eye. While the hand will perceive individual aspects of the sphere through touch, reason, through the use of sight, will perceive the sphere in its entirety. He continues by noting that, since the universal aspects of an object are not understood by the lower senses, then the lower senses could think the universals perceived by reason are illusory.

Boethius tries to use the senses' lack of comprehension of reason's knowledge of universals to argue that two opposite things can be true of the same object at the same time. However, since universals and individuals are not self-contradictory opposites, but rather two different aspects of the same reality, the analogy cannot apply properly to the discussion of the nature of future events. He argues:

"The cause of this mistake is that people think that the totality of their knowledge depends on the nature and capacity to be known of the objects of knowledge. But this is all wrong. Everything that is known is comprehended not according to its own nature, but according to the ability to know of those who do the knowing." (Book V, chap IV)

Here Boethius mistakenly confuses the object to be known with the knowledge of the object. All knowers will know according to

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<sup>5</sup>If we allow this kind of relativistic reasoning in our theology and philosophy, we could promote any kind of falsehood under the guise of "another side to the truth," claiming that both opposing views are simply a matter of "perspective."

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their ability, but this will not change the object itself. As knowledge differs from one observer to another, different aspects of the object will be comprehended, but the aspects which are known are all qualities of the object. And the qualities of the object, in this case the individual and universal aspects of a sphere, are not self-contradictory, but complementary.

One of the mistakes of this argument is to imagine there are two parts to the picture rather than three. The senses observe the individuals of the sphere and reason perceives the universals. But what of the sphere itself? With regard to foreknowledge, people imagine the *event in the future as perceived by God* is one thing, and the *event in the future as perceived by man* is a second thing. Thus people can make these two things different without obvious conflict in their philosophy. They are imagining there are two events, one fixed and one free, when in reality there is only one event which can have only one nature.

There are three elements to the argument. First, there is God's perspective of the event. Second, there is man's perspective of the event. And third—and this is what is commonly overlooked—there is the event itself. The perspectives of God and man are different from the event itself, and that event can have only one nature, not two, regardless of the knowledge or perspective of the beings beholding the event. How something is viewed is very different from the object itself, and though views of the same object can be different, the object cannot be opposite things at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

For example, one person could perceive an object to exist while the other perceives it to not exist, perhaps an angel who appears to one person while the second person in the room does not see him. But this is only a matter of perception. The angel does not exist and non-exist at the same time. In this case we would have to conclude one perception or the other is incorrect. There can be no such differing qualities in the same object, whether that object is in the present or the future. Perspective makes no difference as to the reality and quality of the object itself. Any claims to the contrary will

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<sup>6</sup>Furthermore, we have no scriptural evidence that objects change their essential nature depending on the subjective experiences of the observer. Rather, Genesis 1 teaches us that objects are real or they are not. Since the finite mind of man did not exist until the sixth day, this means that God, from his perspective as Creator, has revealed to us that objects exist as he describes them regardless of the subjective perceptions of the observer. The idea that there can be varying levels of reality among created things is directly from Plato and not part of the biblical worldview. Thus, my choices have one nature—they exist, and they are free. They do not exist with two opposing natures at the same time, both fixed and free, depending on the perspective of the observer.

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have to be supported by good evidence, from the Scriptures and from logic, that objects can possess self-contradictory qualities simultaneously.

In a situation where the lower intelligence has a different opinion of the facts from the higher intelligence, Plato concludes that the lower intelligence must be wrong and the higher correct. Thus, if a prisoner thinks the shadows are real, he is wrong. Boethius, on the other hand, declares both opinions are right and the seeming difference is only a matter of perspective. He solves the problem by stating events can have self-contradictory characteristics at the same time and dismisses the inconsistency as a result of the inadequacy of human intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

It does not help to say God is outside of time and sees an event as in the present, whereas we are in time and see the same event as future. This only makes the event be both future and present at the same time, in the same way it is assumed to be fixed and free simultaneously. But which is it? Is the event present or future, fixed or free? If we must choose, it seems most reasonable to take God's assessment of the event as more accurate than our own. But if we say the event is present to God and must happen in the way he sees it, free-will is lost and the future is as fixed and certain as God's knowledge of it.

### **Future or Present?**

Another major problem with this kind of reasoning is that the definition of a future event changes in the middle of the argument. The argument begins by supposing there is a *future* event. Then, when the event is "viewed from God's perspective," it suddenly becomes a *present* event because of God's timelessness.

This redefinition of the event attempts to solve the argument by imagining that the future event is suddenly no longer a problem because it has become a present event. But the event is still future for the human observer, regardless of how God may view it. The future event is a problem specifically because it is assumed to be part of an objectively-existing future which can be known absolutely by God. If you then make the event a present event, you have solved the problem of its necessity, but only by declaring the event is now present instead of future. Thus, all present events are present as

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<sup>7</sup>This appeal to the limitation of human reason to support two contradictory ideas simultaneously is widespread in the church today, and its use is not restricted to the discussion of foreknowledge vs. free will. It is called "antinomy" and is discussed in detail in chapter 6.

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viewed by both God and man, and all future events are future as viewed by man, but present as viewed by God. However, the event can have only one nature—present or future. It cannot be both.

If God lives outside of time, he cannot experience any event as future or past—only as present. So if we say an event is future from our perspective, we are only admitting our viewpoint is incorrect. If there are really no future events, then our speaking of them as such is only delusion on our part. Perhaps this is why Boethius preferred to refer to God's foreknowledge as providence, since in this view God cannot really have *foreknowledge*.<sup>8</sup>

Yet another difficulty with this argument is that the reasoning shifts from the event itself to the knowledge of God. The problem is really that the event exists at all, not how it is viewed by man or God. If a future event exists absolutely such that it can be an object of God's knowledge, then the event is not potential, it is actual. Any view God may have of the event, such as present and contingent, does not eliminate its absolute existence as an object. Even Boethius admitted that future events happen "necessarily as a result of ... divine knowledge." Therefore, switching the argument to talk about God's knowledge of a future event does not change the nature of the event. If it is going to take place, it is an absolutely-existing future event, and God's perspective from his timeless vantage point will not make it otherwise.

### A Modern Illustration

A television program described a test given to two students by their teacher. She brought the students into a room and sat them before a sphere which was on a table between them. Each student was able to see the sphere, but they viewed it from opposite directions.

The teacher then asked the students to state the color of the ball. One student said the ball was white, the other claimed the ball was black. It is not too difficult to deduce that the ball was black on one side and white on the other. What was the truth about the ball? The teacher, from her perspective, was able to see the ball was white on one side and black on the other.

But even the perspective of the teacher is not the crucial issue here. It is the *nature of the ball itself* which is important, and *not the perspectives* of the students or the teacher. Note that the ball was not all black and all white at the same time. That would be to

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<sup>8</sup>Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. V, Sec. VI. Translated by V.E. Watts, (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 165.

## GOD'S VS. MAN'S PERSPECTIVE OF FUTURE EVENTS

describe the ball as having self-contradictory qualities simultaneously. The ball had two sides, one black and one white. The ball was not black on one side and white on the other because of her perception, but rather, she perceived the ball that way because that was the true nature of the ball.

What if the two observers were a human being and God? While the human says the ball is white (from his perspective), God will say the ball is white on one side and black on the other. Having complete knowledge of the ball, God is not fooled into thinking the ball is black. The ball has one nature, not two, and God knows the ball according to its reality, not from an incomplete perspective. But even so, God's perspective does not determine the color of the ball. Rather, the color of the ball determines God's perspective. Thus, the ball itself is separate from the perspectives of either the human or God.

So how does this relate to the future choices of human beings? If the ball is a choice in the future, and the person on one side is a human being and the person on the other side is God, we have the two perspectives of the future choice. The human being looks at the choice and says, "It is free, because it has not happened yet, and it will not exist until the choice is made." But God, from his "eternal now" perspective, says, "No, I see the choice as fixed, because it will happen as I am seeing it happen right now."<sup>9</sup>

In this case, who has the correct view of the future choice? Obviously, God, who has complete knowledge of the situation, is in a better position to define the future choice than a human would be. The incomplete perspective of the human must be rejected in favor of the absolutely perfect understanding God has of the event. So, the event is certain to happen and fixed in nature, though it may appear free to the human. In this case, the human perspective must be wrong.

Note again, it is not the perspectives of either God or the human which makes the choice a fixed event. It is the event itself which determines its nature. We accept God's assessment of the event as true because of his superior knowledge, and the human must be mistaken.

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<sup>9</sup>Augustine and Boethius both acknowledged that future choices had to be fixed if God had absolute knowledge of the events. They also said that the events were free, which is the problem with the argument. The same event cannot be both fixed and free at the same time.

## Summary

Those who use the argument that God's and man's perspective of future events can be different, and yet both correct, usually do not realize they are appealing to a very old argument started by Plato and promoted by Boethius.

Trying to claim an event in the future is both fixed and free is contrary to both logic and the Scriptures. *One event cannot have two self-contradictory qualities at the same time, regardless of the perspectives of the observers.*

In the case where the observations of God and man differ concerning an event, we will have to assume that God, with his greater knowledge, is more accurate in his assessment of the situation. Thus, if God sees an event as actually happening (whether as a future event or as happening in the present due to timelessness), then that event will happen, and is consequently fixed and certain. If future choices *must* happen, free will is only an illusion due to man's inadequate view of the event.<sup>10</sup>

Switching the argument from the future event itself to God's perspective of the event does not give the occurrence two natures at the same time. An event cannot be both future and present, both certain and contingent, simultaneously, and an appeal to God's timeless observation of the event will not change that fact.

We must also keep in mind that these arguments do not prove God is timeless or that he has absolute foreknowledge. Rather, they assume both of these to be true about God and proceed from there. Whether or not God lives outside of time or has absolute foreknowledge of future events is an issue which will have to be established by good Bible study, on good exegetical grounds, and not by appeal to human reasoning, even though those arguments come from the minds of such renowned philosophers as Plato and Boethius.

In the Bible, our future choices are always presented as ours to determine freely—not fixed by some inescapable foreknowledge of a timeless being. And if we do not presuppose the timelessness and absolute foreknowledge of God, we do not have to defend philosophical absurdities and biblical contradictions.

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<sup>10</sup>For further discussion of this aspect of the argument, please see chapter 4, "Does Absolute Foreknowledge Eliminate Free Will?"

## Chapter 4

### Does Absolute Foreknowledge Eliminate Free Will?

If God knows the future choices of human beings, does this necessarily mean that man has no free will? What is the nature of history? What is the nature of our choices? Are they fixed or free, certain or contingent, actual or potential, necessary or avoidable?

Most people who hold to the timelessness of God and absolute foreknowledge attempt to answer these questions by appealing to the difference between God's and man's perspective of future events.<sup>1</sup> They argue that there is no logical connection between God's seeing a future choice and the nature of the choice. But is this so? Is history such that events which may never exist can be known absolutely? If an event can be known absolutely, is it necessary that the event come to pass? Is there any way to view history such that an event could be known absolutely and yet not be necessary?

In approaching the subject of the nature of history, it is important to remember that those who hold to the "different perspectives" theory must presuppose timelessness as an attribute of God before they begin their argument. Of course, whether or not God is timeless is a matter of what God's Word teaches, and the doctrine will have to be established on the basis of good Bible study, and not on supposition alone.

There are those rare individuals who deny timelessness but propose absolute foreknowledge by some mystical, unknown capacity in God. But they still use the same kind of reasoning as the "different perspectives" proponents when attempting to maintain freedom of will in light of God's absolute foreknowledge of future events.

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<sup>1</sup>The form, history, and inadequacy of this argument are discussed in chapter 3, "God's vs. Man's Perspective."



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### Present or Future?

In discussions about God's knowledge of the future, one often hears that we see future events as future whereas God sees them as happening now. Since a choice which is happening now cannot be said to be fixed in any way, then God's "seeing" of the future choice does not make it a fixed event. Thus, people can have free will while God has absolute knowledge of their future choices. But is this definition of the nature of history possible?

Boethius, in his *Consolation*, uses the illustration of watching a chariot race as an example of the freedom of present actions.

"...we see charioteers performing in order to control and drive their chariots, and other things of this sort. But no necessity forces any of them to happen in this way, does it? ... Therefore, all those things which happen without happening of necessity are, before they happen, future events about to happen, but not about to happen of necessity. For just as the knowledge of present things imposes no necessity on what is happening, so foreknowledge imposes no necessity on what is going to happen."<sup>2</sup>

The argument here is that since God sees the event as happening "now" even though it is future for us, the event is still free because it has the same nature as any present event.

But that is exactly the problem. When God sees something which is future for us, it is in the future, it is *not* now. Saying an event, such as a choice, is future with respect to us and present tense with respect to God is only claiming the event is, by nature, *both* future and present at the same time. Even though *he* may be imagined as beholding the event as present while we see it as future, still the quality of the event itself is being described as both future and present simultaneously.

We view future events as not yet existing. If God sees all future events as happening "now," then all events which we perceive as future have an absolute existence right now.<sup>3</sup> As Augustine put it,

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<sup>2</sup>Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Ch. IV. Trans. by V. E. Watts (Penguin Books, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>If all of my future choices are happening now, then God is not the only one who lives in the "eternal now." I live in an "eternal now" too.

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“Things then past and to come are.”<sup>4</sup> So, which are they—present or future?

It is interesting to note that this line of reasoning forces the proponent to assume that objects can exist and non-exist at the same time. Does the future exist as an object of knowledge to God? Then it absolutely exists. Does the future exist for us? If not, then the future both exists and non-exists at the same time.

Another question which must be answered about a pre-existing future is how it came into being. It obviously did not come into being by *our* choices since we have not yet made them. But if all of our future choices exist to bring about the future event in question, who did make those choices? Are we making them right now? If this is true, how is it we exist in both the future and present at the same time?

Or did God create all the events of history before they ever happened? If we did not make our future choices, then God seems to be the only other candidate for the existence of such a history.<sup>5</sup> If so, we cannot escape the inevitable, logical results of such a premise. If God predestined all events, including all of the good and evil choices man will ever make, then there is no free will and God becomes the author of evil.

What is the nature of future events? Are they only possibilities or will they actually occur in the future as God has seen them happen in his “eternal now”? If they absolutely *will* happen, they are not potential events, as are the present actions of the charioteers, but actual events, which from our present perspective must be viewed as certain, since they absolutely *will* come to pass. If they absolutely will exist, how can we say they may or may not happen?

### **Actual or Potential?**

Potential events are events which may or may not come to pass. Their existence depends on the free-will choices of God and man. If one choice is made, a particular circumstance results. If a different choice is made, a different circumstance follows. This is the essential nature of “free will.”

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<sup>4</sup>Please see chapter 2, “A Brief History of Timelessness,” for more information on Augustine’s views of timelessness as an attribute of God.

<sup>5</sup>Or the only reasonable candidate. As we shall see later in this chapter, there is a third, though absurd, alternative.

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Actual events are events which absolutely will come to pass. They are not such that they may or may not come to pass. They *will* happen.

As with the previous discussion of present and future events, the perspectives of God and man make no difference to the situation. Saying God sees an event as actual while we see it as potential is still claiming the same event has both opposing qualities concurrently.

But how can one event have two different natures? If something *will* come to pass, it cannot at the same time be such that it *may or may not* come to pass. That is, an event cannot be both potential and actual at the same time. Since all events in the future are either potential or actual, we need to decide which way to define them.

People have focused their attention for so long on God's and man's perspective of future events, they have forgotten that the event itself must have some kind of nature. That is, history must be one way or the other. If they assert the future is both actual and potential at the same time, they will have to find some way to support this logical absurdity. They will have to find a way to prove  $A = \text{non-}A$ .

At this point, people try to use linguistic sleight of hand to say events *actually* exist from God's perspective but only *potentially* exist from our perspective. But these two qualities of history cannot be true of the same event at the same time, whether the event is viewed as present or future. It is still the same event and must have one nature or the other. If anything can be assumed about the superiority of God's knowledge over man's, we must conclude God's viewpoint of the event to be correct, and ours must be mistaken, since the event cannot actually and potentially exist at the same time. Saying history is potential from our standpoint, and actual from God's, is only supposing two completely opposite views of history are both true of the same events.

The Scriptures say that because of God's faithfulness there will be a future, and God will bring about certain events in the future, but it does not say the future *now* exists (as an object of knowledge or otherwise). This idea comes only from the supposition that God lives outside of time and that all of history is "now" to him. There is no statement in the Bible that the future now exists.

The capacity to know is different from knowledge. Knowledge is always the knowing of an *object*, such as a thing, idea, or event, while the capacity of the mind to know is the *ability* to know the object. If there were no facts to be known, a mind could not be said to have knowledge. I can have a mind which has the capacity to

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know, but I do not know unless there is an object to be known. Thus, if God knows the future, then there must be an actual future, not a possible future, to be an object of God's knowledge. And if God's knowledge of this pre-existent future is correct, then the future must happen exactly as God has foreseen it.<sup>6</sup>

Even a present event must be chosen one way or the other to be an object of knowledge. If it is potential rather than actual, we are still left with the question of how a potential event, which may never happen, can be an absolute object of knowledge. An illustration of this point comes from God himself when he commands the Israelites, "... put off your ornaments from you, *that I may know what I will do with you*" (Exodus 33:5). Until the Israelites chose one way or the other, God could not know what he would do in response.<sup>7</sup>

Another interesting aspect of this problem is how God can know the outcome of a future choice if both the outcome and the choice itself are always in the present. This would mean God always sees the person as *just about to make the choice*, but never proceeding to choose one alternative over another. But if he absolutely knows the outcome, then the person must have *already* made the choice. But which is it? Is the choice potential or actual? It cannot be both.

Or, to put it another way, the existence of an actual result requires that an actual choice has already been made. Thus, a future choice has the same quality as past events, and must be as certain and fixed as those events.

### Contingent or Certain?

Actual future events fall into the same category as present cause and effect events. If an event in the future must happen, rather than it may or may not happen, it is impossible for the event to happen

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<sup>6</sup>As stated before, the future need not pre-exist as a *physical* object, only as an object in the mind of God. Either way, the future is certain and fixed, and all of the problems related to absolute foreknowledge ensue. See footnote 6 of Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup>Some interpreters might claim the word "know" here actually means "experience." They argue that God said "know" but he meant "experience" because he already knew what they would do. The only reason these interpreters do this is because they have already assumed God is outside of time, having absolute foreknowledge. This would be performing eisegesis and forcing an unwarranted meaning onto the Scriptures because of preconceived ideas of the nature of God.

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any other way. Thus it has the same quality as a cause and effect event.

We know that particular chemicals, when mixed, will produce a particular reaction because the chemicals must, by their nature, react in this fashion. These are called cause and effect reactions because the cause must produce the effect. The chemicals are not free to act in one way or another, so there is no question as to which reaction will result given a particular cause.

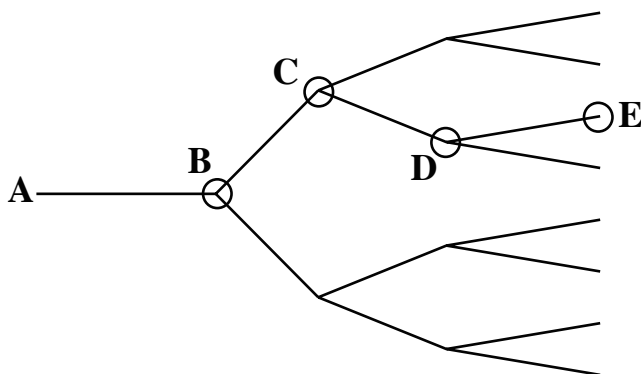
An actual future event, since it will happen exactly as God has seen it happen, *must* happen. The will that “produces” the event is in the category of cause and effect, since the will cannot produce one effect or another. It can only produce the effect God has seen will happen. Thus, the will can only “cause” the actual event to happen, and the will then exhibits the same nature as the cause in a cause and effect reaction.

We understand a will to be “free” only if it can produce more than one effect. But if a choice can result in only one actual event, and not one of two different potential events, the will cannot be said to be free. Thus, if all of our choices in the future must result in the actual events which God has already seen will happen, we are not free, but are acting merely as the cause which brings about the certain effect.

The connection between the foreknowledge of God and the loss of free will is the *actuality* of the foreseen event. If the event is foreseen as happening, the event is actual and not potential. If the event is actual and not potential, and since God cannot be mistaken about what he knows, then the event must happen. If the event must happen, then the will producing the event can only produce one result—the actual event which God has foreseen. Thus, if God absolutely foreknows an event, the human being loses his free will and becomes only a cause producing the actual, inevitable event.

The situation could be illustrated something like this:

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A represents the present time. B, C, D, and E all represent future choices. If choice E will happen in the future and God sees it as happening now, then choices B, C, and D *must* happen if E is to happen such that it can be an absolute object of knowledge now. This means when I reach choice B, I *have to choose* to go to C or E will not happen. If I *must* choose to go from A to B, B to C, C to D and D to E, then I have no free will. It does not matter at which point I find myself. Each choice must happen just as God has foreseen it or the ultimate outcome (E) will not take place and God will have been mistaken in his knowledge of the future.<sup>8</sup>

Again, we cannot salvage the situation by claiming all of the above is only the future *as God sees it*, but we really do have free will *from our perspective*. This is not a matter of the perspectives of God and man, but of *the nature of history itself*, and if the future is certain as God sees it, any feeling on our part that we are free is only an illusion.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Interestingly enough, the Scriptures record two instances in which God was mistaken about the future choices of his people. Isaiah 5:1-4 says that God was mistaken about how his people would act once they were in their promised land. He expected them to choose righteousness, but they chose wickedness instead. Jeremiah 3:7 states that God had an incorrect thought about the future when he declares, "I thought, 'After she has done all these things, she will return to Me'; but she did not return."

<sup>9</sup>I believe John Sanders gives the proponents of "simple foreknowledge" too much latitude at this point. "According to simple foreknowledge (or timeless foreknowledge) God decided to create this particular type of world and then atemporally *learns* what will happen in this world. God did not know prior to his decision to create what would happen in this world. Once God becomes aware of what will *actually happen* in this world, he cannot make events "deoccur" such that what does actually happen does not actually happen, for that would

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And what of our present, free-will choices? Are they really free? Is the future contingent on the choices we make now? If one presupposes the absolute foreknowledge of God, the answer must be “No.” Since the choices we experience as present for us have been foreknown by God, and were at one time future events, they must have the same quality of actuality our future choices do. Thus even our present choices become certain if absolute foreknowledge is true.

### **Past, Present, and Future, or Only Present?**

If God lives in an “eternal now,” and all times are present tense to him, then all times must have the same quality. Since the past, present and future seem to us to have different characteristics, this leaves us with three possible scenarios.

1) All times are exactly the same as the present, which means all events are contingent and can have alternate outcomes. This view was held by Augustine who said, “Things then past and to come are.”<sup>10</sup> But it would be very strange to conceive of the past as currently happening with the possibility of being different. What if my parents should right now choose not to have me as a child? Could I suddenly go out of existence because I was never conceived? And if this were true of the future, how could God know absolutely what will happen since it is being chosen right now and

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falsify God’s foreknowledge.” *The God Who Risks*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 260.

When Sanders states that God “did not know prior,” does he mean that God suddenly gained foreknowledge of the events in the world he would create? But if God has foreknowledge, why did he not also know eternally and atemporally that he *would* create and also foreknow all of the events in that creation?

I have never heard a proponent of foreknowledge claim that God “gained” foreknowledge because of his decision to create the world. I have heard, though, an argument that perhaps God limited his foreknowledge when he created the world. This is equally illogical, however, since all of the problems with absolute foreknowledge would have been part of this view of God before he decided to limit his knowledge. Thus, God would be limiting himself so he could become just and his creatures could become free. This changing of God’s nature and character is contrary to many scriptural passages about the consistency and faithfulness of God. Either God has always had complete foreknowledge of all events, or he has not. The idea that God gained or lost foreknowledge is purely speculative and outside the scope of biblical revelation.

<sup>10</sup>St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. XI, chap. XVII, ll. 22, p. 94

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the outcome is dependent on human choices? If all events happen concurrently, what becomes of history?

Any practical application of this idea becomes confusing, to say the least. No sin is ever forgiven because the person is still sinning, is still unrepentant, and God has not yet forgiven the person. Christ has not died yet because he is still living his life in Judea. But then, Christ is now reigning in the new heaven and earth because the future is “now” also. We have already had the great white throne of judgment, but we have not yet been created! What a mess this makes of history. The activities of God and man apart from a time reference end up being not just confusing, but ludicrous.

2) All times are exactly the same as the future, which means no events have yet taken place. But it seems obvious all past events are real but gone, never to happen again, and present events are real and happening now. This “feeling” about history is supported by God’s many declarations that the past and future are past and future for him too. In all of these statements he never once gives us the idea, when he says something is past, that it is still occurring for him.<sup>11</sup> And he certainly does not say the past has not yet happened!

3) All times are exactly the same as the past, and if the past cannot be changed, then the present and future must be just as unalterable as the past. If this is the case, then present and future choices are as fixed as past choices, and free will is abolished.

Of the three scenarios, this one seems the most plausible if God lives in an “eternal now.” If God sees what I will do next Tuesday, then he also sees next Wednesday, and next Tuesday is a past event for him. That is, if God sees next Wednesday as “now,” then he

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<sup>11</sup>The use of present-tense language to represent more than one time does not contradict this. When the Scripture says in Numbers 23:22, “God brings them out of Egypt, He is for them like the horns of the wild ox,” the deliverance of Israel from Egypt was both a past and a present reality. If I say, “God saves us from our past lives,” I do not mean that God is currently viewing me as becoming a Christian when I was 16. What I mean is that God has saved me and is still able to save anyone who trusts in him. Thus, present-tense language used to represent the past need not mean that the event in the past is still happening as a present occurrence.

Again, in I Thessalonians 1:10, in the phrase, “Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come,” the present participle “is delivering us” is easily understood as covering all three tenses of our deliverance. We have been delivered from wrath by being saved, we are currently being delivered, and we will be delivered in the future. There is no reason to interpret this verse as meaning that all three tenses are happening at the same time due to some quality of timelessness in God’s being. That would be forcing an unwarranted meaning onto the text due to preconceived ideas about the nature of God.



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sees my choices on Tuesday as already made. Or, to put it another way, he cannot see Wednesday as “now” without the inclusion of Tuesday’s choices as part of the history of Wednesday. Otherwise, his knowledge of Wednesday is not complete, or accurate, if it does not include Tuesday’s choices as already made. Again, if the consequences of Tuesday’s choices are part of Wednesday’s history, then Tuesday must be past if Wednesday is “seen” as present. This means next Tuesday becomes as fixed as any past event (such as last Tuesday) and all freedom is lost because all events take on the same nature as past events. From God’s perspective, I have *already made* all of my future choices, and since I cannot undo a previous choice, there is no free will.

Someone may suggest that all events have all three qualities. If every time is “now” to God, then one could assert every event is past, present and future at the same time. This is, of course, even harder to support logically than saying all future events are both future and present (future to God, present to us). Claiming what I am doing presently is also both past and future, that is, it has already been done, but has not yet been done, is simply an unsustainable assertion with no possibility of proof.

Fortunately, none of these scenarios is supported by the Scriptures. God speaks of the past, present, and future in the same way we do. He could have hinted that time is different for him than it is for us, but he has not done so.

God speaks of his memory of the past exactly as we would:

“Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, The love of your betrothals, Your following after Me in the wilderness, Through a land not sown.”’” (Jeremiah 2:2)<sup>12</sup>

God speaks of the future in the same way we do:

“‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’” (Jeremiah 29:11)

And God seems to think we can make choices in the present which will determine our future condition. He says through Moses:

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<sup>12</sup>See also Leviticus 26:45; Numbers 10:9; Jeremiah 2:2; 14:10; 31:20; 44:21; Hosea 8:13.

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“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

God even says that if the Israelites had chosen a different course in the past, their present condition would have been different:

“If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.” (Isaiah 48:18)<sup>13</sup>

In other words, if the Israelites had made different choices in the past, they would now be living a different present history. Surely God does not speak this way to taunt us, but to encourage us to make proper choices in the present so our futures can be brighter.

God himself validates the idea that the course of history is not certain, but is contingent on what we do with our choices. The future is open and can have different outcomes depending on how we respond to God and to his Word.<sup>14</sup>

### **Certainty, Necessity, and Contingency**

There are those who object to this line of reasoning because they see it as a confusion of the three terms certainty, necessity, and contingency.<sup>15</sup> They accuse those who argue this way of redefining their words in the middle of the argument—called, in philosophy, an *equivocation*. They assert that saying something is certain (i.e., absolutely will happen), is not the same as saying something is necessary (i.e., must happen, or is caused to happen). In this argument, contingency is defined as something which may or may

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<sup>13</sup>See also I Samuel 13:13, 14.

<sup>14</sup>Those who would like to call all of this language poetic only do so because they have pre-conceived that God is outside of time, and then proceed to interpret these verses using that assumption to distort the clear meaning of the texts.

<sup>15</sup>e.g., Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology* (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), or Robert E. Picirilli in the June, 2000 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom and the Future,” In *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June, 2000), pp. 259-71).

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not happen, and is presented as the opposite of necessity, but not the opposite of certainty.

Certainty, they say, is not the same as necessity. Saying an event is certain is only to say that it will (absolutely) happen. But saying an event is necessary is to say that it is caused to happen. Thus, they argue, an event can be certain without being necessary, that is, an event absolutely will happen, but is not caused to happen.

The question here is whether or not *certain* events are also *necessary* events. If an event absolutely will happen, is it caused by anything or anyone? Can an event be absolutely foreknown without its actual existence? How did an event come to exist without causation of any kind? If truly contingent events may or may not happen, then can events which are absolutely certain to happen qualify as truly contingent? What is the nature of future history?

If God sees a future event, then it exists as an object of his knowledge. Since he cannot be mistaken about what he knows, then the event will (certainly) take place.<sup>16</sup> The problem here is not God's knowledge of an event, or that the event certainly will take place, it is that the event exists at all. Boethius wrote, "as the knowledge of present things imposes no necessity on what is happening, so foreknowledge imposes no necessity on what is going to happen."<sup>17</sup> While this may be so, it is superfluous to the argument. The problem is not that God knows the future, but that there is an objectively-existing future to be known. While knowledge of an event does not make the event happen, there can be no *knowledge* of an event without the *existence* of the event.

So what caused this pre-existent future to exist? There are only three possibilities: 1) God, or 2) ourselves, or 3) some being other than 1 or 2.

1) The idea that God determined all of human history, commonly called predestination, *does* answer the question of foreknowledge, but only because God could know everything he had planned to do. One of the major problems with this view is that it describes God as the cause of all choices, both good and bad, and thus God becomes the author of evil. Though this view solves the problem of foreknowledge vs. free will (by eliminating free will),

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<sup>16</sup>To say that God cannot be mistaken about what he knows is quite different from saying that God knows what will happen in the future. The former is knowledge of a fact, the latter would be knowledge of a possibility. Claiming that God has knowledge of the future as a fact rather than a possibility is only another way of asserting that God has absolute foreknowledge.

<sup>17</sup>Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Ch. IV. Trans. by V. E. Watts (Penguin Books, 1969).

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many still accept the idea of foreknowledge without believing in the absolute predestination of all events.<sup>18</sup>

2) As part of the finite creation of God, existing only in the present, it is obvious that we cannot be the ones who made our future choices. We are not there yet to choose, so the certainty of our decisions must be based on something other than our free wills. Otherwise, we would be in the strange situation of existing in the “eternal now” as surely as some people claim God does. If our future choices really are future, and not present, then *we* did not make those choices because we are not there yet to choose them.

3) It would seem as if the only alternative left is that future history either made itself (!) or that some unknown cause apart from God or man produced the history of the universe. If God is beholding the future, whether as future or present events, and he did not predestine this future to occur, then he is beholding a history he *did* not create and we *could* not create. The only alternative to this is that there is some other being who made this history—a being who is greater than both God and the history of the universe. We are left in the awkward position of wondering if we are worshipping the wrong being. This is absurd and unbiblical, of course, and we reject this alternative, but we still have not answered the question as to how this future history originated.

This “cause” of the future is never stated by those supporting absolute foreknowledge, and while this silence may be understandable, it is nevertheless not a sufficient answer to the question. It is understandable, because if someone presupposes God knows all future events, then those events must exist in some fashion. But this is not an explanation, because it still outlines no cause for this pre-existent future. While we do not have to know what the exact cause of the future is, we do have to assume there is a cause, since a history of created, finite beings could not have created itself. For now, we will assume there is a cause, but that the cause need not be stated for the discussion to proceed.

The existence of an event, either future or present, is logically prior to knowledge of the event. It is logically prior, though not necessarily temporally prior. The knowledge and the event could be happening simultaneously, but the knowledge of the event cannot happen without its existence. If foreknowledge claims anything, it is

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<sup>18</sup>Strict predestinarians may claim that God causes the choices, but people are still free to make the choices. This only amounts to a claim that determined choices are free choices—an obvious logical and linguistic contradiction. Statements like, “God determined that you would freely make this choice,” are not explanatory, they are simply incoherent.

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that God has present knowledge of a reality other than the present—namely the future. Thus, all proponents of foreknowledge tacitly accept the existence of the future as an entity distinct from the present.

Asserting God knows the future when it does not as yet exist will not help the situation. “God can know a non-existent event,” is not the statement of an impossibility, but an absurdity. This is the same as saying, “God knows a something which is not a something,” and falls into the same class of self-contradictions as, “God can make a tripod with four legs,” or, “God can make a rock bigger than he can move,” or, “God can make it rain and not rain at the same place at the same time.” These are not impossibilities, they are absurdities, and are not worthy of serious consideration in a discussion about the attributes of God.

But if God knows an event, the event must exist as an object. If the event exists, then it somehow came into being. If the event has a cause which produced the event with absolute certainty, then the event occurred necessarily. Necessities are the results of causes which produce absolutely certain effects. Thus, if the future is the result of a cause which produces its results with absolute certainty, then the future exists necessarily. And if future choices exist necessarily, then they are not contingent, and free will is eliminated.

The laws of cause and effect are viewed as laws of necessity precisely because they tell us what *will* (absolutely) happen (if I drop my pen, it will go down). Laws of contingency (or free will) only tell us what *ought* to happen, but cannot tell us what actually will transpire (Thou shalt not steal). We determine what *must* happen on the basis of what absolutely *will* happen given a particular cause. When we know what absolutely will happen given a particular cause, and it is not such that the event may or may not happen, then the event is not contingent, it is necessary. Thus, absolute certainty, when applied to future events, becomes absolute necessity. Whatever the cause of the future was, it was sufficient to bring about future history with absolute certainty, so the future must have been produced necessarily by this cause. If the future originated out of necessity, then future choices cannot be contingent. They must happen exactly as God has foreseen them, and man’s will has nothing to do with it.

The logic goes like this:

1. God knows a future choice will certainly take place.
2. To be an object of knowledge, the choice must actually exist.
3. If the choice exists, it had to have a cause.

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4. God is not the cause of the choice (rejecting the absolute predestination of all events).
5. A human will is not the cause of the choice (the human who makes the choice exists in the present, but not the future).<sup>19</sup>
6. The cause of the choice, whatever that cause is, produced only one, absolutely certain effect—the choice.
7. Causes which produce only one effect with absolute certainty are necessary causes.
8. So, the choice happens of necessity.
9. Necessity is the opposite of contingency.
10. The choice is not contingent, so the choice is not free.

We conclude, therefore, that absolute foreknowledge logically eliminates the free will of man. If the nature of future history is such that it will take place in only one manner, then the cause of that history is a necessary cause, producing only one possible effect. If future history is necessarily caused, then there are no contingencies, and free will cannot exist.

So then, there is no equivocation on the words certainty and necessity if the event under consideration is a future event which currently exists as an object of God's knowledge.<sup>20</sup> If a future choice is certain, but the person only exists in the present, then the pre-existence of the choice must be explained on a basis other than the person's free will. Technically speaking, a future event which is a current object of God's knowledge *has already been produced* by a cause sufficient to insure the absolute certainty of the event. And since we define necessity as that which proceeds from a cause with absolute certainty, then the certainty of a future choice entails its necessity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Using the "eternal now" does not help here because even though God might exist in the future as well as now, the human does not. Thus, the human could not have made the future choice, even though God could have "beheld" it in his "ever-present now." Claiming that the event is present tense for God will not help either, because the future event is then being defined as both future and present at the same time, and this is not admissible.

<sup>20</sup>Someone may note that the phrase "a future event which currently exists" is illogical, but this is an assertion made by those who hold to absolute foreknowledge. This self-contradictory language must be used to present the position we are trying to refute.

<sup>21</sup>It will not help to claim that the certainty of future choices is based on man's will. If a future choice exists as an object of knowledge, the choice has already been made, and is in the same category as all past choices—it is a fixed, unchangeable event.

## Summary

The future cannot be both present and future at the same time, neither can it be both potential and actual simultaneously. The same choice cannot be both contingent and certain. The future cannot have completely opposite, self-contradictory qualities at the same time, and no amount of presuppositional double talk will make A equal non-A.

People try to solve these dilemmas by saying God's perspective of the future is different from man's perspective. God's absolute knowledge of the future does not make the events necessary, they say, because he sees the events as present occurrences. They view history this way because they have already presupposed God is timeless, living in an "eternal now," seeing all events as present-tense occurrences.

If the future exists such that God can know it absolutely, then it must be actual and not potential. And if a will can produce only one actual result, and not differing potential results, then that will is not free. Thus God's absolute foreknowledge eliminates the free will of man.

Again, if God foreknows an event, it must actually exist as an object of knowledge. If the event actually exists, it had a cause. If the event was caused with absolute certainty, the event was necessary. Thus, foreknown events are necessary and cannot be contingent. Free will is eliminated by the necessity of the event.

Nowhere in God's Word does it declare that an actual future pre-exists as an object of knowledge for God.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, there are many references to God's not knowing the future choices of human beings.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, if we do *not* presuppose the timelessness and absolute foreknowledge of God, we avoid this futile struggle to integrate the foreknowledge of God with the free will of man. Man is free and able to create any number of potential futures as he cooperates with God to determine his own destiny.

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<sup>22</sup>Though it is possible for God to foreknow those events which he has determined to bring to pass. The issue of prophecy will be handled in chapter 7.

<sup>23</sup>A discussion of these references can be found in chapter 10.

# Chapter 5

## Time, Change, and God

### The Logic of Time and Change

The Bible clearly asserts that God does not change (Malachi 3:6 — “I, the Lord, do not change”). This is commonly called God’s immutability. But the Bible also clearly refers to the changing of God’s mind thirty-six times.<sup>1</sup> Apart from direct statements, there are numerous other references indicating that God changed his thoughts, actions, attitudes or emotions.<sup>2</sup> How can these statements all be true? If God does not change, why do the Scriptures refer to the changing of God’s mind?<sup>3</sup> There will be a biblical discussion of Malachi 3 later in this chapter, but for now let’s take a look at some of the logical arguments related to God, change, and time.

One argument is framed in this fashion: being immutable (unchanging) necessarily entails timelessness. To change, they say, requires time, so for a being to be unchanging, it must have no time. But does this logically follow?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See appendix D for a list of references.

<sup>2</sup>One example is the sorrow and grief God expressed over having created man (Genesis 6:6) when he had formerly seen all that he made and called it “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

<sup>3</sup>We have already seen that these references to God’s changing his mind cannot be brushed off as anthropomorphic or anthropopathic statements unless we have compelling evidence in the context or elsewhere in the Bible to do so.

<sup>4</sup>Norman Geisler, in his book *Creating God in the Image of Man?*, quotes Aquinas as arguing in this fashion concerning time and change. “One argument goes like this: whatever exists in time can be computed according to its before and afters. However, a changeless being has no before or afters; it is always the same. Consequently, God must be timeless.” Geisler then goes on to use this same kind of reasoning to support his ideas of God’s timelessness. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), pp. 29-30.



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We commonly accept intuitively, and can generally agree for the sake of argument, that when a thing changes from one state to another, time is necessarily a part of this process. This is because the thing, by definition, is changing “from” and “to,” the “from” being in one moment and the “to” being in another. Given this definition of change, we can formulate an argument which goes like this:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after (exists in time).

This thing changes.

Therefore this thing has a before and an after.

This kind of argument, called a syllogism, is commonly written in a kind of shorthand as:

If p, then q

p

∴ q

In this kind of argument, the first line states a premise (the major premise), the second line states another premise (the minor premise), and the third line states a conclusion drawn from the two premises. The first part of the major premise, “If p,” states a condition. This part of the major premise is called the antecedent. The second part of the major premise, “then q,” states a conclusion. This part of the major premise is called the consequent. The symbol ∴ in the third line means “therefore.” The middle line can change, depending on the kind of conclusion the person is trying to reach.

Here is a verbal example of this form of argument:

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.

This animal is a cow.

Therefore this animal has four legs.

This is a valid argument. Since it is part of the definition of “cow” that the animal called “cow” has four legs, then if an animal is a cow, it has four legs.

Let’s look again at the argument concerning time and change:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after (exists in time).

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This thing changes.

Therefore this thing has a before and an after.

This argument is also valid, but the above logic is not employed by those attempting to support the idea of an “eternal now” God. Instead, they try to reason in this fashion:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after (exists in time).

This thing does not change.

Therefore this thing does not have a before and an after (or does not exist in time).

What they are trying to say is if things which change involve time, then because God does not change, he is outside of time.

Or, to put it in the shortened form:

If p, then q.

not p

∴ not q.

An example of this kind of logic applied to cows would look like this:

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.

This animal is not a cow.

Therefore this animal does not have four legs.

Now, horses are not cows, but they do have four legs, and if we can think of at least one example which does not logically follow, then the entire argument is false.

This is a logical fallacy called denying the antecedent (not p).<sup>5</sup>

The only way this kind of logic can work is if the first phrase also includes the stipulation “if and only if.” If we knew of a world where cows were the only four-legged animal, then in that world the condition, “If an animal is a cow” would imply “If and only if an animal is a cow.” In that case, the logic would work. But without

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<sup>5</sup>See Stephen F. Barker, *The Elements of Logic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 95, and W. Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther, *Fallacy: The Counterfeit of Argument* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 155 for discussions of this logical fallacy.

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any proof the condition is true, we have to consider the possibility there may be animals other than cows that have four legs.

In an argument structured in this way, “if and only if” is a form of circular reasoning (a non-sequitur) because you are defining your premise to include the conclusion you wish to reach.

Let’s go back to the argument concerning time and change. It states:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after (exists in time).

This thing does not change.

Therefore this thing does not have a before and an after (or does not exist in time).

Again, the only way we can be sure this is true is if we can prove the condition “If a thing changes” really means “If and only if a thing changes.” To prove that, however, is to conclude there are no unchanging beings or objects that have a before and an after. In other words, could God exist in a duration and yet not change? But this is the very question we are trying to answer. If we assume the first line of our argument implies “If and only if a thing changes,” then we have assumed our conclusion to be true before we ever start our reasoning.

Ultimately the issue is not a matter of philosophy or thought, but of revelation. Does the Bible say God is outside of time, or does it teach something else? We will have to find conclusive evidence in the Scripture that God does not live in duration before we can be sure that “if and only if a things changes, then that thing has a before and an after.”

The same kind of argument can be applied to the idea of infinity:

True:

If a thing is finite, then that thing involves time.

This thing is finite.

Therefore this thing involves time.

False:

If a thing is finite, then that thing involves time.

This thing is not finite (infinite).

Therefore this thing does not involve time.

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This is the same logical fallacy of denying the antecedent and can only be shown to be true by first defining that “if and only if a thing is finite, then that thing involves time.” But the question is, “Are there any infinite beings which *do* involve time?” Until we have a biblical answer to this question, the logical argument cannot be accepted as valid.

### **Affirming the Consequent**

We saw above that those who espouse timelessness often present their argument concerning time and change in this form:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after.  
This thing does not change.  
Therefore this thing does not have a before and an after.

Or:

If p, then q.  
not p  
∴ not q.

This is an invalid argument because the negation of the antecedent does not automatically imply that the negation of the consequent will follow.

Denying the antecedent is not the only way some proponents of timelessness attempt to support the idea from the concept of change. Sometimes the person presenting the position will commit another logical fallacy called “affirming the consequent” (q). They will argue in this fashion:

If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after.  
This thing has a before and an after.  
Therefore this thing changes.

Or:

If p, then q.  
q  
∴ p.

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Using our cows as an illustration again, we see this kind of logic:

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.  
This animal has four legs.  
Therefore this animal is a cow.

It is not too difficult to see how this argument cannot be true. Since there are other animals that have four legs, many animals besides cows could be the animal mentioned in the minor premise (the second line of the argument).

So while we can accept that things which change are in time, we cannot turn this around to say that because something is in time, it automatically changes.

### Arguing the Converse

So far we have looked at the logic of denying the antecedent, and affirming the consequent. Both of these attempts to support the timelessness of God fail philosophically. But there is another way people approach this problem.

In philosophy, if you exchange the first part of a conditional statement with the second part, this is called the converse of the statement.

Here is a conditional statement about change and time:

“If a thing changes, then that thing has a before and an after (exists in time)”

Here is the converse of that statement:

“If a thing has a before and an after, then that thing changes.”

As Stephen F. Barker points out in *The Elements of Logic*, “Clearly, the converse is a new and different sentence that need not agree with the original as regards truth or falsity.”<sup>6</sup>

The truthfulness of this new conditional sentence will need to be validated on grounds apart from the truthfulness or falsity of the original sentence. Therefore, while we may accept the first sentence

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<sup>6</sup>Stephen F. Barker, *The Elements of Logic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 94.

to be true, that is, that things which change are necessarily in time, we cannot turn that around to say that things which are in time necessarily change. If there exists only one thing (or being) which does not change, yet exists in time, then the new conditional sentence cannot be used as the first part of an argument. We would have to prove “if and only if” a thing has a before and an after does that thing change, before we could assume the converse of the original sentence to be true.

Some may wish to avoid this difficulty by defining time *as change*, but defining time and change as the same thing only yields sentences like, “If this thing has a before and an after, then it has a before and an after,” or “If a thing changes, then it changes,” and this is not helpful in the discussion. In common discourse, we make a distinction between time and change, so to define time as change will not help.

One interesting question which comes to mind is the definition of “unchanging.” To change means to be different from one moment to the next. So, if unchanging means anything, it must mean that the object does not change *from one moment to the next*. To define an object as unchanging by stating that it *cannot go from one moment to the next* is to drain the word of any meaning. It would seem as if the only way “unchanging” can have any meaning, is if it indicates that the object *does go* from one moment to the next, but without changing [rather than it has no moments in which to change]. This kind of static being with no sequence in which to exist cannot be the living, dynamic, and active God described in the Bible.

### **Perfection, Immutability, and Time**

Another argument concerning time and change goes like this: If a thing is perfect, then that thing cannot change. For a perfect thing, to change would be for it to go from a perfect state to something less, and then the thing would no longer be perfect. Thus, if God is perfect, he cannot change, for to change would be to become less than perfect, and God is perfect.

There are two glaringly obvious problems with this kind of logic.

1) the word perfect is defined to mean unchanging (immutable, if you will), and then the logic proceeds from the definition of the word. But if you define perfection to *be* immutability, then anything which changes is by definition not perfect. This amounts to nothing

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more than a tautology no better than “all bachelors are unmarried.” Since the word bachelor already includes “unmarried” as part of the definition, the statement tells you nothing. If “perfect” is defined as “immutable,” then to say something which changes is not perfect does not state anything new.

The logic of this argument might look like this:

If a thing is perfect, then that thing does not change.  
This thing does change.  
Therefore this thing is not perfect.

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.  
This animal does not have four legs.  
Therefore this animal is not a cow.

This argument contains the same logical fallacy as the former. We can only be sure that “If a thing is perfect, then that thing does not change” if we can know there are no things which change which are also perfect. In other words, the argument will only work if we can say, “If and only if” a thing is perfect, then that thing does not change. But we can only make this statement if we know beforehand there are no perfect beings which *do* change. The existence of only one such being will make the argument impossible.

2) The second major problem with defining “perfect” to mean “immutable” is that the idea of perfection is a human mental construct. Serious students of the Bible have to ask, “Where in the Bible does God tell us he is perfect in this manner?” If we construct a character of God in our minds and then go to the Bible to try to prove it, we can come up with all kinds of fanciful qualities in God, which may or may not be true. We must allow the Bible to reveal God’s nature and character to us rather than imagining with our finite minds what God is like and then going to the Bible to prove it.

So the real question then, is how the Bible says God is perfect.

God never defines his nature or character as perfect without respect to some specific quality. God is not abstractly perfect, he is concretely perfect. God is not a philosophical abstraction, he is a person. If he is called perfect, he is perfect in his attributes as a person. Nowhere in the Bible is the attribute of perfection generalized and abstract when speaking of God.

When the Bible refers to God as perfect, we then have to ask, “Perfect with respect to what?” His work is perfect-Deuteronomy 32:4; He is perfect in knowledge-Job 37:16; His faithfulness is perfect-Isaiah 25:1; He is perfect in loving and being good to those

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who hate him—Matthew 5:48; His patience is perfect—I Timothy 1:16. It is mentioned in Hebrews that Jesus was perfected by the things which he suffered, but this is also not a generalized or abstract perfection, but rather a reference to his perfect obedience. (Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 7:28)

Besides the references to God's attributes as perfect, the Bible speaks of some other things which are perfect. The law of God is referred to as perfect (Psalm 19:7; James 1:25). Every gift of God is perfect (James 1:17). Abraham's faith was perfected with works (James 2:22). Love can be perfect (I John 4:18). Hebrews 9:11 speaks of a *more perfect* tabernacle (τελειστέρως—definitely a comparative word). And sometimes humans are called perfect: Hebrews 10:14; 11:40; 12:23; I Peter 5:10; I Chronicles 12:38; James 1:4; John 17:23; II Corinthians 7:1; Philippians 3:15.

So then, is God the only perfect being? Where have we found this definition? Did we produce it out of our own human minds, or did we discover this definition in the pages of Scripture?

If there could be a being who changes—as God changed his mind thirty-six times in the Bible—and yet is perfect, then the argument from perfection falls apart. Since one must be able to prove that “If and only if a thing is perfect, then that thing does not change” as a major premise, and since God, who is perfect, is spoken of as changing in the Scriptures, then the first premise cannot be established. Without the major premise, the argument goes nowhere.

At this point, some readers may be asking, “But if God is perfect in his attributes, how can we square this with statements in the Bible that he changes?” For a discussion of this issue, please see the section “Time, Change, and the Attributes of God” later in this chapter.

### Change and the Nature of God

Paul teaches that the idols people worship are “by nature” not God (Galatians 4:8).<sup>7</sup> This is what distinguishes the true God from all other so-called gods—his nature. God is by nature eternal, spirit, powerful, a trinity, etc. Idols, on the other hand, are none of these. Thus, God's nature defines his existence as God.

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<sup>7</sup>Galatians 4:8 - “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.” See also Acts 17:29; Romans 1:20; II Peter 1:4.



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But there is a difference between God's nature and his character. God's natural attributes are those qualities he has simply because of *what he is*. His moral attributes are those characteristics he has because of *what he chooses*. God's nature is metaphysical, related to his being, whereas God's character is moral, originating from his will.

God cannot change his nature (cannot go out of existence, cannot be less than all-powerful, cannot be something other than a person), and his nature need not change because he is in time. For example, he is omnipotent at every moment in his duration. If he is omnipotent today and also omnipotent tomorrow, then his nature has not changed. Thus, it is not necessary to view God as living outside of time for his nature to remain unchanged. As already discussed, change necessitates time, but time does not necessitate change.

God also has a character which does not change—he is loving in every moment of his duration. He is loving in every choice he makes today and will be loving in every choice he makes tomorrow. Thus, even though God is said to change his mind thirty-six times in the Bible, his character does not change.

If God changes his mind, is this a change in the essential character of God? Not at all—a change of mind does not necessarily mean a change of character. God can change his mind about what he is going to do, and both before and after changing his mind, be completely loving, just, and wise in his character. Take, for example, Jeremiah 18:1-10, where God says he will change his mind and either bless or curse nations according to what the nations do. He simply changes his mind from one loving thought to another—in one case to judge those who deserve it, and in the next moment to forgive those same people because they have repented. Thus, he changed his mind, but did not change his character.

But how can the Bible declare that God does not change, and yet, at the same time, say God changed his mind numerous times? The one Scriptural citation people use to attempt to prove God does not change is really in a moral context:

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,” says the Lord of hosts. ‘For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned

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aside from My statutes, and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you,' says the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 3:5-7)

This passage reveals God as a merciful judge who prefers forgiveness over punishment. Because God does not change in this quality, the sons of Jacob were not consumed. Thus, the statement, "I, the Lord, do not change," is in a moral context and cannot be generalized, or taken out of context, to mean that God does not change in any fashion. There is no inconsistency, then, between God's changing his mind and his declaration that his basic moral character remains unaltered. It is precisely because God does *not* change in his character that he *does* change his mind in order to forgive those who turn away from their sin.

### Time, Change, and the Attributes of God

Are the moral or natural attributes of God affected or changed if God exists in a duration or sequence? Those who say God is timeless often assert that to claim God lives in time implies God necessarily changes his attributes. But is this true? As we have seen logically, change necessitates time, but time does not necessitate change.

Let's take a look at some of the moral and natural attributes of God to see if they would necessarily be changed if God lived in a duration. The moral attributes we will cover include his love, holiness, justice, mercy, truthfulness, wisdom and faithfulness. Natural attributes we will discuss include his substance, location, power, unity and diversity, knowledge, and eternal existence.

#### Moral Attributes:

**Love:** If God chooses to love someone, perhaps by forgiving a repentant sinner, is he then more loving after his act of forgiveness than he was before? It is not necessary to suppose any change in the moral attribute of God's love just because he expresses that love in an action.

If every choice God makes is a loving choice, then there is no change in his moral character.

**Holiness:** Some would dispute the idea that holiness is a moral attribute of God. But Peter makes it very clear in his first epistle that holiness is all about behavior:

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“Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (I Peter 1:13-16)

We are commanded to be holy in the same way God is holy, that is, we are to choose to behave in the same way God behaves.<sup>8</sup> And how does God behave? He chooses to do what he knows is right in every circumstance. We can behave in this fashion also, that is, we can choose to do what we know is right. Though our knowledge of what is right is minuscule compared to God’s knowledge, we can still be holy in the same *manner* as God is holy—in all our behavior.

So does the holiness of God change as he makes holy choices? Not at all—since his holiness in all his behavior simply means he is holy in every choice he makes. He was holy in all his past behavior, he is holy now, and he will be holy in all his future behavior.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The passage Peter quotes here, Leviticus 11:44, 45, and the other passages which refer to being holy as God is holy, all refer to behavior. In Leviticus 11:44, 45, holiness is defined as not eating unclean animals (cf. also Leviticus 20:26). Leviticus 19:2 commands the people to be holy by reverencing father and mother, keeping the sabbaths, and not making or worshiping false gods. Leviticus 20:7 states that holiness is not visiting mediums or spiritists and keeping God’s statutes and practicing them. The context of Leviticus 21:8 lists a series of activities in which a priest is not to participate. Avoiding these activities is then defined as what it means to be holy (v. 6). In Deuteronomy 23:14 God commands the people to keep the camp holy by washing from physical uncleanness and burying waste material properly. Thus, holiness is never defined as some kind of immutable essence in God’s metaphysical being. It is always defined as behavior.

<sup>9</sup>We do not need to concern ourselves with the question of whether or not God might choose to do something other than what is holy in the future. Since God cannot even be tempted with evil (James 1:13), he therefore cannot sin. This stems from his knowledge of all the possible ramifications of any choice he would make. Temptation works on the basis of deception. Only a finite mind can be tempted because only a finite mind can be deceived into thinking that the results of a sin could possibly be beneficial. God, with his knowledge of all the consequences of any choice he would make, can therefore not be deceived into thinking that any sinful choice would ever be beneficial. Thus, since God cannot be deceived, he cannot be tempted with evil. And if he cannot be tempted, he cannot sin.

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Duration or sequence in God does not necessitate change in the holiness of God.

**Justice:** The Bible describes God as “righteous in all His ways, And kind in all His deeds.” (Psalm 145:17). The word “righteous” can also be translated “just.” Righteousness or justice is the fair, impartial treatment of every moral being. God is just to judge and punish us if we sin (Psalm 9:8; 19:9; 119:75; Romans 2:5), but it is also part of God’s justice to forgive us if we repent and confess our sins (I John 1:9).

Does God change in his justice if he judges, punishes, or forgives? Since every choice he makes is fair and impartial, his just character does *not* change because he makes different just choices towards his creatures at different times.

**Mercy:** The beautiful, amazing character quality of God whereby he desires to release us from the punishment we so justly deserve is called mercy. Is the attribute of mercy threatened by the idea that God lives in a duration? On the contrary, duration is absolutely necessary for mercy to exist. That God has one attitude toward us at one time and then changes his attitude toward us if he sees a change in us implies the sequence of time. John 3:36 states that the wrath of God is abiding on the person who does not obey the Son. But the wrath of God is not abiding on the one who obeys the Son. Duration in God is necessary for these statements to be true. Otherwise we have the awkward situation where God is both having wrath and not having wrath towards us at the same time in some kind of “eternal now.” Timelessness in God makes utter confusion of this beautiful truth. But if God really does change his attitude toward us as we repent, the wonderful mercy of God makes complete sense.

**Truthfulness:** God is truthful. This means in all of his communications or revelations he expresses only that which is true. Lying is the communication of information which is contrary to reality. To put it another way, if God were to say one thing is the case when he knew it to be otherwise, he would be lying. This is where the idea of absolute foreknowledge can give rise to serious questions about the character of God.

For instance, if God knew he would ultimately *not* destroy the children of Israel, when he told Moses he *would* destroy them, he was lying (Exodus 32:7-14). Claiming God said this just to test Moses does not make it any less a lie—actually, it is even worse because it accuses God of both lying and manipulating Moses. However, if we take the scriptures at face value, and there is no reason to do otherwise since the narrative is historical in nature, we find a simple, compelling interaction between God and Moses. God

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said he would destroy the people for their sin, then Moses prayed, asking God to change his mind, and God changed his mind about doing harm to his people and did not do it. Any idea that God already knew what would happen eliminates the clear and beautiful truth of the story—God listens to his people and can be persuaded by their prayers. Saying God knew beforehand what would happen implies God both lies to and toys with his people, and this is inconsistent with the character of God as revealed throughout the Scriptures.

It is not necessary, therefore, to claim God is timeless or that he has absolute foreknowledge in order to preserve his truthfulness. A God who was truthful in all his communications in the past, is truthful today, and will be truthful in the future is eternally truthful.

**Wisdom:** Wisdom is sometimes defined as the loving application of knowledge. As with the other moral attributes of God, if God is wise in every choice he makes with his knowledge, his wisdom does not change. If God uses his knowledge to love someone, he is not therefore more or less wise than he was before. As long as every choice God makes is wise, his wisdom remains the same.

**Faithfulness:** God is consistent in the expression of all his moral attributes. He does not cease to express his love, mercy, justice or wisdom toward us, and we can depend on him to express these attributes consistently in the future. This is what it means for God to be faithful. Since faithfulness is a choice God makes toward his creation, and he makes these choices continually, there is no change in God's moral character as he expresses his faithfulness to us. There is then no reason to think God must change because he exists in a duration.

On the other hand, the question comes to mind as to how a timeless being can be considered to be faithful. If all God's choices occur in a timeless eternal now, then he never makes one choice before or after another. But the very concept of faithfulness includes the idea that as God has chosen to be good toward us in the past, so he will be good toward us in the future. If all of God's choices are at the same time, there can be no "future" element to faithfulness. It is all "now" to him, and as such, cannot be "future." Thus God is reduced to a moral abstraction which may be interesting to contemplate, but impossible to depend upon for our daily bread.

**Natural Attributes:**

**Spirit:** Jesus told the Samaritan woman “God is spirit.”<sup>10</sup> This is just as true today as it was when Jesus uttered these words two thousand years ago. God’s essential nature as a spirit need not change because he exists in a duration or sequence. Our essential existence as matter is not changed because we have duration in our existence. Are we matter at one moment and something else the next? In the same way it is not necessary to view God as timeless in order to preserve his nature as a spirit. If God is spirit one moment and is also spirit the next, he has not changed his nature. There is nothing about being a spirit which requires timelessness for its continued existence as spirit.

**Location:** God’s location, commonly called omnipresence, is his ability to be present in every place at the same time.<sup>11</sup> It should not be difficult to understand how God’s presence in every place is not changed even if God exists in a duration. If God is present in every place now and is also present in every place ten minutes from now, this does not constitute a change in his omnipresent status. Thus, it is not necessary to appeal to the idea of timelessness in order for God to be unchangingly omnipresent. He is simply able to be everywhere at any time in his duration.

**Unity and Diversity:** God is one and yet God is three persons. We often call this the triune nature of God. In philosophy this is called having unity and diversity. The unity is the “oneness” of God (one in essence as opposed to uniqueness, though God is “one” in that sense also). That God is three persons means there is

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<sup>10</sup>John 4:24 - “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

<sup>11</sup>Though it would be interesting to inquire as to whether God’s location is involuntary or voluntary, it is outside the scope of this book. It is commonly taught in the church that God’s omnipresence means that he is everywhere as a matter of his nature rather than he chooses to be everywhere. But is it necessary or even biblical to define God’s presence in this way? In the light of interesting verses like II Thessalonians 1:9, which state, “And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” it would be fascinating to revisit the doctrine of omnipresence asking the question, “Where is God?” and to let the Scriptures speak for themselves. Any reading of this scripture as “away from the [manifest] presence of the Lord” or “away from the [feeling of the] presence of the Lord” would be eisegesis on our part and a violation of good hermeneutical principles. Appeal to the scripture which states that God’s spirit is in sheol will not help, since the “place of departed spirits” of the Old Testament cannot be equated with the lake of fire, which appears to be the only form of eternal destruction mentioned in the Bible.

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also diversity in the essential being of God. We cannot fully understand this aspect of the nature of God, but it has been revealed to us in his word that our perception of this characteristic is accurate, though incomplete.

This quality of unity and diversity is also shared by the creation God has made. Our bodies are “one body” and yet the members of that body, though they are many, are still only one body (as Paul argues in I Corinthians 12).

It is easy to see that being in a duration or sequence is not contrary to having unity and diversity in one’s being. If God is triune at one moment and is also triune at the next moment, he has not somehow lost his triune nature. He remains triune at every moment in his existence. Therefore, it is not necessary to presuppose timelessness in God to support the idea of God’s unchanging triune nature. Neither is duration contrary to God’s eternal existence as a being possessing both unity and diversity.

**Power:** Omnipotence, or being all powerful, is in no way forfeited if God exists in a sequence. Before God created he was all powerful, and after God created he was still all powerful. Thus, his omnipotence was not changed by his creative act. It is not necessary to view God as living outside of time to preserve his omnipotence. Of course, those who say God is timeless will have the problem of explaining how a timeless being ever had a “time” *before* he created anything.

**Knowledge:** While it may be easy to understand how the natural attributes already mentioned need not change if God exists in a duration, some may find it more difficult to understand how God’s omniscience does not change—even though he comes to have knowledge of facts which were not formerly in existence.

If God knows something now that he did not know before, does He change? Not at all. He was omniscient before (capable of knowing all knowable things before) and is omniscient now (capable of knowing all knowable things now). Thus, he does not change because he increases in knowledge. He is omniscient both before and after he gains knowledge. (If a river has more water in it one day than it does the next, is it therefore not a river?) Thus, if God is always able to know all that is knowable, he is always omniscient.

It is only because people have already defined the omniscience of God to include all future events, that they believe any change in the knowledge of God is a change in his omniscience. If omniscience is defined as God’s ability to know all things knowable, and if God knows an event as it happens, then there is no

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change in God's omniscience as he comes to have knowledge of the new choices of human beings.

Thus, when God announces to Abraham, "Abraham, now I know," (Genesis 22:12), there is no change in God's omniscience, only a change in the facts included in that omniscience. If God can know everything knowable today, and can know everything knowable tomorrow, then he is omniscient today and omniscient tomorrow and thus has not changed. So then, duration or sequence in the being of God is not a challenge to the omniscience of God.

Another way to look at this is to ask, "What is absolutely necessary in order for God to have perfect knowledge?" If God is capable of knowing all past, present, and potential future objects of knowledge, is his knowledge perfect? If, before an event happens it is potential, then as it is happening it is present, and after it happens it is past, need God know more than these to have perfect knowledge? Thus, as the future unfolds, God's perfect knowledge of the potential becomes perfect knowledge of the present and then perfect knowledge of the past. In this way, God can have new facts added to his body of information without ever changing the perfection of his knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Not all who reject the absolute foreknowledge of God agree that God can gain knowledge. Some view the idea that God comes to new knowledge (i.e., "learns") as only his finding out what a person actually chooses out of the many possible choices they could make. That is, the person is not informing God of anything he did not know before (people can obey or disobey), but only of what this individual will do in this situation (obey rather than disobey). Thus, God is not seen as gaining absolutely "new" knowledge, but only finding out how a particular event will unfold out of all the possible outcomes—possibilities of which he was completely aware. Viewed this way, when God says, "Abraham, *now* I know," God is not claiming that he learned something absolutely new, but only how Abraham would respond to the possible choices laid before him.

Whether you say God adds to his body of knowledge through his experiences, or that God only finds out what people will do out of the possible choices—God remains omniscient in the sense that he is able to know all possible current facts.

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<sup>12</sup>The only reason people assume that God must have knowledge of the future before it happens is that they have presupposed, apart from good biblical evidence, that the future pre-exists objectively such that it can be an object of knowledge.



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**Eternal Existence:** Is duration inconsistent with eternal existence? Is it necessary to view God as timeless to say he could exist forever?

Timelessness or duration would both seem, from a strictly philosophical standpoint, to be sufficient to provide for eternal existence. Which is correct will be a matter of revelation from God's Word, since we, with our finite minds, cannot make definite conclusions about the nature of God.

Just as other natural attributes do not change because God makes choices, so the attribute of unending duration need not change because God progresses through a sequence of time. If God exists now and has a past and a future, is there any reason this necessitates his having had a beginning or his going out of existence? Though we will have difficulty grasping the idea of no beginning or end, there is no philosophical reason to reject eternal duration, as it is logically consistent with itself and the other attributes of God.

What about the argument following the same reasoning as Zeno's paradoxes, but with respect to time? If God tries to move in time from one moment to another, can he ever reach the second moment (or a moment infinitely distant in time)?

The answer here is the same as it is for Zeno's paradoxes. People actually walk from one place to another and arrive at their destinations. Achilles passes the tortoise. Arrows finally do hit their targets (if they are headed in the right direction to start with). And though objects move relative to each other in space, the moon still orbits the earth correctly. Obviously, real space does not work in the same way philosophical space works.

In the same way, though time could be imagined as having any amount of time between two moments, we somehow manage to get from one moment to the next. It appears as if real duration operates differently from philosophical duration.

Although using space to represent time can be helpful in some situations, time is not the same thing as space, and the analogy fails at many points. Saying that God moves from one "moment" to the next in time, is presupposing that all time exists as a separate entity from God, and that God is moving through that medium much as a person would walk from one side of a room to the other.

But we do not understand time as a "medium" through which we move. Our intuitive understanding of the future is probably better described as a continued existence of the present. As we continue to exist, the "future" is incorporated into the present and then immediately into the past.

A beginningless and unending movement from the present into the future is all that is necessary for eternal existence in duration to

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make sense. After all, we are speaking here of a sequence which never had a beginning, is progressing right now, and will never have an end. There is no “moment” for God to reach if there will never be an end to his duration. His continued existence does not depend on a continual “moving through time,” but on his independence as a being. He will always continue to exist because he does not depend on any other thing for his existence, so his present will forever continue to become his future.

### Summary

Logically, change necessitates time, but time does not necessitate change. Trying to turn the argument around introduces a logical fallacy (denying the antecedent) which can only be supported by first proving God must change if he lives in time. Since this is the very point we are trying to prove, we participate in circular reasoning if we approach the problem in this fashion.

Arguing the converse of “change necessitates time” will also not prove the timelessness of God. “If a thing has a before and an after, then that thing changes” can only be proven if we can demonstrate there is no being who lives in time and does not change. Since it appears there is at least one such being, God, we cannot conclude that time necessitates change.

We have also seen that the moral and natural attributes of God do not need to change because God lives in a duration, making choices in a sequence. God’s essential nature—his power, presence, eternity, knowledge, and existence as spirit—are not changed because he exists in a sequence of time. Also, God’s love, mercy, justice, and faithfulness are never diminished or enhanced because he makes different choices toward us at different times. Changing his mind does not involve changing his character.

There is, however, a very big problem if God is timeless. All of the moral and natural attributes we have discussed depend on duration for their existence and expression, so if God has no duration, he also cannot have these qualities.

If all of God’s thoughts, choices, and emotions are happening at the same time, then he is experiencing completely opposite and conflicting functions of personality simultaneously. His wrath is abiding on the unrepentant sinner and he is rejoicing over the same person’s repentance at the same time. He is experiencing grief over a person’s rebellion and delight over the repentant person’s prayers in the same instant. There can be no expression of mercy, since there would never have been a time when this mercy had not already been

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expressed. And if mercy has been expressed from all eternity, it makes no difference whether or not the person repents.

Without duration there can be no creation. Timelessness in God would necessitate the timelessness of all events in the history of the creation. No event can be other than present tense for God, that is, no event can be past or future, so all events must be eternal—existing forever and continually happening. If there were not a “time” when the creation did not exist, a time “before” God created, then the creation must have existed eternally with God, and God has never created anything (or has been creating eternally). As a result, his creation is eternally co-existent with his being.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of a being who has all of his actions, thoughts, choices, and emotions happening at the same time is truly confusing. In fact, according to the definition of these aspects of personality, they cannot exist without the quality of duration. Thus, a timeless God must be impersonal, more like the static god of Hinduism than the exciting, living God of the Bible who longs to be involved in our lives.

Thus we see that none of the moral or natural characteristics of God requires timelessness for its existence. Further, the attributes of God do not have to change because God lives in a sequence or duration. In fact, duration in the being of God makes more sense than timelessness and causes fewer questions about the goodness and justice of God.

A timeless God is a philosophical abstraction, perhaps an interesting object of contemplation, but not a person with whom we can have a daily, vibrant, living, and growing relationship. For that we must turn to the God of the Bible.

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<sup>13</sup>For those who have studied Eastern religions, you might recognize this as the “emanation” theory of existence. God, according to some monistic religions, is continually emanating the creation, and the creation is continually beaming God again. Thus, timelessness in God necessitates a pantheistic view of creation.

**Part II**

**Biblical**



## Chapter 6

### Exegetical Considerations

Before we examine God's relationship to time and the problems of foreknowledge and free will, it will be necessary to lay down some ground rules for interpretation of the Scriptures. Since the Bible is our final authority on the nature of God and man, we want to be sure we are interpreting the Bible correctly.

In order to do good Bible study (exegesis—study of the Bible to find out what it says), it is necessary to have a set of interpretive principles (hermeneutics). But where will we get these principles? These principles will have to be applicable to all types of literature, and not just the Scriptures, or we might end up with esoteric interpretations having nothing to do with what the writers of the Bible were trying to communicate.

Before we look at some generally-accepted hermeneutical principles, it will be instructive to look at some places where we *cannot* derive our interpretive rules.

1. We cannot use *the results of exegesis* as the basis for our hermeneutical principles. Any results of exegesis come from an application of hermeneutical principles to the Scriptures. Thus, until we have established what the interpretive rules will be, the resultant ideas of what the Bible says cannot be trusted, because we do not know which principles were followed to arrive at those ideas.

An example of this is the insistence by some interpreters that we cannot trust any interpretation because we are all totally depraved. But where did they get the idea that we are depraved? They will tell us it was from good exegesis of the Scriptures. But what principles did they use to search the Scriptures to come to the conclusion we are depraved? Did they assume after they had done their Bible study that they could not trust their own conclusions, so maybe we are not depraved after all?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis astutely notes that if we were totally depraved, our minds would also be totally depraved, so we could never conclude that we were depraved. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962), pp. 66-67.

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Thus we see we will have to start at least one step farther back. The principles used in interpretation will have to be readily apparent to any human being without having first read or interpreted the Bible.

2. We cannot use *private spiritual revelations* as principles to interpret the Bible. Since humans are susceptible to deception, delusions, hallucinations, and a host of other mental aberrations, any experiences we have will need to be judged by some higher, absolute authority to be sure we can trust our revelations to be true. Thus, we will first have to establish what the Bible says so we can use it to judge whether or not our private revelations are valid. The principles we use to make this assessment of the Bible will have to be those principles which appear reasonable to any human being in the interpretation of any text.

3. We cannot use *whatever suits us* as a basis for interpretation. Making up our own hermeneutical principles also will not work, though some have tried. Some early writers used an allegorical method, imagining every passage of Scripture, no matter how concrete, must also have an allegorical interpretation. This is simply a private view of the Scriptures forced onto the text for interpretive purposes. To interpret a scripture text as allegorical, there must first be some good reason in the text itself to believe an allegorical interpretation is warranted.<sup>2</sup>

### **Basic Principles of Interpretation**

The previous examples are just three of the places where we cannot find good hermeneutical principles. The common thread in all of these is that the principles used in interpretation will have to be the reasonable processes any human approaching any text would apply. That is, they must agree with first truths of reason. Also, the principles we use must be applicable to all kinds of texts and not just the Bible.

Since it is not our purpose here to teach on hermeneutics, but rather to look at some of the problems in exegesis, we will simply list a few of the commonly-accepted hermeneutical rules used in exegesis of the scriptures.

Numbers 1-8 of the following principles are from Guy Duty's book, *If Ye Continue*.<sup>3</sup> Principles 9 and 10 are from Charles

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<sup>2</sup>Such as when the writer of Hebrews says that everything in the earthly tabernacle is a picture of something in the heavens (Hebrews 8:5).

<sup>3</sup>Guy Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1966), pp. 179-87.

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Finney. Numbers 11-14 are from Bernard Ramm's work, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*.<sup>4</sup>

1. Rule of definition — Words are to be interpreted according to their literal meaning unless there is good reason in the immediate context, or the context of the Scriptures, that the words should be understood otherwise. The literal definition should always be given precedence.

2. Rule of usage — The Bible is generally a book written by Jews for Jews, though it has a universal application. Thus, the use of words in a Jewish manner must be considered in interpretation.

3. Rule of context — The words before and after a portion of text must determine the meaning of the text. Every consideration must be given to interpret so that a word or phrase does not conflict with the surrounding text.

4. Rule of historical background — The culture, customs, and language of the writer and readers must be considered in the interpretation. In obscure texts, the literal meaning of the words will be understood if the background of those words can be ascertained. For example, when Isaiah declares Israel has become like a “shack in a cucumber patch,” the literal meaning of the words does not conflict with the meaning of the phrase. When we understand calling anything a “shack in a cucumber patch” was to say something was worthless, like a demolished shack after the cucumber harvest, the words communicate the intended meaning.

5. Rule of logic — We read in M. S. Terry's book, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, “The use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture is everywhere to be assumed. The Bible comes to us in the forms of human language, and appeals to our reason.”<sup>5</sup> We must apply our minds to the Scriptures just as we would to any other text. Reading without thinking logically is bound to produce misguided interpretation.

6. Rule of precedent — How words have been used in the past must guide their present interpretation. A novel usage for a word must not be accepted over a previously-approved definition. Usage and context, of course, can determine the same word could mean different things in different contexts.

7. Rule of unity — Passages should be interpreted so as not to conflict with each other. If we believe the Bible is the word of God,

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<sup>4</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), pp. 128-148.

<sup>5</sup>M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1895, p. 25.



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and as such the product of one mind, we must assume he would not make contradictory statements.

8. Rule of inference — That which can be logically inferred from a text applies with as much force as the actual statements of the text.

9. “Texts that are consistent with either theory prove neither.”<sup>6</sup> As a lawyer and evangelist, Charles Finney noted if a text could be used to support two opposing theories, the text must be considered obscure. Obscure texts require clearer texts for their explanation.

10. “Language is to be interpreted according to the subject matter of discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Finney’s point here is similar to Gordon Fee’s instruction to interpret according to the literary genre of the text.<sup>8</sup> Historical narrative, poetry, and apocalyptic visions will have to be interpreted differently, since the use of words can vary from one form of literature to another.

11. The principle of the priority of the original languages - Whenever possible, the original language of the text should be consulted to verify that the translation used in study is accurate. Practically speaking, the more literal the translation, the better. Though it is good to consult many translations, it should be kept in mind that “dynamic equivalent” translations or paraphrases leave much room for the translators to insert their pet doctrines into the text.<sup>9</sup> This insertion may be deliberate because the translators believe this is what the text really means, or it may be inadvertent, but either way, the more literal translations are preferable.

12. The principle of grammatical interpretation - The interpreter needs to pay attention to the grammatical use of words as well as their definitions.

An example of this is the word “prepared” (or “fitted”) in the phrase “vessels of wrath *prepared* for destruction” in Romans 9:22. While this verse is commonly understood to mean God prepares some people to destruction, Dr. James D. Strauss says of this text:

“But the form *katertismena* is a perfect passive or middle participle. In the perfect tense the passive and middle

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<sup>6</sup>Finney, Charles, *Finney’s Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc, 1976), p.177.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

<sup>9</sup>Please refer to the section in this chapter on sovereignty for an example.

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have the same form, only the context will determine which way the word should be translated. ... In this context, I see no justification for translating the word under consideration as passive, i.e., the subject is acted upon; rather, the translation should be 'fitted themselves' for wrath."<sup>10</sup>

The passive voice means some unstated subject performed the action (I was hit), whereas the middle voice means the action was performed reflexively, that is, by the subject on himself (I hit myself). This means the phrase "prepared for destruction," which many take to mean "prepared by God for destruction" is better translated as "prepared themselves for destruction," rendering the word as a middle rather than a passive participle. What a difference a little grammar can make!

13. The principle of induction - Induction is the process of gathering different units of information and then trying to figure out what the information means. Deduction is starting with a general premise and evaluating each unit of information in light of the presupposed premise. Induction works from the particulars to the general principle. Deduction works from the general principle to the particulars.

Bible study must proceed on the basis of induction. We gather information from different passages and then try to understand what they all mean together. To start with the idea we are trying to prove is deductive method and will result in eisegesis, the reading of meaning *into* a text rather than deriving meaning *from* a text. Bernard Ramm insists "We must discover the meaning of a passage, not attribute one to it."<sup>11</sup>

Following this rule, we ask, "What does the passage say?" We do not ask, "How can I make this passage fit my understanding?" Nor do we ask, "How can I prove this passage does not really mean what it says?" John Bright, in his book *The Authority of the Old Testament*, defines unbiased exegesis as "an exegesis that is aware of presuppositions but allows them to be corrected by the text."<sup>12</sup> We need to let God's Word dictate our doctrines to us, and not try to make God's Word say what we want.

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<sup>10</sup>Dr. James D. Strauss, "God's Promise and Universal History: The Theology of Romans 9," chap. in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 200.

<sup>11</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), pp. 128-148.

<sup>12</sup>John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 45-46.

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14. The principle of interpretation by proper use of cross references - Some Bible interpreters call this “allowing the Bible to interpret itself.” Using cross references differs from induction in that induction can involve very different units of information, whereas cross referencing usually involves passages about the same word or topic.

One clear record can illuminate another, more obscure account of the same event. Take, for instance, the phrase “the abomination of desolation” used in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. Matthew and Mark both make the comment, “Let the reader understand,” but “the abomination of desolation” (Daniel 11:31 or 12:11) is still difficult to fathom. But when Luke records the same teaching of Jesus (Luke 21:20), he replaces “the abomination of desolation” with “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.” Thus, cross referencing clears up the meaning of a phrase which is almost impossible to understand on its own.<sup>13</sup>

This list will not cover all of the rules of hermeneutics, but it does enumerate the most common and obvious principles. Since it is the most basic rules which are most often violated, it is good to review them periodically. In the remainder of this book, it will be helpful to keep these rules in mind while investigating the Scriptures related to the foreknowledge of God.

### **The Problem of Eisegesis**

God has revealed himself to us in the Scriptures. The reason for this is obvious. We could not figure out the specific natural or moral attributes of God revealed in his Word through the general revelation of creation. We can see God is powerful, intelligent, and possibly good from the natural world, but we could never surmise what God created on each of the creation days, or that God “looked for a person” in Israel to intercede for the land so he would not have to destroy it, or that there is a great gulf fixed between the two parts of Sheol. These are things we simply would not know if God had not told us. God gave us his Word so we could know him better.

For this reason, we must consult the Scriptures to discover the nature and character of God in the text of the Bible. This process of

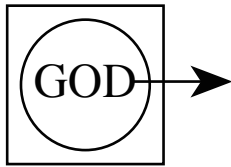
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<sup>13</sup>In Chapter 9, the section on Romans 8:29 shows how cross referencing can clear up what it means to be “predestined to adoption as sons.”

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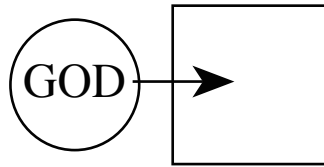
Bible study is called *exegesis*—taking meaning out of the Bible. But if we preconceive an idea of God apart from the Scriptures, and then read that idea into the text, we participate in *eisegesis*—reading a meaning into the Bible. Here is a graphic illustration of these processes:

**Exegesis:**



Discovering God's  
Nature and Character  
in the Bible.

**Eisegesis:**



Reading God's  
Nature and Character  
into the Bible.

The biggest problem with eisegesis is that it allows us to conceive of God as having any nature and character our minds can devise. Then, during interpretation, we force the Scriptures to fit our preconceived mental construct of God. Thus, we can make the Bible support any view of God by twisting the obvious meaning of a passage to defend our theological notions.

The most obvious, and admittedly the most extreme, example of this method is found in the theological aberrations of the cults. But the temptation toward eisegesis is not limited to cultists. Anyone who interprets the Scriptures must be careful not to read unwarranted meanings into a text.

One of the common ways of performing eisegesis on a passage of scripture is to declare the text is “poetic” so it obviously “cannot mean what it says.” Thus, the person re-interprets the passage to align with his preconceived understanding of God, and so avoids having to adjust his ideas to agree with God’s Word. This tactic is quite common in discussions about God, especially about the foreknowledge of God. Yes, there is poetic language in the Scriptures, but we must first be sure the text warrants being treated as poetry before we dismiss something which simply does not agree with our opinions.

We must determine at the outset, then, to accept God’s Word for what it says, and allow the “theological chips” to fall where they

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may. If God really gave us his Word because we could not discover the information in it by ourselves, then we need to allow the Scriptures to change our minds, and not change the Bible to match our understanding of God.

Paul the apostle warned his Athenian audience on the Areopagus that “we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.”<sup>14</sup> Paul’s obvious injunction against physical idols sometimes obscures a more subtle point—the source of the images. They are images formed by the “thought of man.” Though theologians warn us openly against making physical idols, they often construct mental images of God using their own minds. Then, ignoring the clear descriptions of God in the Bible, they proceed to force their own image of God onto the Scriptures.

We need to heed the advice of Bernard Ramm when he cautions the interpreter and theologian to “be ever so careful to keep their exegetical and theological work within the limitations of the Biblical data.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Use of Reason in Interpretation**

M. S. Terry, in his work *Biblical Hermeneutics*, states “The use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture is everywhere to be assumed.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately there are many Christians who hold to the notion that the use of the mind should be completely divorced from the study of God’s Word. They seem wary of trusting the human mind to interpret the revelation of God correctly.

This resistance is sometimes rooted in the opinion that since man is totally depraved, his mind cannot be trusted to interpret the Scriptures accurately. But, as C. S. Lewis so astutely noted, if man were totally depraved, his mind would also be depraved, and so he would not be able to reach that conclusion.<sup>17</sup> Or, if he did reach that conclusion, he could not be sure whether the conclusion were accurate.

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<sup>14</sup>Acts 17:29.

<sup>15</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 172.

<sup>16</sup>M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1895), p. 25.

<sup>17</sup>C. S. Lewis astutely notes that if we were totally depraved, our minds would also be totally depraved, so we could never conclude that we were depraved. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962), pp. 66-67.

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But though our minds may be depraved, this does not mean all reasoning was completely annihilated at the fall. God invites us to reason with him, never hinting that we, as fallen beings, do not have the ability to do so.<sup>18</sup> If God invites us to reason with him, then he must know we have the ability to reason. And God cannot be mistaken about what abilities we do or do not possess.

If we do not use our reason in the interpretation of Scripture, we open ourselves to all kinds of theories which could lead us into false doctrine. Reason acts as a restraining device and will protect us from undue speculation. As Bernard Ramm put it:

“What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence ... interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic and science may have improper notions of implication and evidence. Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence.”<sup>19</sup>

People who accept the use of reason on exegetical grounds may nevertheless reject its use on emotional grounds.

There is a not-so-subtle *ad hominem* argument employed by those whose concept of God is challenged by a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. If they do not appreciate the theological direction a particular line of logic is headed, they will attack the speaker with statements like, “Well, you just want God to be that way because you cannot handle the implications of the Biblical view.”

This dodging of the literal meaning of the Scriptures does not address the idea posed by the Bible itself. It is only an attack on the honesty, hermeneutical method, or logic of the person holding the opposing viewpoint. Avoiding the implications of texts contrary to one’s ideas by attacking the honesty or sincerity of the opponent should not be part of a Christian discussion of the attributes of God.<sup>20</sup> It displays a lack of respect and consideration for the other person as a human being, and hinders an honest, open investigation of the topic under discussion.

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<sup>18</sup>Isaiah 1:18. See also Luke 5:21; Acts 17:17; Acts 19:8.

<sup>19</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), pp. 170-172.

<sup>20</sup>This is only one form of the *ad hominem* argument, the *abusive* form, but it is probably the most commonly used. See Stephen F. Barker, *The Elements of Logic* (McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 190-192, for definitions of the *abusive*, *circumstantial*, and *tu quoque* forms of the *ad hominem* argument.

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Employing reason in the interpretative process is not only advisable, it is absolutely necessary. We do not need to fear going astray in our studies if we are willing to submit our minds to the revelation of God's Word. Our willingness to do the will of God will protect us, as Jesus said, "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God."<sup>21</sup> And if we use Biblical data as the raw material to guide our reasoning, we can apply our minds to the Scriptures with confidence that the Spirit of Truth will guide us into all truth.

Reason should not be looked upon as an enemy, but as an ally. Together with other good hermeneutical principles, the use of reason can lead us to clearer understanding of what might otherwise be obscure or confusing passages. As Gregory A. Boyd noted in *God of the Possible*, "The extent to which the Word of God is incoherent to us is the extent to which it is of no benefit to us."<sup>22</sup>

### **The Use of Natural Justice in Interpretation**

Abraham cried, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"<sup>23</sup>

We pause for a moment, waiting for the flash of lightning and the clap of thunder, but they never come. Instead, God begins one of the most interesting interactions with man found in the Scriptures. He allows Abraham to talk him into progressively fewer numbers of righteous people necessary to save Sodom and Gomorrah.

Though it is futile to ask, "What if?," it is still interesting to speculate what might have happened if Abraham had brought the number down to two instead of ten. Could the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have been spared? We cannot say, but this does not lessen our amazement over Abraham's audacity.

What was Abraham doing? He was using his intuitive sense of natural justice to judge the actions of the Almighty Creator. Evidently, Abraham did not think this move was out of order for a human being. And the response of God indicates he did not think it inappropriate either.

Unlike Abraham, some theologians read accounts in the Bible which seem to indicate injustice on the part of God, and instead of asking, "How can this be?," they shrug their shoulders and sigh,

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<sup>21</sup>John 7:17.

<sup>22</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p.

92.

<sup>23</sup>Genesis 18:25.

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“Oh well, God’s justice is so different from ours that we simply have to accept this without question.” They then believe they are relieved of any obligation to seek out an answer for this seeming unrighteousness in God’s behavior.

Take the execution of Achan as an example (Joshua 7). Most people know God said the children were not to be put to death for the father’s sins. But in the case of Achan, at first reading, it appears as if the whole family was killed with the father. “Oh well,” some may say, “God can do anything he wants, and even though he said the children should not die for the fathers’ sins, we cannot question the justice of God. We will have to accept this as just, even though it does not appear that way to us.”

But a closer reading of the text, especially of the singular and plural pronouns in the Hebrew, indicates the family may not have died with Achan. Rather, he and his household goods were destroyed, but the family probably escaped.

Coupled with the judgment on the household of Korah, this understanding becomes even more likely. Korah and “their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah, with their possessions”<sup>24</sup> descended into the earth. But we read later “the sons of Korah, however, did not die,”<sup>25</sup> which is also evidenced practically by their having written some of the Psalms. When we first read of the destruction of the man and his household, we think his children must have died also. But if God really meant what he said about the children not being put to death for the fathers’ sins, would God command that the children be executed contrary to his own law? He would not, and did not, and in the case of Achan, the Hebrew pronouns indicate he probably did not have the children killed with the father in that case either.

We do not have to irrefutably settle the case of Achan. The point we are making here is that some Bible students will not even venture to ask a question about the justice of God. Even in light of a seemingly unfair judgment by God (e.g., Genesis 20:6, 17, 18), some people refuse to even question the action, preferring to leave a niggling doubt in their hearts about the goodness of God, than to use their innate sense of justice as a tool to search for an answer.

But God has written the work of the law on our hearts. It is his doing! And that law is accurate enough that God will use it on the day of judgment to either *accuse* or *excuse* the Gentiles who have not heard the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.<sup>26</sup> This means that

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<sup>24</sup>Numbers 16:32.

<sup>25</sup>Numbers 26:11.

<sup>26</sup>Romans 2:14-16.



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even unbelievers have a dependable intuitive sense of justice. Of course, we take the fallenness of man and the possibility of deception into consideration, but these are no reason to reject our sense of natural justice altogether.

God invites us to use our sense of natural justice, even to the extent of judging his character. Jeremiah 2:5 reads:

“Thus says the Lord, ‘What injustice did your fathers find in Me, That they went far from Me And walked after emptiness and became empty?’”

This challenge, if accepted, requires the hearers to judge the actions of God using their own understanding of justice. Evidently, God is not threatened at the prospect of being judged by the innate sense of morality in the hearts of his people. Rather, he encourages them to question his actions, knowing that his behavior will be vindicated by their conclusion. If God invites us to examine his character using our sense of natural justice, then we need not fear his recrimination when we investigate his word using that same sense.

Natural justice can be an invaluable tool when we are faced with seeming moral contradictions in the Scriptures. Our hearts compel us to seek intellectually-satisfying answers to the questions. We compare the text in question with other passages, and as we gain a broader, clearer understanding of the situation, in most cases we will be able to resolve the conflict.<sup>27</sup> As a result, we are convinced in our hearts and minds of the justice and goodness of God, and are free to relate to him openly, without subconscious misgivings about his righteousness.

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<sup>27</sup>There are some instances which appear unresolvable due to lack of information.

## Antinomy and the Scriptures

Some people teach there are completely opposing doctrines revealed in the Scriptures which we must accept as true, though we cannot conclude how the two ideas will fit with each other. This process of holding contradictory ideas simultaneously is called “antinomy” (from “anti” against, and “nomos” law—a contradiction between two laws or between two parts of the same law).

One example of antinomy is the predestination vs. free will dilemma. How can God both predestine what we will choose and still leave us free to choose? If our choices are determined, how can they be free? But those who hold to antinomy will encourage us to accept both ideas as true and not try to resolve the apparent logical contradiction.

The idea that completely contradictory doctrines must be held in a “dynamic tension” is in direct violation of the rules of logic. As I. A. Richards said in his book, *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

“We cannot have it both ways, and no sneers at the limitations of logic ... amend the dilemma.”<sup>28</sup>

What he means by this is that A will never equal B, and no matter how much you assert our minds are limited, this will not make A equal B. Some interpreters feel justified in “sneering at the limitations of logic” because the subject matter they handle includes a being with infinite intelligence. But infinite intelligence should still be regarded as intelligent, not irrational. Claiming that “A equals B” is justified when dealing with God does not remove the absurdity of the claim.

Thus, some people argue, the Bible teaches both that God absolutely determines (or foreknows) what we will do and yet we are free to choose what we will do. This appears to be just so much verbal and philosophical nonsense. Any talk of “certain contingencies” or “determined free-will choices” is tantamount to speaking of “black white things” or “existent non-existent entities.” Theologians can be quite sophisticated in the way they present these contradictions, but they do not, thereby, remove the contradiction. They are still saying A equals B, and this is not possible philosophically.

“But,” some may argue, “our minds are so limited we simply cannot understand how both things can be true at the same time. We

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<sup>28</sup>I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967), chapter XXXV, p. 225.

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need to teach both of the doctrines as facts because the Bible teaches both of them.” We humans, they say, simply cannot understand how both things can be true at the same time, so we will have to accept the limitations of our finite reason and say that two opposite ideas are both valid.

While it is true our minds are finite and we must depend on God’s revelation in his word to understand truth, we are never required by God to lay aside the function of reason when studying the Scriptures. Indeed, we are encouraged to “reason together” with the Lord (Isaiah 1:18 ; 41:21 ; Acts 17:2).

It is interesting that the same people who will say the Bible is using poetic language when it speaks of God as having wings, will do so because they believe the Bible teaches elsewhere that “God is spirit” (John 4:24) and God has no form like anything in the creation (Deuteronomy 4). Agreed, but why not use antinomy here also? Why cannot God be both spirit and physical? Why cannot God both have wings and not have them at the same time? Surely this makes just as much sense as to say our choices are both free and fixed, foreknown and non-existent. It appears as if people want to use one set of hermeneutical principles when discussing the nature of God and a completely different set when addressing other biblical issues. With respect to the nature of God, they will question the meaning of one passage of scripture on the basis of a contradictory passage, but when it comes to the issue of freedom of the will, they want choices to be determined and free at the same time.

This rejection of the rules of logic stems, in part, from a confusion of “supra-rational” with “irrational.” While it is obvious that God knows more than we do, it does not follow that his mind works in a completely different manner than ours. In fact, we should assume since we are created in the image of God, he must have made us to think in the same manner as he thinks. It is quite reasonable to expect the God who made us to be at least as rational as we are, if not more so.

People sometimes claim they are forced to embrace antinomy due to the differing concepts which seem to result from their study of the Scriptures.<sup>29</sup> The Bible appears to reveal two completely contradictory doctrines, each true on its own, but impossible to reconcile with each other. If both ideas are true, they argue, we will

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<sup>29</sup>Many people who accept these “two sides to the truth” did not arrive at these doctrines through their own study, but in most cases were taught these contradictions by other people. For instance, how many people do you know who arrived at their concept of God’s omnipresence by studying every place in the Bible which speaks of the location of God?

have to lay aside our reason, and the laws of logic, and live with the contradiction.

One of the greatest dangers of antinomy is the possibility of accepting unbiblical doctrines as “another side to the truth.” Since using antinomy makes it unnecessary for any ideas to agree logically with each other, any inconsistencies can be ignored, attributing the conflict to the finiteness of our human minds. Thus, God becomes a convenient excuse for mental laziness and irrationality.

Ultimately this is not a question of logic, but of exegesis. The real question is, “Does the Bible teach both of these doctrines?” If only one of these “sides” can be found in the Scriptures, then there is no need to accept self-contradictory doctrines. In every case of this kind, one of these “sides” will not stand up to the scrutiny of a thorough, biblical exegesis. We do not have to maintain opposing ideas in tension if only one of the sides is there in the first place.

### **Recognizing Poetry in the Scriptures**

Probably the biggest objection people raise to texts where God says “Abraham, now I know” or “maybe they will repent” or “and if not, I will know,” is that these passages must be interpreted poetically.<sup>30</sup>

Since God knows beforehand what we will choose, they argue, then we have to re-interpret these verses to agree with the absolute foreknowledge of God. But this constitutes eisegesis, forcing an idea onto the Scriptures, rather than exegesis, taking an idea from the Scriptures. And the preconceived idea people use to interpret these passages is the very idea the study is trying to prove or disprove. Until the doctrine is established using good exegetical method, the conclusion of the study cannot be used as an interpretative principle. Otherwise, the interpreter is participating in circular reasoning.

In discussions about God’s foreknowledge, little time is spent in serious study of the passages of Scripture which contradict the notion of absolute foreknowledge. The reason so few people are aware of these texts is that those who have already concluded God knows everything in the future do not present the verses which would disprove their position. A whole body of texts on the knowledge of God is simply dismissed with a wave of the hand, and a quick, “All of those are just so much poetic language.”

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<sup>30</sup>This refers to the content of the text and not its structure, since Hebrew poetry is mostly a matter of structure rather than content.

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Unfortunately, the honest seeker is not often given the chance to look at the scriptures which contradict absolute foreknowledge. So the matter of whether these texts are poetic or not should be taken very seriously.<sup>31</sup>

How can we tell if a passage should be interpreted as poetry? Though there are probably other examples we could quote, there are four definite reasons to treat a text as poetic:

1. *It will be obvious from the structure of the language.* “The Lord God is a sun and shield” is obviously a metaphor. We recognize a metaphor when we see one. God is not actually a sun or a shield, but he provides understanding and protection, and so can be spoken of as “sun and shield.” “Is not My word like fire?” is easy enough to recognize as a simile. When there are obvious poetic devices in use, we can safely assume we will need to interpret the poetry to ascertain its meaning. The personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs is another clear example of easily-recognizable poetic language.

But a statement like, “Abraham, now I know” just does not have poetic form, and re-interpretation of this verse on the grounds that it is poetic only reveals the presuppositional prejudice of the interpreter. Taking these words at face value does no violence to the words themselves or to their context. God tested Abraham, Abraham obeyed, and God said, “Abraham, *now* I know.”

Though this may challenge our preconceived ideas about God’s foreknowledge, there is no reason to treat the words as poetic, so we will have to accept the words as they are, and change our concept of God’s knowledge where necessary. When our thoughts conflict with the clear words of scripture, either we will twist the Scriptures to match our thoughts, or we will allow the Scriptures to change our ideas. Hopefully, we will always choose the latter.

2. *It will be obvious from the context.* God told the children of Israel, “like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand” (Jeremiah 18). Though we cannot tell from the words themselves this is poetic language requiring an interpretation, we can determine this from the context. God called Jeremiah to the potter’s house to

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<sup>31</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, in *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 77, makes the astute observation that, “There is simply no reason to interpret language about changeable aspects of God less literally than language about unchangeable aspects of God.” Referring to Jeremiah 18, he goes on to say, “I suggest that if this text isn’t enough to convince us that God’s mind is not eternally settled, then our philosophical presuppositions are controlling our exegesis to a degree that no text could *ever* teach us this. People who affirm the divine authority of Scripture do not want to be guilty of this charge.”

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announce his words to him there. After Jeremiah observed the potter remolding a marred pot, God likened himself to the potter and Israel to the clay. Finally, he went on to explain the metaphor to Jeremiah as representing God's treatment of the nations based on conditions of strict justice. Thus, the statement that the people were like clay in God's hand can be recognized as poetic language requiring interpretation because it is in a midst of a larger, poetic context.

The common literal interpretation that God can do to us whatever he wants is exactly backwards to the meaning of the illustration. God says he treats us exactly according to *our choices*, and it pleases him to treat us in that fashion.

3. *Taking the words literally will make no sense.* When Jesus says, "I am the door," we are not prompted to look for a doorknob. If he says, "I am the vine," we are not tempted to look for branches. We recognize this kind of language as poetic because the words cannot mean exactly what they say. But what of a statement like, "I thought they would return to me, but they did not" (Jeremiah 3:7)? Can we understand these words literally and still make sense of the text? We can, but it may require a change in our concept of God's knowledge to accept that he had an incorrect thought about the future choices of his people.

This point is different from point number one, in that, while the structure of a sentence may look like a metaphor ("God is a spirit"), it does not have to be considered poetic, since a literal interpretation makes sense. "God is a sun and shield," on the other hand, has the structure of a metaphor, and must be considered a poetic statement, because taking the words literally makes no sense.

4. *To take the words literally will cause the text to conflict with other clear teachings in the Scriptures.* When David says, "Let me take refuge in the shelter of Thy wings," (Psalm 61:4), how do we know God does not actually have wings? We know this because there is clear teaching elsewhere that God forbids the making of any image to represent him as having wings (Deuteronomy 4:12-18). According to Numbers 12:8, God has a form, but it is evidently not like that of a bird.

This last point is probably the major reason people want to treat the texts refuting the absolute foreknowledge of God as poetic. They sincerely believe the Bible teaches absolute foreknowledge, so any verses which appear to be contrary to that doctrine must not mean what they actually say, but require poetic re-interpretation.

Until all the verses pertaining to the subject have been considered, it is unwise to formulate a doctrine of the knowledge of God. And until one has conclusive evidence God knows all the future choices of human beings, it is simply prejudice to treat all

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verses contradicting that idea as poetic. Hopefully, this book will provide an opportunity to look at some of the verses which are often overlooked in discussions about foreknowledge.

### **Anthropomorphism and the Bible**

When people claim scriptures describing God like a human must be interpreted “poetically,” what they often mean is that God has likened himself to a human being for our benefit. God is not like man, they reason, so he had to describe himself in ways we would understand. This application of human characteristics to God is called anthropomorphism or anthropopathism, depending on whether it is the form or personality of man which is being attributed to God. Thus, the words cannot be taken literally, and have to be re-interpreted to mean something other than what they actually say.

The word “anthropomorphism,” coming from the two Greek roots *anthropos* (man) and *morphe* (form), means the attributing of human form to something which does not have that form. The “head” or “foot” of the bed, the “leg” of the table, the “head” of the river, and the “foothills” are some examples of anthropomorphisms related to physical objects. The “eyes” of the Lord, the “arm” of the Lord, or the breath of his “nostrils” are all anthropomorphic descriptions of God. Since God is a spirit, and as such does not actually have human body parts (Deuteronomy 4), phrases such as these are recognized as a form of poetic description called anthropomorphism.

“Anthropopathism,” on the other hand, derived from the roots *anthropos* (man) and *pathos* (feeling), is the attributing of human thoughts, feelings, or choices to things or beings which do not have those abilities. “My dog worships me,” or “my cat expects me to worship him,” or apologizing to an object you bump (“Sorry chair”) are some examples of anthropopathic reactions to objects not having human thoughts or feelings.

This quote from J. Barton Payne’s *Theology of the Older Testament* reflects the common belief that the Bible uses both anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language when it describes God.

“The term (anthropomorphism) concerns the Biblical descriptions of God ‘in the form of man.’ In the primeval age, for example, God is described in a straightforward way as walking and talking with men (Gen. 2:6, 19; 3:8). The

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descriptions are anthropomorphic. God is also spoken of as having ‘human’ feelings, such as being grieved and regretting (6:6), or feeling pleased (8:21). These latter are examples, technically, of anthropopathism. On the basis then of the biblical anthropomorphism and anthropopathism, the most fundamental truth about the Testator is that He is a real person!”<sup>32</sup>

While “anthropomorphism” is commonly used to describe both anthropomorphism and anthropopathism, it is very important to make a distinction between the two terms. Using one term to describe both the attribution of physical form *and* functions of personality, blurs the line between form and feeling, and can cause much confusion in biblical interpretation.

Of course, the big question in exegesis is, “Does the Bible use anthropopathic as well as anthropomorphic language when describing God or his activities?” Many theologians assume that since God is a different being from man, God can only describe himself to us in human terms, because we would not be able to understand any other kind of description. And since God is different, he must be different both in form and in personality. But while God may not have “arms” as a spirit, is it also true that he does not have thoughts, feelings, or volitions?

On what basis do we determine that an anthropomorphic description has been used with reference to a particular object? We make this determination based on whether or not the object has the form of a human being. We know the “head of the bed” is an anthropomorphism because a bed does not really have a head in the same way a human does. Again, on what basis do we decide an anthropopathism has been used? We decide based on whether or not the object in question has the same kind of feelings, thoughts, or volitions (i.e., functions of personality) a human has. The crucial question, then, is whether or not God has the same functions of personality humans do.

While it is clear from the Scriptures we are created in God’s image,<sup>33</sup> meaning we are like him, we still have to ask if God is like us. The answer is, “Yes, God *is* like us!” If one object is like another, this means the two objects share at least one common

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<sup>32</sup>Dr. J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 120-121.

<sup>33</sup>While some believe that the fall corrupted or eliminated the image of God in man, Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 make it clear that man, even in his fallen state, is still in the image and likeness of God.



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attribute. If they did not, they could not be said to be *like* each other. So, if we are like God, made in his image, then God must be like us with respect to the characteristics we share. These attributes do not have to be the same in *quantity*, but they must be the same in *quality* if we consider it to be true that we are *like* God. And if we are like him, then *he must be like us* with respect to the same characteristics.<sup>34</sup>

When God describes himself as being “grieved” over the sin of mankind, why should we understand this as anything other than real grief? We may not be able to comprehend the extent of God’s grief, but this does not mean we have to say his grief is something other than grief. Or what shall we make of the statement “God so loved the world”? Shall we say we really cannot understand this or it means something other than that God loved us? What use would it be for God to reveal this information to us if it does not mean what it says?

The supposed use of anthropathism in the Scriptures raises questions about the nature of man as well as the nature of God. If we think the Bible uses both anthropomorphic and anthropathic descriptions of God, we then have to ask, “What does it mean for us to be created in the image of God?” What is there in us that is like God? If we are not like him in form (which we admit), and we are also not like him in functions of personality (thought, choice, emotion), then how is man in the image of God?

Claiming it is the soul and/or spirit of man which is in God’s image will not rescue us from the dilemma. The functions of personality—intellect, emotions, and will—are associated with the soul in the Scriptures.<sup>35</sup> The functions of intuition, devotion, and

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<sup>34</sup>The scripture “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,” is frequently torn from its context to support the idea that God has a different kind of thoughts from man. The verse before this states, “Let the wicked forsake his *way*, And the unrighteous man his *thoughts*.” This is clearly a moral context, speaking of evil *ways* and *unrighteous* thoughts—both requiring the compassion and pardon of God. God’s ways and thoughts are different from man’s in that his thoughts are holy whereas man’s are not, but this verse cannot be used to support the notion that when God thinks, he does not actually think thoughts as we know them.

<sup>35</sup>Intellect - “my soul knows it very well” (Psalm 139:14). Emotions - “I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11. See also Job 10:1; Isaiah 38:15; Ezekiel 27:31). Or “My soul has no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10:38. See also Proverbs 2:10). Will - “love the Lord...with your soul” (Deuteronomy 30:6. See also Psalm 30:12; 57:1; 108:1; Jeremiah 32:41).

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conscience are associated with the spirit.<sup>36</sup> So, if God is a spirit (“God is spirit” - John 4:24) who has a soul (“My soul will have no pleasure in him” - Hebrews 10:38), then this is how we must be like God. We have the functions of soul and spirit just as God does, because he created us as spirits who have souls.

If, however, we are like God in our ability to think, feel, and choose, then the Bible is not using anthropopathic language when it says God loves us, is grieved by our sin, rejoices over our obedience, is delighted by our prayers, or is angry with the wicked. These are not poetic descriptions. They are real descriptions of the thoughts, emotions, and choices of God. God does not have to use anthropathism to describe himself to us because we are like him, and he is like us, as regards the functions of personality.

Another way to put this is to look at anthropathism as a form of personification. Personification is speaking of impersonal objects, either concrete or abstract, as if they were a person. “Wisdom calls from the gates” is an example of personification in the Bible. But personification is not necessary in God’s case, because God really is a person. Thus, God does not have to use poetic language to describe his functions of personality because he really has these functions.

When people read verses which state that God changes his mind, they want to call the passages poetic because they know there are other passages which state God does not change his mind. These other passages will be discussed later, but there is an important question which should be raised here. If God says in one place, “I will not change my mind,” and in another place declares, “I have changed my mind,” then which of these statements should be taken as literal and which should be interpreted as poetic? Both of these are talking about the changing of God’s mind. If we look at the words “I change my mind” and then the other words “I *do not* change my mind,”—which of these phrases should be taken literally and which poetically? If verses about God’s changing his mind are to be taken poetically, why should verses about God’s *not* changing his mind be taken literally? These passages are both about the changing of God’s mind. How do we decide which is literal and which is anthropopathic? Unfortunately, most theologians choose on the basis of their preconceived ideas of the nature of God, rather than sound principles of interpretation.

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<sup>36</sup>Intuition - “Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves” (Mark 2:8. See also Job 32:8; Romans 8:16). Devotion - “who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24. See also I Corinthians 14:2, 15-18). Conscience - Romans 2:14, 15.

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Actually, we do not need to interpret either passage poetically, since to interpret both of them literally does no injustice to the text, the context, or the message of the Scriptures.<sup>37</sup> But if we do interpret both of them literally, then God could not have absolute knowledge of all future events, since he could never change his mind about something he knew from all eternity.

In our exegesis of biblical texts mentioning the thoughts, choices, or emotions of God, it is not necessary to re-interpret the words to mean anything other than what they actually say. When God says “now I know” or “maybe they will repent” or “I will find out” or “I thought they would return, but they did not” or “the thought never entered my mind,” there is no reason to take these phrases to mean anything other than what they appear to mean at face value. The only reason we would have to re-interpret these words is if we had clear evidence from other passages in the Scriptures that these words could not mean what they literally say. And since that evidence is lacking, we shall have to let these words mean exactly what they say, even if that interpretation leads us to conclude God does not have absolute foreknowledge of the choices of human beings.

### **The Definition of “Sovereignty”**

“The Lord has established His throne in the heavens;  
And His sovereignty rules over all.” Psalm 103:19

“God has everything under control.” This bumper sticker proudly proclaims what some Christians believe is a biblical view of the sovereignty of God. But what could the unbeliever in the following car think of such a pronouncement? “If God has everything under control, why are babies born deformed? Why are there wars? Why are people abused, raped, tortured and murdered? Where is God in all of this? If he has everything under control, he sure is doing a poor job of it!”

The sovereignty of God is clearly a biblical doctrine. That God is the ruler of everything he has created should be accepted by all Bible-believing Christians. But it is one thing to *say* God is sovereign, and another thing to *define* what the Bible means by the word “sovereign.”

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<sup>37</sup>And, as we will see later, the passages are not in conflict with each other if they are interpreted literally according to their immediate context.

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Sovereignty is a matter of control, so there are really only two possibilities in defining the word. Either 1) God controls absolutely every event which happens in all of history, so no event is something he did not will to happen,<sup>38</sup> or 2) God is the ruler, but there are events which happen under his sovereignty which are not part of his will. If even one event happens which God did not intend, the second definition is the case. The matter can only be decided by exegesis, of course, so we will have to determine whether or not the Bible says there are events which God did not will to happen.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>R. C. Sproul, in *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), p. 26, defines sovereignty in this way. “To say that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over his entire creation. If something could come to pass apart from his sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate his sovereignty. If God refused to permit something to happen and it happened anyway, then whatever caused it to happen would have more authority and power than God himself. If there is any part of creation outside of God’s sovereignty, then God is simply not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not God.”

But if God’s idea of “sovereignty” is to force all events to conform to his will, then what of Jesus’ denunciation of this kind of rulership in Luke 22:25-26, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’ But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.” Would God the Father participate in a kind of rulership Jesus rejected? I think not.

John Sanders, in *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 213, also acknowledges this problem with “meticulous providence” when he states, “Finally, exhaustive divine sovereignty appears to pit Jesus against the Father. Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and instructed them that Christian leaders were to emulate this style of leadership. ... If one posits a hidden will of God the Father behind the revealed will of God the Son, then the ‘revelation’ of God in Jesus is undermined.”

<sup>39</sup>There can be no such thing as what some call the “secret will of God”—some plan that God has that he has not revealed to us in the Scriptures. If a person thinks he knows what God wills, but God did not reveal this will in the Bible, the person is simply making up this “will of God” in his own mind. This is humanism and it will not help us in our understanding of God’s Word. Unfortunately, there are many people who presuppose a “will of God” apart from the Scriptures and then read that understanding into the Bible, forcing an interpretation of texts into an esoteric framework which directly contradicts the general revelation of God and his will in the Scriptures.

Take, for example, the idea that God secretly wanted man to sin so he could reveal his love to us through the death of his Son. Since God always, in every passage, condemns sin, declares it an abomination, and commands us to refrain from all sinful choices, how would someone know that God “secretly”

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It is easy to see how the first definition conflicts with the idea of the free will of man. If God is making everything happen, then man's choices are controlled, and man is not free. Attempting to use logical sleight of hand to define choices as both certain and contingent, or determined and free,<sup>40</sup> at the same time (A=non-A), will not resolve the dilemma. If a choice is controlled by God, it cannot at the same time be defined as the free choice of a human being. The certainty of the events eliminates the freedom of man's will.<sup>41</sup>

Does the Bible teach that everything that happens is the will of God? Not at all! God declares explicitly what his will is in a number of ways. "In everything give thanks; for *this is God's will* for you in Christ Jesus." I Thessalonians 5:18. Do all Christians give thanks in everything? If not, then the will of God is not always done. "For *this is the will of God*, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality." I Thessalonians 4:3. Do Christians ever commit sexual immorality? Yes, they do. And every time this sin is committed, God's will is not done. The Lord is "*not wishing for any to perish* but for all to come to repentance" II Peter 3:9. Every unrepentant person is therefore living in direct opposition to the will of God for his life. "The Pharisees and the lawyers *rejected God's purpose for themselves*" Luke 7:30. The word "purpose" here actually means "plan," as opposed to desire (the usual word for "will"), which means people resist God's plan for their lives, and not just his wishes. Lastly, why would Jesus teach us to pray, "*Thy will be done*, On earth as it is in heaven," if the will of God is always being done?

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wanted us to sin? If God tells us in his word that sin is not his will, then the idea that he secretly wanted us to sin is simply a figment of someone's overactive imagination. This kind of humanistic fabrication has no place in biblical exegesis.

<sup>40</sup>As per Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* and Norman Geisler in *Chosen But Free* and *Creating God in the Image of Man*. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Part II, Ch. IX, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1960). Geisler, Dr. Norman. *Chosen But Free*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999. Geisler, Dr. Norman. *Creating God in the Image of Man?*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997. Instances of this kind of logic are found throughout both of Geisler's works.

<sup>41</sup>The line between necessity and certainty is eliminated by any claim that an event *absolutely will* take place. Remember that we are talking here about God's bringing an event about in his sovereignty, not the nature of future human choices in the light of absolute foreknowledge.

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The sovereignty of God vs. the free will of man is only one of the conflicting doctrines which must be held in a “dynamic tension” if we believe all of these ideas are biblical. Some examples of these conflicts include:

The sovereignty of God vs. the free will of man.  
The foreknowledge of God vs. the free will of man.  
Inherited sinful nature vs. the free will of man.  
Election to salvation vs. the free will of man.  
Irresistible grace vs. the free will of man.  
Eternal security vs. the free will of man.  
Predestination vs. the free will of man.

Do we see a pattern here? The common thread in all but one of these contradictory pairs is the concept of God. If God absolutely controls the choices of man by electing man to salvation against his will, causing man to be regenerated whether he wants it or not, making man remain saved even if he wants to fall, and then predestining this whole history to take place before the person is born, it is easy to see why these ideas come into direct conflict with the free will of man.

So how will we define “sovereignty”? Either God controls every event which happens in the history of the universe, or some events occur which he did not will to happen. These are the only two possibilities when it comes to the sovereignty of God. And any concept of God which says he controls every event in the universe must conflict with the idea of the free will of man. Either man is controlled, or he is free. Either God determines which events will happen, or man can bring about situations God never intended.

Those who read the New International Version of the Bible (NIV) will encounter the word “sovereign” or “sovereignty” 296 times. Of those, 289 are in the form “Sovereign Lord,” most of which are a translation of the phrase *adonai yahweh*. The remaining seven are in Daniel 4, 5, and 7, and refer either to the sovereignty of God, Nebuchadnezzar, the Son of Man, or the saints.

The New American Standard Bible (1977), uses the words “sovereign” or “sovereignty” only eight times, six referring to human beings and only two referring to God (Psalm 103:19; I Timothy 6:15). The phrase *adonai yahweh* is translated as “Lord God” in the NASB.

The translators of the NIV appear to have wanted to emphasize the sovereignty of God in their translation. Perhaps they felt people were ignoring the doctrine, and adding the word to their text hundreds of times would help people to accept the idea of

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sovereignty more readily. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, in their *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, never give the word “sovereign” as a definition of the word *adonai*. On the contrary, they define the word, when used as a reference to God, as “parallel with Yahweh, substit. for it oft. by scrib. error, & eventually supplanting it.”<sup>42</sup>

But even if the NIV translators were correct in translating *adonai* as “sovereign,” it is still the definition that is important. God is sovereign, but what does this mean? The idea that God makes all events happen, or that he has all events in his control, is clearly unbiblical. When people sin, they are creating events God never willed or desired. God will judge every event, and as the Governor of the universe, he will punish and reward those events according to his justice. But to define “sovereignty” such that it includes the idea that no event happens which God did not intend, is to ignore the plain teaching of the Scriptures that sin is never a part of the will of God.

The president of the United States is the ruler in our country. So, if someone breaks into my house and steals my computer, does this mean the president is no longer the ruler in the United States? Of course not. God is the sovereign ruler of the universe. But if someone denies his will by not giving thanks in all circumstances, does this mean God is no longer the king? Of course not. Just as the rebellion of a citizen of the United States does not negate the presidency, so the rebellion of one of God’s citizens does not threaten his sovereignty. It simply means the sovereign God will one day judge the act, and barring repentance, the perpetrator will receive his just punishment.

Our definition of sovereignty, then, must include the reality of the free will of man. It must also include the possibility that though God is sovereign, things can happen which he did not plan. The scriptures stating that man can resist the will of God require a definition of sovereignty which both upholds his rulership and, at the same time, allows for the exercise of man’s free will.

### The Definition of “Infinite”

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, said of the word “infinite”:

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<sup>42</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford University Press, 1907), pp. 10-11.

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“But if by using the word ‘infinite’ we encourage ourselves to think of Him as a formless ‘everything’ about whom nothing in particular and everything in general is true, then it would be better to drop that word altogether.”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, if the word infinite means so much that it really means nothing, then it is a useless word. This would be true of any word which lacks sufficient definition and specification.

Some people use the word infinite to read into God’s character completely opposing qualities. “God is infinite,” they intone, “so he must be both matter and spirit, personal and impersonal, good and evil, real and illusory, everywhere and nowhere, etc., etc.” This is an example of the lack of definition or specification described by C. S. Lewis. Allowing the word “infinite” to mean more than what the Bible says, people sometimes assign conflicting attributes to God’s nature or character. God is infinitely good, but this definition does not allow for God to be infinitely evil at the same time. Only a careless application of the word “infinite” can be marshaled to attribute both good and evil to God’s character simultaneously.

The word “infinite” is used only once in the New American Standard Bible. It is found in Psalm 147:5, which states, “His understanding is infinite.” Though this is the only reference which contains this English word, still, the use of the word is instructive. Note the word is not used in a general sense as we often do in discourse about the “infinity” of God (“God is infinite”), but is applied to a specific attribute of God—his understanding. The Hebrew and Greek here literally say his understanding is beyond counting or telling.<sup>44</sup>

But what of the idea of “infinite”? Is it scriptural? Generally, it is used to describe the greatness of one of God’s attributes. So, it seems reasonable that, even if the word is not in the Bible, we can still use it, as long as we are careful to define it in biblical terms. We must be careful to define the “how” and the “with respect to what” when we employ the term.

If we say God is infinite with respect to time, we mean he has always existed, he exists now, and he will always exist. He is the one “who was” and “who is” and “who is to come.” He is eternal. But how this eternal existence relates to time is another issue. God

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<sup>43</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 89.

<sup>44</sup>In the Hebrew as לְתַבִּינָתוֹ אֵין מִסְפָּר (his understanding is not to be counted or recounted, i.e., it is beyond telling) and in the Greek as τῆς συνέσεως αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀριθμὸς (his understanding is not a number, i.e., is beyond counting).



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can be said to be infinite with respect to time by living outside of time altogether, or he could be living in an endless duration which had no beginning and will have no end. Either definition will satisfy the idea of “infinite time,” and determining which one is biblical will be a matter of exegesis.

The danger in using the word “infinite” without proper biblical definition is we can easily be involved in eisegesis. We can tacitly smuggle attributes into God’s nature or character without proper biblical justification. The temptation is to define “infinite” apart from the Scriptures, and then read that concept of “infinite” into the passage we are interpreting. This amounts to eisegesis, of course, because we are no longer allowing the Scriptures to tell us who God is, but we are defining God’s nature and character apart from the Bible, and then forcing those ideas onto the text.

The word “infinite” can be useful as long as we are careful to define it biblically. If we are not attributing to God characteristics he does not have, or twisting a scripture to fit a preconceived idea about God, using the word “infinite” can help us in our attempts to describe the greatness of the Almighty.

### Summary

Following a few, basic principles of interpretation—such as carefully defining our words, or interpreting words in their context—will help us in our efforts to discover God’s nature and character from the Scriptures. Using those principles which would be applicable in the interpretation of any text will keep us balanced and help us to avoid esoteric renderings of Bible passages.

We should go to the Bible, allowing it to tell us what God is like, and develop our understanding of God through our study of the Scriptures. This is *exegesis*—developing our doctrines from the Bible. We need to be careful not to presuppose an idea of the nature or character of God, and then go to the Bible to try to prove it. This is *eisegesis*—the reading of ideas into the Scriptures.

Reason and a sense of natural justice can be useful tools in our efforts at proper interpretation. Though we may be fallen, this has not completely eliminated our reasoning abilities or sense of right and wrong. Thus, the judicial application of reason and natural justice can be useful in clarifying obscure or confusing passages. In applying reason and natural justice to a problem, we are being human, not humanistic, as long as we ultimately submit our reasoning and sense of justice to the Word of God.

Antinomy, or holding two completely contradictory doctrines “in a dynamic tension,” should not be involved in proper exegesis. This

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attempt to say A equals non-A, and any efforts at a biblical justification of this illogical stance, are counter-productive in biblical interpretation.

If we are going to claim a text is poetic in nature, we have to have good reason to do so—either from the text itself, or from its context. If it is not obvious from the word, the immediate context, or the broader context of the Bible, then we should interpret the text historically.

Though the Bible sometimes uses anthropomorphic language when referring to God, there is no basis to assume anthropopathic language is used also. On the contrary, since we are made in the image of God, we should assume that when God refers to attributes of his personality—intellect, emotions, or will—the Scriptures mean exactly what they say. These texts do not have to be interpreted poetically, because God, as a personal being, really does have these capacities.

We must carefully define the “sovereignty” of God. If, by using this word, we encourage ourselves to imagine God controls everything that happens in the universe, and nothing can happen which is not part of his will, we need to revise our definition. God is sovereign in the sense that he is the Ruler over all his creation, and is moving that creation towards his ultimate goal. Along the way it is possible for the free will of man to temporarily thwart the desires and plans of God. Thus, his will is not always done, but he remains the sovereign ruler of his creation.

Lastly, if we use the word “infinite” in our descriptions of God’s attributes, we must be careful to give it a biblical definition. It is possible to fall into eisegesis using the word “infinite” if we preconceive a characteristic of God, and then read that definition into the Scriptures during interpretation. The word “infinite” can be useful, as long as its definition does not conflict with sound biblical teaching.



## Chapter 7

### Prophecy and Foreknowledge

One of the defining characteristics of God is his ability to foretell future events. People assume if God can do this, then he must know the future. But is this a biblical conclusion or a philosophical one? Is it possible that God could precisely prophesy future events without exact knowledge of every event in the future? How could God tell us exactly what will happen in the future if he does not know the future? Doesn't prophecy indicate the future exists and can be foreknown by God?

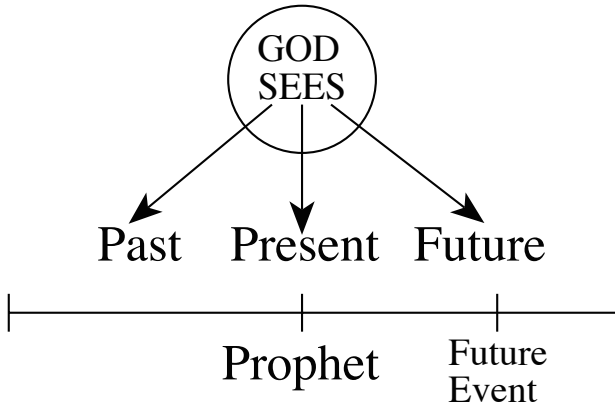
There are two parts to this question—the presuppositional and the biblical. How one views the phenomenon of prophecy will be determined by how one views God's relationship to time and God's foreknowledge. This is the presuppositional aspect. But one must also study the Bible to see which view of prophecy is supported by the Scriptures. Regardless of our philosophy, if God says prophecy occurs in a certain way, then that is how it happens.

So, how does God tell the future? The two major views of God's relationship to time—God lives in an “eternal now” or God lives in a duration—present two different ways we can look at prophecy. Either 1) God is outside of time and sees an objectively existing future and tells the prophet what will happen, or 2) God lives in a duration and tells the prophet what he (God) is going to do in the future. God then works in history to cause the events to come to pass as he has spoken.

Diagrams of these two positions might look like this:

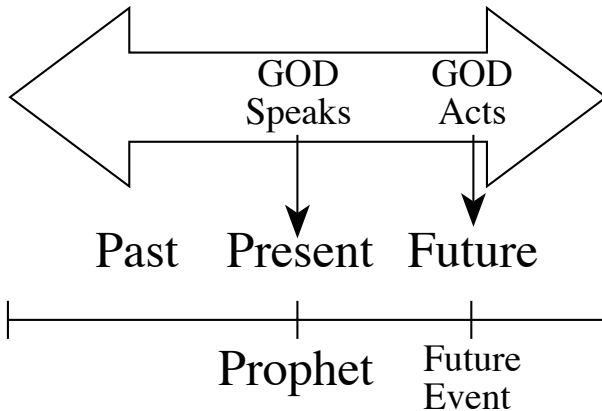
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### “Eternal Now”



In the above illustration, God is outside of time seeing all events, past, present, and future. He then tells the prophet what will happen and the event happens as he has seen it.

### God in Duration



In this illustration, God is in a duration, declaring to the prophet what he (God) plans to do in the future. Then, when the time comes, God acts in history to bring about the prophesied events.

The two views of history represented in these illustrations follow logically from the two different views of God's relationship

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to time. If the future already exists objectively so all its events can be known by God, then God can tell the prophet what will occur and it eventually happens. If the future does not yet exist as an object to be known by God, then God tells the prophet what he (God) plans to do and then, when the proper time comes, God acts to bring about the events he planned in the past.

The “God sees the future” view of prophecy has been accepted by so many for so long it can be difficult for some to imagine prophecy could happen any other way. But there are some ways God can make accurate statements about future events without having to know what will happen.

First, God can know what will happen if the laws he has established in the universe determine that the event will come about.

For example, God can know right now if a particular meteor will strike the earth in the future. He can know the exact time and place the meteor will impact earth by knowing the position, velocity, and direction of all objects as they currently exist. So, if he predicts this event beforehand, it may seem like a supernatural utterance to us, but for him it was a simple matter of knowing how everything he made happens to work.

Another example might be the provision of a necessary object before the need arises. For instance, a group of missionaries was in great need of money for an evangelistic trip. Since they were departing the next morning, they prayed all night long and the money continued to come in through the night. The entire amount came in by the next morning, but when the money was counted, there was exactly two dollars too much. The missionaries left on their trip, leaving those who were staying behind with only the two dollars for all their needs. That night the furnace broke down and required a new part for its repair. And what was the cost of the part? It was exactly two dollars.

While this event demonstrated the amazing love and attention to detail God expresses in his care for his children, it did not require a knowledge of a pre-existing future for its fulfillment. It only required that God know the part on the furnace would fail, and this he could do since he can know all that is happening in the universe at any particular time.

Second, God can know what will happen in the future by knowing what people will do given particular circumstances. This prediction of a future reaction is based on God’s knowledge of the person’s present heart condition.

A clear example of this kind of foreknowledge is recorded in Deuteronomy 31:20-21. After declaring:

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“...when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant.”

God then goes on to explain how he knows they will reject him. He says:

“... for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore.”

So, if God knows the condition of a person’s heart, and that the person will be in a particular situation, he can know what that person will do. This prediction is not based on knowledge of a pre-existing future, but on understanding of the workings of the human heart.

Another biblical example of this kind of knowledge is revealed in Peter’s denial of Jesus. Jesus predicted Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed the next morning. How could Jesus do this? Does this imply Jesus had exact knowledge of the future choices of Peter? Let’s take a look at the elements of Peter’s denial and Jesus’ prediction.

As the crucifixion drew near, Jesus knew Satan had demanded permission to attack the apostles. In the phrase “sift you like wheat” in Luke 22:31, the “you” is plural in the Greek. Thus, Satan was not singling out Peter for abuse, but had some design to defeat all of the apostles.

Jesus also knew Peter’s heart was weak and given certain circumstances he would fail. So Jesus prayed that Peter would be able to endure. Jesus then based Peter’s future ministry on the lesson he would learn through this experience—strengthening the hearts of his brothers.

Knowing the devil’s tactic to attack people three times, Jesus could predict Peter would deny him three times. Jesus had undergone this kind of attack in the wilderness after his baptism.<sup>1</sup> Satan approached him three times with the phrase, “If you are the Son of God.” As Jesus resisted him all three times using the word of God as a defense, the devil retreated. Jesus would again undergo this same three-fold attack on the cross as he would hear this same phrase, or one very similar, from the Pharisees, the thief on the

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 4.

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cross, and those passing by.<sup>2</sup> So Jesus not only knew the state of Peter's heart, he knew precisely the kind of onslaught to which he would be subjected.

Having the cock crow after the denial was a simple matter of God's controlling the cock until Peter had made his third denial. The Bible is very clear that God can have complete control over the animal world when he wishes, though his government of the animals is generally accomplished through instincts. The words "the cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" can just as easily be a declaration as a prediction.<sup>3</sup>

Given all of these elements, Jesus did not have to have knowledge of some pre-existing choices in the future to predict Peter would deny him three times. He only needed to know the character and tactics of Satan, the state of Peter's heart, the kind of circumstances which would surround Peter's temptation, and the Father's ability to control animals. Knowing all of these, Jesus could say with certainty what Peter would do.

A third way God can predict the future is by knowing the plans in human minds. Unless the person changes his mind about what he is planning to do, God can know the event will happen.

An example of this is found in the biblical record of David's flight from King Saul (I Samuel 23). When David was in the city of Keilah, he asked the Lord what Saul would do. Concerned that the men of Keilah would hand him over to Saul, he asked the Lord:

"Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Thy servant has heard? O Lord God of Israel, I pray, tell Thy servant." And the Lord said, "He will come down."

Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the Lord said, "They will surrender you."

Then David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could

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<sup>2</sup>Matthew 27:43, Luke 23:39, and Matthew 27:40 respectively.

<sup>3</sup>I was in a meeting once where we were searching our hearts to see if any of us had betrayed the Lord. While we sat quietly, a rooster entered the room, walked down the aisle between all the people, hopped onto the speaker's podium at the front of the room, and crowed. He then hopped down, walked back up the aisle, and exited the same way he had entered. Needless to say, this event prompted fervent heart searching and convinced us all of God's ability to control animals.



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go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit.

David asked the Lord what Saul would do, and the Lord, based on Saul's present plans, said Saul would come to Keilah. But after David and his men left the city, Saul "gave up the pursuit" and did not come. But the Lord had said Saul *would* come to Keilah. Was God mistaken? No, but since David's actions changed with his new knowledge, and Saul's actions changed in response to David's departure, God's prediction did not come to pass due to the choices of David and Saul.

This example points out an important principle concerning prophecy. Many prophecies are conditional upon the will of man, but the condition may not be stated in the prophecy. It may just be assumed.

Take, for instance, the announcement of Jonah, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). This prediction did not include any statements implying the outcome could be different depending on the choices of the people in Nineveh. But the king of Nineveh said, "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?" And when God saw that the people repented, he changed his mind and did not destroy Nineveh. Though the condition was not specifically stated, the destruction of Nineveh was dependent on whether or not the people repented.

This same principle applies to many prophecies in the Bible. The condition may not always be stated when the fulfillment of a prophecy is based on the free will of man. There are numerous predictions of this kind in the Scriptures, most of which have to do with the failure of the Israelites to drive out the inhabitants of Caanan after God had predicted they would surely succeed.<sup>4</sup> God was not mistaken in his prediction, but the existence of the future events depended on the choices of the Israelites. Since they failed, God's prediction did not come to pass.

The fourth way God can predict the future is probably the most well known and the most common. God can foreknow what he has

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<sup>4</sup>Another interesting case is that of Joseph who dreamed that the sun, moon, and stars would bow down to him. His father Jacob understood this to mean that Jacob (the sun), Rachel (the moon), and his brothers (the stars) would bow to Joseph. This did not come to pass, however, since Rachel died before Jacob and his sons came to Egypt. Thus, Rachel (the moon) never did bow down to Joseph.

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planned to do. And whatever God plans to do, he is both powerful and intelligent enough to perform.

Though it is not often understood or acknowledged, God actually tells us in the Scriptures that this is his method of foretelling future events. There are two passages in Isaiah outlining how God “declares the end from the beginning.”

In Isaiah 46:8-11, the Lord compares himself with the idols of Babylon, explaining that the ability to foretell future events is part of what distinguishes him as the one true God. He states:

“For I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like Me,  
Declaring the end from the beginning  
And from ancient times things which have not been done,”

When God says he declares the “end” from the “beginning” we understand this means he declares the future from the past. This is also true of the phrases “things which have not been done” and “from ancient times.” Thus, it is quite clear God foretells the future.

If God had ceased speaking at this point, we would be left to conjecture as to exactly *how* he declares “the end from the beginning.” But God did not stop here. He goes on to say:

“Saying, ‘My purpose will be established,  
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure’; ...  
Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.  
I have planned it, surely I will do it.”

He declares the end from the beginning by pronouncing what he will do in the future and then he *brings it to pass*. He plans an event and then *he does it*. This is how he *accomplishes* all he pleases to do.

Note that God does not say the events would have happened without his intervention. He says, “I will accomplish,” and, “I will bring it to pass,” and again, “I will do it.” There is no hint here of a pre-existing future which would happen regardless of God’s involvement. Rather, God reveals to us that prophecy happens because of the direct intervention of God in history. *He speaks and then brings it to pass. He plans and then does it.*

Because people have been taught for so long that God prophesies by simply seeing a pre-existing future event, it can be difficult for some to accept that God may foretell future events by some other method. Yet, here it is, written in God’s Word for our information. God says what he will do, and he does it. He plans

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events and then brings them to pass. This is God's method of prophecy.

Two chapters later, in Isaiah 48, God gives us another clear insight into how prophecy operates. Verse 3 says:

“I declared the former things long ago  
And they went forth from My mouth, and I proclaimed  
them.  
Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.”

This could hardly be clearer. God proclaimed what would happen, and then acted suddenly and the events came to pass. Again, there is no notion here of a future which God saw ahead of time which then happened as it was going to all along. God proclaims things and then causes them to happen later in history.<sup>5</sup>

To make it even clearer, God goes on to say that the predictions he is making now did not exist before:

“You have heard; look at all this.  
And you, will you not declare it?  
I proclaim to you new things from this time,  
Even hidden things which you have not known.  
*They are created now and not long ago;*  
And before today you have not heard them,  
Lest you should say, ‘Behold, I knew them.’” (Isaiah 48:6, 7)

These scriptures support the picture of God as living in a duration and not as a being living in some kind of “eternal now.” If God speaks at one time and suddenly acts at another time, duration is required for this series of events.

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<sup>5</sup>Here are some additional verses which point out that God moves in history to fulfill what he has foretold: I Kings 8:15, 20, 24; I Kings 13:32 (with II Kings 23:1-3, 15-18); II Kings 19:25; II Chronicles 1:9; I Chronicles 6:4, 10, 15); II Chronicles 36:21, 22; Ezra 1:1; Isaiah 5:19; Isaiah 25:1, 2; Isaiah 37:26; Isaiah 42:9 (with verse 16); Jeremiah 29:10; Jeremiah 32:24, 28; Jeremiah 33:14, 15; Lamentations 3:37; Ezekiel 33:29, 33; Daniel 4:33, 37; Acts 3:18; Revelation 17:17.

## Prophecy and Free Will

One of the biggest problems people have with God's causing events to happen is when God's plans interfere with the free will of man.

Some people acknowledge only two categories here, either God never interferes with man's free will (absolute freedom), or God makes man do everything he does (absolute predestination). But are these two extremes the only possibilities? Is it not possible that God follows a general rule of allowing man freedom and yet sets aside that freedom when he deems it necessary and loving to do so? This is the very picture which seems to be portrayed in biblical history. God accomplishes his desires through people, and although the general rule is that God allows them to freely choose to work with him, God sometimes fulfills his purposes by overriding their free will.

But if God can set aside man's free will, how can he be just at the same time? Under what special circumstances would God take such drastic action? If a man is forced by God to do or not do something, how will God judge the act? What about the person's salvation? Is it affected by God's suspension of the person's free will? Do good people have to be concerned that God may sometimes remove their freedom to accomplish his purposes?

Fortunately, the Bible gives us enough examples of God's governmental interference with man's will to allow us to discover some general principles which apply to such situations. The major examples include:

- 1) Balaam's blessing of Israel when he tried to curse (Numbers 22-24).
- 2) The hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4-14).
- 3) The placement of fear on the hearts of the Canaanites so they would be destroyed (Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25).
- 4) The stirring of Cyrus' heart to release the Israelites from captivity and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1).<sup>6</sup>
- 5) The turning of Nebuchadnezzar's mind to that of an animal (Daniel 4).

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<sup>6</sup>There is another interesting example of this in Revelation 17:17. "For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose ... until the words of God should be fulfilled."

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It is important to distinguish between very strong influence which could be resisted and actual coercion of the will. For example Jonah was swallowed by a fish and Saul was blinded and fell to the ground, but these influences could have been resisted. This is evidenced by Jonah's prayer of repentance<sup>7</sup> and Saul's statement to Agrippa that he was not "*disobedient* to the heavenly vision."<sup>8</sup> These were strong influences, to be sure, but they were not cases of a loss of free will.

What principles can we glean from these examples to uphold the justice of God in his setting aside of someone's free will? Let's take a look at five general conditions and then see how those conditions apply to two specific instances—the cursing of Balaam and the altering of Nebuchadnezzar's mind.

1) *The person was always wicked.* We never read that God overrode the free will of a righteous person. The Bible only records instances where a wicked person was forced by God to do something other than what he wished.<sup>9</sup> Righteous people will do what God desires when requested, so there is no need for God to coerce the will of a righteous person. Balaam was attempting to curse Israel when God caused him to bless instead. Nebuchadnezzar was an idol worshipper and the captor of the Israelites in Babylon.

2) *The suspension of will was temporary.* There are no examples of a person whose will was removed for his entire life. Though God "put a word in Balaam's mouth"<sup>10</sup> so he "had to bless"<sup>11</sup> Israel and "God turned the curse into a blessing,"<sup>12</sup> Balaam then proceeded on his own volition to tempt the Israelites to disobey God.<sup>13</sup> Nebuchadnezzar was altered by God to become like an animal for a time, but God eventually restored his mind to its original state.

In the case of Pharaoh, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but only after Pharaoh hardened his own heart. The references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart reveal an interesting phenomenon—the hardening was not consistent. That is, God did not harden his heart and then it was hardened continually thereafter. Rather, the instances of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart alternate with Pharaoh's

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<sup>7</sup>Jonah 2:4-9.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 26:19.

<sup>9</sup>Some have suggested that John the Baptist may have been under causation by God, but the evidence to support this is only inferential.

<sup>10</sup>Numbers 23:5.

<sup>11</sup>Joshua 24:10.

<sup>12</sup>Deuteronomy 23:5.

<sup>13</sup>Numbers 31:16.

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hardening his own heart, and not in any consistent manner. Thus, it appears as if God only interfered with Pharaoh's free will when it seemed Pharaoh's choices might abort the plan of God to free the Israelites from Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

3) *The salvation of the person was not affected by God's temporary overriding of the person's free choices.* Being forced to bless instead of cursing, being forced to free the Israelites from Egypt, becoming afraid of the Israelites, allowing the Israelites to go free from Persia, and becoming an animal temporarily—none of these was directly related to the salvation of the affected individual. In no instance was a wicked person forced to love God. In every case the person's relationship to God was determined by choices other than those made while under God's control.

4) *The event always related to the salvation of the entire world.* That is, God only interfered with someone's free will when the welfare of the entire human race was at stake. This was always related to the preservation of the nation of Israel so God could fulfill his promise of sending the Messiah to the world. Balaam's blessing instead of cursing was to preserve the nation. Nebuchadnezzar's becoming an animal was related to Israel's preservation and eventual release from captivity.

5) *The consequences of the action were suspended.* That is, if God made a person do something good, the person was not rewarded for it. If God produced detriment in a person's life, the situation was subsequently rectified by God. Balaam was not blessed because God made him bless the children of Israel. He was killed with the sword because he was involved in the occult and he tempted Israel to sin. Nebuchadnezzar lost all of his glory and his officials left him, but God restored all Nebuchadnezzar lost and in addition taught him a valuable lesson—God can humble anyone.

So, we have seen God can justly set aside someone's free will if these conditions are met:

- 1) The person is not a righteous person.
- 2) The person's will is only suspended temporarily.
- 3) The person's salvation is not affected by the temporary loss of will.
- 4) The event has implications for all mankind.
- 5) The consequences for that particular action are suspended.

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<sup>14</sup>See Exodus 3:19; 4:21; 5:2, 17, 18; 7:3, 13, 14, 22, 23; 8: 15, 19, 32; 9:1, 2, 7, 12, 16, 34, 35; 10:1, 3, 20, 27; 11:9, 10; 13:15; 14:4, 8, 17.

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Given these five conditions, we can understand how God could accomplish his purposes and fulfill every prophecy, yet without doing injustice to man's free will.

We should remember, too, that these instances were rare exceptions in God's dealings with men. God's general rule in his government of free-will agents is to allow them their freedom, even though the consequences may be quite dire at times.

### Summary

The two views of God's relationship to time produce two different views of prophecy. If God lives outside of time and "sees" the future, he can tell the prophet what he sees and the prophet declares it. Later the event happens as it was going to all along. On the other hand, if God does not know the future, he would need to tell the prophet what he plans to do, the prophet speaks it, and then God moves in history to accomplish what he has foretold.

The Scriptures are very clear that the second view is how God performs prophecy. God declares the end from the beginning by speaking it and bringing it to pass, he plans it, and then does it (Isaiah 46:8-11). Isaiah 48:3 tells us God proclaims what he will do and then acts suddenly in history to bring it to pass.

But does God ever override the free will of man to accomplish his purpose in history? Yes, he does. But we have seen that given the proper conditions, God can be completely just toward man at the same time as he temporarily suspends his freedom.

So prophecy can be performed without absolute foreknowledge and without God's doing injustice to man's free will.

There are other references in the Scriptures which are not prophetic in nature, but still involve God's foreknowledge of a human choice. These will be given special attention in Chapter 9.

### Note for the second edition

I gained my general understanding of how God sometimes suspends man's free will from Gordon Olson [Gordon C. Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Franklin Park, IL: Bible Research Fellowship, 1980), pp. T-IV-7-8.]. I learned about the conditions of such government in a lecture by Winkie Pratney in the 1970's.

## Chapter 8

### Is God Timeless?

The idea that God lives outside of time in an “eternal now” is so common most people do not even know the doctrine is in dispute. They simply accept the idea because someone they respected taught it to them. Searching the Bible to prove if the doctrine is true does not seem to occur to them. While it is admirable that they trust those who are instructing them in the ways of the Lord, it is still their responsibility to search the Scriptures to see whether or not these things are so. Blind, unquestioning trust in any human is inadvisable given the possibility for deception in our fallen, demon-influenced world. The final word in all such matters will have to come from God’s revelation of himself to us—the Bible. And the interpretation of the Bible will have to proceed on sound hermeneutical principles which can be applied to any Scriptural passage.<sup>1</sup>

The major question, then, is whether the Bible teaches that God lives outside of time in some kind of eternal now, or if he lives in an endless duration or sequence.

The biblical references which can be rallied to support the idea of an “eternal now” God are very few indeed.<sup>2</sup> Most of the references people quote have to be interpreted in light of a pre-conceived idea

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<sup>1</sup>For a list of hermeneutical principles and some of the problems in their application to this topic, please see chapter 6, “Exegetical Considerations.”

<sup>2</sup>Nelson Pike, in his book, *God and Timelessness* (Shoken Books, 1970), pp. 183-84, is amazed that Norman Malcolm would try to use Psalm 90:2 to support the doctrine of timelessness in God. Even Schleiermacher (a proponent of timelessness) recognizes that these verses cannot indicate that God lives outside of time, but rather exactly the opposite. Pike concludes, “However, I think it is instructive to note that this is the biblical passage singled out by Malcolm when attempting to *support* the idea that God is timeless. One must suspect that scriptural passages conveying this idea are not easy to find.”



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that God is timeless in order to make the verses indicate God is timeless. This is, of course, circular reasoning (non-sequitur), that is, assuming your conclusion is true in order to reach your conclusion. With their concept of a timeless God already in mind, they then interpret verses to fit their ideas rather than allowing the Scriptures to speak for themselves as to the character of God.<sup>3</sup> (Please refer to chapter 6 for further discussion on eisegesis in interpretation).

Let's take a look at some of the verses used to support the idea of the timelessness of God, remembering that references to prophecy will not apply since it is not necessary for God to have foreknowledge in order to perform prophecy (as already established in chapter 7).

### **“who was and who is and who is to come”**

One of the verses most commonly quoted in support of the idea that God is outside of time is the declaration of God, and the four living creatures, that God is the “Alpha and Omega” who “was and who is and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8; 4:8).

We should note that the very language of the verses does not lend itself to the idea of timelessness, but rather, the exact opposite. To be the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, indicates two different positions in time, not that all aspects of God's nature and character occur in the same, timeless “instant.” What is the point of saying you are the beginning and the end if these are exactly the same? Even if we interpret “beginning” and “end” to mean “author” and “consummator,” the reference to time is still very clear. If God authors something, this must happen at a different moment from the time he consummates it. The title “Alpha and Omega” is clearly geared to a duration in the being of God and does not indicate any form of timelessness in God's being. And, since the phrases “who was and who is and who is to come,” “the first and the last,” and “the beginning and the end,” are used as qualifiers of “Alpha and

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<sup>3</sup>Consider an example of this kind of prejudice in interpretation. A Christian philosopher was presented with a list of over 300 verses showing that God lives in a duration. What was his response? Did he address any of the verses with good principles of interpretation? Unfortunately, his response to this evidence was, “All of these verses must be poetic and do not mean what they appear to mean.” And what was his reason for assuming the verses were poetic and had to be reinterpreted? “God is timeless,” he said, “so these verses cannot be taken literally.” He offered no biblical evidence that God was timeless, he simply presupposed God's timelessness and proceeded to force over 300 verses to the contrary to fit his preconceived concept of God.

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Omega,”<sup>4</sup> the indication of duration is quite clear in these words also. Any definition of the words “beginning” and “end” which mean “at the same time with nothing in between” is obviously meaningless.

But what of the phrase stating God “was, and is, and is to come”? What could these words mean? Well, what does the word “was” mean in normal discourse? It means “existed in the past.” And what does “is” mean? It means exists in the present. And what does “is to come” mean? It means, simply, the being will exist in the future.

What is said of God, that he “was and is and is to come,” can also be said of any human being. My friend Mark “was” yesterday, “is” today, and given the sustaining power of God “is to come” tomorrow. The obvious difference is that God’s “was,” that is, his duration in the past, had no beginning, and his “is to come” will have no end. In that regard, the Creator is completely different from his creation. But to interpret the words “was, and is, and is to come” to mean “is outside of time in an eternal now” is imposing a pre-conceived notion onto the passage, and is simply against the clear, straight-forward reading of the text.<sup>5</sup>

“But,” someone may object, “God had to use this kind of language because he had no other way to express the concept of timelessness to us.” There are at least three major flaws with this argument.

First, the simple, obvious meaning of the words in their context does not warrant any re-interpretation of the text. In Revelation 1:8, God is speaking to John to identify himself. This is not poetic language. God is simply stating who he is. In the Revelation 4:8 text, the four living creatures are again stating who God is. There is no reason to interpret what they say as poetic language. If we were

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<sup>4</sup>Revelation 21:6; 22:13.

<sup>5</sup>I have never heard it argued that the words “was,” “is,” and “is to come” are not the past, present, and future forms of the verb “to be.” The only argument I have ever heard is that the words say one thing but mean another. The person’s reason for saying this has always been based on the pre-conceived idea that God lives outside of time, and thus the words must mean something different than what they appear to mean. The argument is never based on the general principles of hermeneutics commonly applied to all texts. Thus, they have constructed a concept of God based on their own human reasonings and then must re-interpret the scriptures to fit their view of God. If we let these words speak for themselves, we must conclude that God lives in a duration, having a past, a present, and a future. (Though “without beginning” and “without end” are not explicitly stated in this text, we can conclude these aspects of the duration of God from other passages.)

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to be consistent with this method of interpretation, the words “holy” and “almighty” would also have to be re-interpreted to mean something other than what they appear to mean. But do we see Bible scholars saying this passage does not mean God is holy? Do we hear them reasoning God is not almighty? No, because they believe we can take the words to mean exactly what they say: God is holy and God is almighty. And if those words mean what they say, why not take the words “was, and is, and is to come” to mean exactly what they say, that God was (past), is (present) and is to come (future)? Inconsistent interpretation of this kind only reveals the presuppositional bias of the interpreter.

Second, the argument presupposes God lives outside of time and then requires a re-interpretation of the verse to fit the pre-conceived idea of God’s nature. The clear meaning of the words “was,” “is,” and “is to come” as references to the past, present, and future only need to be re-interpreted to mean “having no reference to time” if we come to the Scripture with the conclusion of God’s timelessness already in mind and force that meaning onto the passage (i.e., perform eisegesis on the text).

Third, saying God had to use this language because we could not understand any other way implies that God is so lacking in intellectual capacity he could not inspire the author of the book of Revelation to write “I live outside of time.” Could not God, who was intelligent enough to create us, speak these kinds of words to John the Apostle? We manage to use these words and ideas to discuss the topic of timelessness in the nature of God. Why can’t God do the same?<sup>6</sup> And it cannot be argued that the people of the time could not understand language indicating timelessness. Plato and other Greek philosophers were discussing these issues five or six hundred years before John wrote the book of Revelation.

The words “who was and who is and who is to come” clearly indicate a duration in the being of God. To interpret these words in any other fashion than what they appear to mean would require a re-interpretation of the text based on a pre-conceived idea of the nature of God. Since it is this very nature we are trying to discover, we cannot use any particular view of the nature of God as an interpretive tool during the investigation.

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<sup>6</sup>Is it not also the height of arrogance if we believe that we can understand words such as “outside of time” and assume that John the Apostle could not? Plato had already debated the idea of timelessness hundreds of years before John wrote the Revelation, so it is not a matter of whether or not a human can think and speak in these terms. The question is, why does God not describe himself in these terms if he is able to do so? Why does God use language indicating duration in his being if this is not his true nature?

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### “I AM”

Though some advocates of the timelessness of God may object to the use of a present tense verb to represent the existence of God, still some do use this verse to support their position. “God is outside of all time or duration,” they say, “so you cannot literally apply the present tense to God.” He is not “now,” they say, any more than he “was” in the past or “will be” in the future. He is completely apart from all reference to time. But since he must communicate his self-existence to us in some way, he uses the verb “to be” to reveal himself to us as the “I AM.”

Note the subtle assumption in this argument that God is timeless and then the need to force the meaning of the text to fit the preconceived concept of God. If we let the text speak for itself, the phrase “I AM” simply means God exists. And it means God exists “now.” To claim the word “AM” has some hidden meaning of timelessness without any other scriptural basis is against all reasonable principles of interpretation. It is making the text mean what we want it to mean, and not what it says.

We could entertain the possibility that this phrase falls into the category of “obscure” texts—that if a text can be used to prove either theory it proves neither. Clearly, God intends to communicate his self-existence to us through the use of “I AM,” but this still leaves the *nature* of the self-existence open to question. Is God’s self-existence an eternal now, or does God exist in a duration or sequence without beginning or end? Both would seem to be consistent with the phrase “I AM,” but the question is, are both interpretations warranted? Is there anything in the context of this text which demands the phrase “I AM” be taken to mean “I exist timelessly”?

In Exodus 3, the context of the phrase “I AM,” we find past, present, and future forms of many verbs are used by God about his own activities and the experiences of Moses and the Israelites. “I *have* surely *seen* the affliction of My people....” “I...*have given heed* to their cry....” “I *am* aware of their sufferings.” “I *have come down* to deliver them....” “I *will send* you to Pharaoh....” “I *will bring* you up out of the affliction of Egypt....” In fact, every verb God uses concerning his choices is either past, present, or future with no indication Moses was not to understand them exactly as God spoke them. Thus, when God told Moses he is the “I AM,” this could only be taken to mean “the one who exists,” the obvious and natural reading of the text. Either eternal timelessness *or* eternal duration will meet the criterion for eternal self-existence, and since

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there is no reason in the context to read the phrase otherwise, “I AM” will have to be interpreted as a statement that God exists now, in time (duration or sequence), in the normal way we understand the phrase “I AM.”

It is also possible to view this phrase as referring to God’s activity in his deliverance of the Israelites, rather than as a statement about the nature of God’s being. Richard Rice comments:

“It is more in harmony with the biblical view to see this as expressing God’s freedom to act and as relating God’s identity to his action, since it occurs at an important moment in salvation history—just prior to God’s dramatic deliverance of his people from Egypt. . . . At any rate, the text points to the dynamic quality of God’s activity rather than to the static quality of the divine nature.”<sup>7</sup>

So, whether the phrase “I AM” refers to the eternal self-existence of God or to God’s salvation activity, it does not teach or even imply that God lives in some timeless state with no duration in his being.

Any recourse to the argument that all of these phrases are poetic and not to be taken literally is based, as stated before, on the pre-conception that God is timeless and the supposition that we must re-interpret all verses which seem to picture him otherwise. There is nothing in the context of these verses which warrants the conclusion that the narrative of the conversation between God and Moses needs to be interpreted as any form of poetry. A simple, direct, literal interpretation of the words is both understandable and instructive, though it may rattle the thoughts of some who imagine God to be other than he declares himself to be in his Word. To force such an interpretation on the bulk of the Scriptures, one would have to find other passages of scripture which clearly teach the timelessness of God. And these other passages simply do not exist.

### **“Before Abraham was, I am”**

When Jesus said, “before Abraham was, I am,” (John 8:58) the Pharisees did not launch into philosophical discussions about the meaning of his words. They immediately and naturally took the phrase to mean Jesus had existed *before* Abraham. This, they

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<sup>7</sup>Richard Rice, in “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 49.

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concluded, meant Jesus was declaring himself to be God, since only God, and not just a man, would have existed both then and before the birth of Abraham.

Though Jesus could have said, “before Abraham was, I was,” this would not have had the same impact on the Pharisees. Jesus would have left out two very important aspects of this declaration: first, that he not only existed then but still existed at the time of the statement, thus declaring his constant self existence, and second, he would not have equated himself with Yahweh (by calling himself “I am”), which seemed to be the intent during this entire dialogue (cf. verses 12, 23, 24, 28). The result, of course, was the Pharisees took up stones to stone him, ostensibly for blasphemy.

A brief look at the context of the statement will also help to clarify its meaning. Jesus had declared that those who believe in him would not die. The Pharisees countered by saying all people die (i.e., Abraham and the prophets), so how could Jesus promise all who trust in him would not die? When the Pharisees asked how Jesus could have seen Abraham since he was not yet fifty years old, they were essentially stating no person could have existed for that long. Their words indicate this was a matter of endurance in light of the situation that all people die. When Jesus declared he existed before Abraham, he was answering their objection by stating his eternal self existence. He existed before Abraham, existed now, and would exist forever. Thus he could be the everlasting hope for all who believe in him, unlike Abraham and the prophets who had died.

So, does the statement, “before Abraham was born, I am” prove God is timeless? Not by the normal processes of interpretation. If you have not already assumed God is timeless, the statement “I am” can only be taken to mean what it does elsewhere in the scriptures, that is, “I exist.” Also, that Jesus says he existed *before* Abraham places God in the context of time, not outside, but in a duration which has a before and after, a then and a now.

### “El Olam”

One of the names for God in the Bible is the “Everlasting God” (Genesis 21:33; Isaiah 40:28). This name, God Everlasting, is rendered from the Hebrew אֵל עוֹלָם. The adjective everlasting (*olam*) appears many times in the Scriptures with reference to the existence of God and his various attributes.

The noted scholars, Brown, Driver, and Briggs, in their *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, list many references and translations of this adjective, but not one of the

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translations indicates a quality of timelessness in the being of God.<sup>8</sup> Taking quite the opposite stance, they translate the phrase with words like indefinite futurity, for ever, always, continuous existence, continual, perpetual. All of these specific translations are listed under the general category of *long duration, antiquity, futurity*. Yet in all of these uses of the word, not one hint of any kind of timelessness appears.

The same word for everlasting is used to describe things which would not be considered in an “eternal now” even by the proponents of timelessness. Some of these include past time, waste places, ancient people, gates, prophets, dead people, the hills, slavery, pregnancy, the king, enmity, reproach, singing, etc. Even though these things are called “everlasting” in the Bible, none of them gives the slightest hint of equating “everlasting” with “timeless.”

Dr. J. Barton Payne, a Hebrew scholar and author of *The Theology of the Older Testament*, made these remarks about the use of El Olam:

“God’s eternity was first revealed in Genesis 21:33, where Abraham called on the name of ‘Yaweh, *El Olam*,’ the ‘everlasting God.’ The term *olam*, however, did not suggest to the Hebrews God’s transcendence of time, but rather His endless duration in time (cf. 6:4) - ‘everlasting.’ ... Moses’ closest approach to (God’s pre-existence) is to be found in his poetic comparison that a thousand years are but a day to God (Ps. 90:4) and in his exclamation that ‘before the mountains were brought forth, even from *olam* to *olam* Thou art God!’ (v.2). His words correspond to the expressions of Job (Job 10:5) and of his authoritative counselor Elihu (36:26)<sup>9</sup> that God’s duration is limitless, reaching far beyond the years of man. These verses describe

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<sup>8</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 761 ff.

<sup>9</sup>Elihu here declares, “The number of his years is unsearchable.” Other passages which refer to the passing of God’s time in years include Psalm 102:24 “Thy years are throughout all generations,” Psalm 102:27 “Thy years will not come to an end” (also quoted in Hebrews 1:12). Job 10:5, quoted previously, states, “Are Thy days as the days of a mortal, Or Thy years as man’s years?” While this is a rhetorical question rather than a statement, the obvious answer is that God’s days and years are not as man’s days and years. But it is interesting to note that Job related to God’s existence as happening in days and years, that is, in a duration of time, and not in terms of timelessness.

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eternity, but again in the sense of continuation, not timelessness.”<sup>10</sup>

It appears, then, as if the only way someone could make El Olam mean eternal in the sense of “timeless” would be to read an unwarranted definition into the word. Those who claim El Olam refers to God’s timelessness must be presupposing the notion to be true and then making the Scriptures fit their preconceived idea of God.

### **“From Everlasting to Everlasting, Thou Art God”**

Psalm 90:1, 2 reads “Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born, Or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.”<sup>11</sup>

This text is covered in the previous section “El Olam,” but the passage deserves a little more treatment since so many people quote these verses as evidence God lives outside of time.

Even though the form of the literature is poetic, the subject matter of this passage is historical in content. First Moses exclaims about the faithfulness of God to the Israelites as a dwelling place in all the generations of Israel. Then, using the metaphor of birth, he recounts the creation of the mountains, the earth, and the world. Lastly, he compares the beginningless and unending existence of

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<sup>10</sup>J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 152.

Please note that Dr. Payne’s description of “Olam” does not tell us whether or not he personally believed God is timeless, only that the word “Olam” cannot be used to prove that point. In his *Theology*, he states on page 153, “Psalm 139 constitutes David’s classic statement of God’s infinity: He is omniscient (vv.1-6), omnipresent (vv. 7-12), and omnipotent (vv. 13-19). God has knowledge even of contingent events that never take place (I Sam. 23:11; cf. Jer. 38:17, 20; Ps. 147:5).” On page 154 he says, “Isaiah, more than any other prophet, revealed Yahweh as the One who can do all things. He stressed His dominion over the nations (Isa. 17:13), over space (“earth is His footstool,” 66:1), over human thought (55:8, 9), and over time and change (31:2; 41:4; 46:6; 48:12).”

<sup>11</sup>For a list of hermeneutical principles and some of the problems in their application to this topic, please see chapter 6, “Exegetical Considerations.” Cf. also the section in this chapter on the phrase El Olam.



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God with that of the created world as a declaration that the Lord is God.<sup>12</sup>

The references to time in these verses are unmistakable: you *have been*, in all *generations*, *before* the mountains were born, *from* everlasting, *to* everlasting. As already noted, even the word “everlasting” (*olam*) indicates a duration and not timelessness. Without these clear references to position and duration in time, the meaning of the text would be obscure and confusing, if not completely incoherent.

Many people want to rack this passage up to “just another poetic statement about God which does not really mean what it says.” They only react in this fashion because they have already assumed their conclusion to be true (i.e., that God is timeless) and then have to change the clear meaning of the text to fit their preconceptions about God.

There is not a hint here of a quality of timelessness in God. If this portion of Scripture is allowed to speak for itself, it clearly states God existed before the mountains were “born,” has been a dwelling place “in all generations,” and the Lord is God “from everlasting” and “to everlasting.” Taken at its face value, this text says God has existed, exists now, and will always exist in an endless duration of time.

### **“A Day Is with the Lord as a Thousand Years”**

When the apostle Peter states in II Peter 3:8 “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” he is quoting loosely from Psalm 90:4 which says “For a thousand years in Thy sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night.”

Though the context in Psalm 90 is the everlasting nature of God as compared to the transitory existence of man, Peter employs the verse in a different manner. For Peter, the issue is why the coming of the Lord Jesus is being postponed. Peter then quotes the Psalm to illustrate how the patience of God is different from man’s. God, in his patience, views the passing of time not in terms of years and days, but as an opportunity for all to “come to repentance.” God, it

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<sup>12</sup>The Hebrew here says, “You are God.” The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) only states, “from the ages to the ages, you are (or you exist),” making the Greek translation a statement about the everlasting existence of God rather than about the existence of God as a particular category of being (i.e., as God). In either language, though, the idea of “from everlasting” and “to everlasting” is quite clear.

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seems, relates to a thousand years as we would to a day as he waits for people to turn to him in repentance. So Peter's quotation of this verse is not intended to teach doctrine about the nature of God with respect to time, but to explain the patience of God in the delay of the second coming.

In *God, the Atom, and the Universe* James Reid uses II Peter 3:8 to suggest an interesting correlation between the speed of light and the relationship of a day to a thousand years.<sup>13</sup> Though this may be a fascinating bit of speculation about light, the application of this information to the nature of God is based on a faulty exegesis of two scriptures. Reid does not quote any other scriptures in this immediate context, but he later tries to use the phrase "God is light" (I John 1:5) to define the metaphysical nature of God.<sup>14</sup> But just as "a day is with the Lord as a thousand years" is in the context of God's patience, so "God is light" is a declaration of God's moral virtue. These verses reveal something of God's moral character to us and cannot be taken as a description of God's being as it relates to time.

### **"The High and Exalted One Who Lives Forever"**

Isaiah 57:15 reads "For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ..."

The phrase, variously translated as "who lives forever" or "who dwells in eternity" or "who inhabits eternity," is rendered from the Hebrew עַד שֶׁכֵּן עַד. Brown, Driver and Briggs give the definition of the noun עַד as "perpetuity = *advancing time*" (italics theirs).<sup>15</sup> This noun is related to the verb עָדָה which means to pass on or to advance. There is no suggestion of timelessness here. Rather, the whole idea of the verb, the noun, and the way the verb and noun are used, is one of continuation, duration, or passing through time.

Even if we were to leave the word "perpetuity" undefined, the verse would then only fall into the same category as other obscure verses. Unless there is compelling evidence from other clear passages of scripture that God lives outside of time, this reference cannot prove it, since the word could be interpreted either way.

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<sup>13</sup>James Reid, *God, the Atom, and the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968), p. 63.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 723.

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Since the definition of עָרַב gives a clear indication of movement through time (advancing time), this phrase is strong evidence that God lives in an eternal duration. Thus, he is the high and lofty one who “dwells in advancing time.”

### “God is Light”

It has been argued that this verse (I John 1:5) is referring to the metaphysical nature of God and thus means the essential nature of God is light. If God is light, then he must be timeless. The argument goes something like this:

- a. “God is light” means God’s metaphysical being is the same as light.
- b. Einsteinian relativity states that at the speed of light, an object’s time should slow to nothing and its mass should fill the universe (or become infinite).<sup>16</sup>
- c. Thus, if “God is light,” then God’s being should fill the universe (i.e., he would become omnipresent) and time has stopped for him.

We will take these points one at a time.

- a. It would seem obvious this verse could not be used to say God is timeless, since the verse is in a moral context and means God always does what is loving and right and never does what is wrong. Light and darkness as a metaphor for good and evil is a prevailing theme in the book of I John.<sup>17</sup> This theme relates to the morals of God and men, however, and has nothing to say about their metaphysical beings. Applying the phrase “God is light” to the metaphysical being of God denies the context and usage of the phrase and is inappropriate to the argument of God’s timelessness.
- b. God is spirit (John 4:24). Jesus was using this definition to contrast God with the mountains of Samaria and the city of Jerusalem. This appears to mean God is something other than matter and energy. So, it is probably safe to say this statement is a description of the metaphysical nature of God.

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<sup>16</sup>Obviously, this is a rather sloppy interpretation of the theory, but this is how it is commonly presented.

<sup>17</sup>I John 2:9: “The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.” I John 2:11: “But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

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The question, then, is, “Who says a being whose essential metaphysical nature is ‘spirit’ will follow the laws of Einsteinian relativity?” These laws may describe, to a limited degree, matter and energy as we know them, but spirit is obviously a different kind of “substance.” What kind of experiments could we perform to test the Spirit of God to see how he relates to the theory of relativity? In other words, the laws which apply to matter and energy cannot be applied to spirit.

The only way we can know how a spiritual being like God relates to time is if he reveals this to us. That revelation would be in his Word, the Bible, and it would only be on the basis of good interpretation of the Scriptures that we could ascertain God’s essential relationship to time.

- c. Is there anything about the theory of relativity which states the metaphysical nature of an object changes as it reaches the speed of light? Is there anything about the theory of relativity which says all spiritual beings are moving at the speed of light and are omnipresent? Again, Einsteinian relativity does not apply to spiritual beings and cannot be used to determine the relationship of God to time.

In spite of the impossibility of using scientific process to examine a spiritual being, or the difficulties in applying Einsteinian relativity to the nature of God, the biggest problem here is the interpretation of the Scriptures. The phrase “God is light” is in a moral context and cannot be used to support the concept of timelessness in the being God.

### **“I, the Lord, Do Not Change”**

When the Lord declares, “I, the Lord, do not change” in Malachi 3:6, some have taken this to imply he must be timeless. If the Lord cannot change, they reason, then he cannot be in time. The faulty nature of this reasoning has been addressed in another section,<sup>18</sup> but here it should be sufficient to deal with the context of the statement.

Careful reading of the verses before and after this phrase gives a clear picture of how the Lord does not change. God is pictured both as the righteous judge who dispenses punishment to those who deserve it, and also as the merciful God who forgives those who

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<sup>18</sup>Please see chapter 5 for a discussion of the logical fallacies often involved in the discussion of time, change, and God.

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repent. It is in the context of these declarations of God's moral characteristics that the phrase "I, the Lord, do not change" appears. And it is because of God's unchanging moral qualities that the "sons of Jacob are not consumed."

God himself is arguing that it is because he continues to be compassionate towards his people that they are not destroyed for their sin. Thus the context of the phrase is clearly moral and cannot be applied to the metaphysical being of God—especially not to God's relationship to time.

### Summary

The passages of Scripture people cite to prove God exists in some kind of "eternal now" simply do not teach timelessness as a part of God's being. Most of these texts actually teach exactly the opposite if allowed to speak for themselves. A few phrases could be taken as referring to God's eternity in general, without any distinction as to whether eternity is timeless or an endless duration. But these obscure verses can only be understood in light of clearer definitions from other portions of scripture.

The clear message of the thousands of biblical passages which record the activities of God is that God exists in time. References to his past, present, and future activities imply he lives in a duration. His memories of things past and his plans for the future imply he is in time. Differing attitudes, thoughts, or actions require time for their existence, since the opposing states of mind cannot exist at the same time and still make any sense.<sup>19</sup>

The Bible contains so many of these references, the whole tenor of the Scriptures is that God lives in a duration. The language is so common, people reading the texts do not even notice they are assuming the element of time in God's being in order to make sense of the story.

The only way these passages can be made to infer God is outside of time is if the conclusion of timelessness is assumed prior to the interpretation and then forced onto the Scriptures as part of the interpretive process. This imposition of a concept onto the Scriptures constitutes eisegesis and is always counterproductive in the interpretation of the Bible. Without assuming timelessness and reading it into the Scriptures, it is impossible to find any passages which clearly teach the timelessness of God.

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<sup>19</sup>A list of verses supporting this position can be found in Appendix C.

## Chapter 9

### Texts Indicating Absolute Foreknowledge

Since the majority of references people use to support the idea of the foreknowledge of God are prophetic, and since we have already seen how God performs prophecy without foreknowledge, we will not be investigating the references to prophecy in the Bible. Rather, we will concern ourselves with those passages which seem to suggest God knew the future choices of individuals but not as a matter of prophecy.

In order to make this section easy to reference, we will first give the scripture reference, then quote the portion of the scripture pertinent to God's foreknowledge, followed by a brief explanation of how this verse could be understood apart from the absolute foreknowledge of God.

If God does not know the future, how can he predict with certainty the future, free-will choices of human beings? The working assumption in this chapter will be that if there is at least one reasonable way God could foretell the choice of a person without foreknowledge, then the absolute foreknowledge of God is not necessary to explain that prediction.

The word "foreknow" only means to know ahead of time. It does not tell *how* the event, choice, or situation is foreknown, or *how long in advance* it is known, only *that* it is known ahead of time. In light of this, it may be instructive to look first at those verses which actually include the word "foreknowledge" in some form.

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### Verses Containing the Word “Foreknowledge”

#### Acts 2:23

“this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

God could foreknow Jesus would be delivered up to death because he had planned this for the salvation of mankind. God declared to Eve that he would send a seed who would crush the serpent’s head. Jesus himself knew why he had come—it was to die (Matthew 20:28). So it would not require any special foreknowledge of future events on God’s part to know ahead of time what he had planned to do.

#### Romans 11:2

“God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.”

God’s foreknowledge of Israel was based on his activity in history. He had promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, and what he had promised, he was able to perform. Thus, he could know beforehand he would have a people because he would move in history to create and preserve the nation.

#### Romans 8:29

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren;”

The phrase “whom He foreknew” is a direct reference to the verse before. The people God foreknew are “those who love God ... those who are called according to His purpose.” So, he foreknew he would have a group of people who would love and follow him—the church. This verse does not say God knows every individual who will be part of the church, but only that there will be a group of people who will love him.

As for being “called according to His purpose,” Jesus calls everyone. Matthew 11:28 says, “Come to Me, *all* who are weary

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and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Again, Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to Myself.” Thus, all are called and drawn to Jesus, and those who respond by loving him become part of this group God knew would exist. Those who become part of the church are predestined by God to attain a particular end—they are to be conformed to the image of His Son.<sup>1</sup> It is not the people who are predestined, but rather the goal they are to reach.

This is also true of the other verses in the New Testament concerning predestination related to people.<sup>2</sup> It is always the end that is predestined and not the people. For example, I Thessalonians 5:9 says God has predestined the church to obtain salvation and not wrath. I Thessalonians 3:3 says those who follow Christ are destined to encounter persecution and afflictions. I Corinthians 2:7 tells us the church will inherit glory through the eternal wisdom of God. But nowhere does the Bible claim individuals are predestined by God to be saved or lost.<sup>3</sup>

Two verses deserve special attention as they are often used to prove the predestination of individuals to salvation and the predestination of all events.

The first is Ephesians 1:5 which states, “He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.” This verse is often interpreted to mean

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<sup>1</sup>It is probably safe to assume that this conformity has to do with character development.

<sup>2</sup>As opposed to events, e.g. Acts 4:28, the crucifixion of Jesus; states of existence, Colossians 2:2, material things are destined to be destroyed as they are used; or punishment as a result of evil choices, Revelation 13:10, the one who takes captive will be taken captive just as the one who kills with the sword must be killed by the sword. The word “destined” appears in the NASB here, but not in the Greek. Thus, the “perseverance and the faith of the saints” is confidence that those who are taking the saints captive and killing them will themselves be taken captive and killed with the sword. The people of God could take comfort in the knowledge that their suffering would be vindicated.

<sup>3</sup>Though the phrase “you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” from John 15:16 is often used to support the idea that God has chosen us for salvation, it is a violation of the context to interpret the verse in this way. Jesus goes on to say that he has chosen the apostles, not for salvation, but to go out and bear fruit. So, this verse applies only to the apostles and it states that the apostles were chosen for a ministry, to bear fruit, and is not referring to their salvation. This choice happened at the beginning of Jesus ministry. Luke 6:13: “And when day came, He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles.”



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God has predestined us to be his sons.<sup>4</sup> But is the phrase “adoption as sons” synonymous with “becoming a Christian”?

The phrase “adoption as sons” is from one word in Greek—*υιοθεσία*. This word is used in Romans 8:15, Romans 8:23, Romans 9:4, Galatians 4:5, and Ephesians 1:5. In Galatians chapters 3 and 4, Paul describes the state of an heir as no different from a slave until the heir is “adopted” by the Father. So adoption is something which happens to sons who are heirs. According to Galatians 3:29, these heirs are those who belong to Christ and who are the offspring of Abraham. What is adoption then? It is probably better rendered “son-placement” than “adoption,” since it is an event which happens to a son which moves him into a different status with the Father.

In Romans 8:23, Paul defines how he uses the word “adoption” and declares that we, the church, those who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, are *still awaiting* our “adoption as sons”:

“And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.”

The appositive phrase “the redemption of our body” is used to define our “adoption as sons” which, Paul says, we are “eagerly awaiting.” So our adoption as sons, or son placement, has not yet happened. There are two possible ways to look at this verse. Either 1) our adoption as sons will happen at the same time our bodies are redeemed, i.e. at the resurrection,<sup>5</sup> or 2) the redemption of our bodies actually is our adoption. Because the phrase is an appositive, the second interpretation seems more plausible, though either definition places our adoption in the future.

Applying this definition in Ephesians 1:5, we can see what God has predestined for us, the church. God planned ahead of time that those who became part of the church would have their bodies redeemed and come into their full inheritance as sons of God. God did not plan who would become Christians and who would not, but

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<sup>4</sup>RSV, “he destined us in love to be his sons.” NIV, “he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.” TLB, “to adopt us into his own family.” TEV, “he would make us his sons.”

<sup>5</sup>This is the implication preferred by Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 841.

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he predestined that all those who did follow Christ would have their bodies redeemed and receive their full inheritance.

The second verse is found in Ephesians 1:11-12:

“also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

Two points are of interest here. First, if we remove the intervening descriptive phrases, this verse states we are “predestined ... to the end that we ... should be to the praise of His glory.” Note that it is the end which is predestined, not the people. This idea is very similar to the concept that we are predestined to be “conformed to the image of His Son.”<sup>6</sup>

The second point of interest is that God “works all things after the counsel of His will.” Is this a statement that God causes everything that happens in the universe? Obviously not, since God also declares there are many things which happen which are not his will.<sup>7</sup> We must remember the context of this phrase. God “works all things after the counsel of His will” is related to God’s accomplishing our predestined end. He works in all things so we will ultimately “be to the praise of His glory.” Thus, his working all things after the counsel of his will applies to our predestined end, not to every event in history.

This phrasing is reminiscent of Paul’s statement in Romans 8:28 “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” God does

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<sup>6</sup>This also explains Ephesians 1:4, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.” First, being “in Him” is conditional (John 6:56; 15:5; I John 2:6, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:15, 16). Second, what he chose is our end, that we should be holy and blameless before him, and not that we should be saved or lost. So, before the foundation of the world, God chose that those who follow him would be holy and blameless before Him. This is the statement of a general purpose, not the election of specific individuals to salvation or perdition.

<sup>7</sup>For example, the perishing of unbelievers (II Peter 3:9), not giving thanks in all circumstances (I Thessalonians 5:18), and sexual sin (I Thessalonians 4:3) are not the will of God. Since unbelievers do die and go to hell, Christians do not always give thanks in all circumstances, and they also sometimes commit immorality, the will of God is not always done. For more verses showing that God’s will is not always done, please see Matthew 6:10; 23:37; Mark 6:5, 6; Luke 7:30; I Thessalonians 4:3.

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not cause all things to happen, but he guarantees if we love him, he will work in all things to bring about our ultimate good.<sup>8</sup>

### I Peter 1:20

“For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you”

Jesus could be foreknown, even as the “lamb slain from the foundation of the world”<sup>9</sup> because God knew the that possibility man could sin. Thus, God could have had the sacrifice of Jesus in mind from the same moment he conceived of making man in his own image with a free will.<sup>10</sup> That God could have a plan in mind if

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<sup>8</sup>Though it is not directly related to the subject of this book, Genesis 50:20 is sometimes used to support the idea of God’s foreknowledge. The verse reads, “And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.” The Hebrew word **נִשְׁחָטָה**, translated “meant” in the NASB, can also be rendered “planned,” “intended,” or “devised.” The Greek Old Testament is very instructive here, as the translators focused on the intentions of God and Joseph’s brothers, and not on the event itself. (ὕμεῖς ἐβουλεύσασθε κατ’ ἐμοῦ εἰς πονηρά, ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἐβουλεύσατο περὶ ἐμοῦ εἰς ἀγαθά) This translates literally as, “You planned against me unto evil, but God planned for me unto good.” Thus, rather than being a statement that God intended that Joseph be sold into slavery to save lives, it is better understood to mean that, in spite of Joseph’s brothers’ evil intentions, God’s intentions were good. So God, because of his good intentions towards Joseph, turned their evil deeds into an opportunity to save lives. God did not plan that Joseph would be sold into slavery, for this would mean that God “did evil so that good would come,” which he has forbidden us to do (Romans 3:8). This was just another case of God’s love, grace, and wisdom turning the evil of man into an opportunity for good—the same principle as outlined in Romans 8:28.

<sup>9</sup>Revelation 13:8.

<sup>10</sup>Though it is technically a question about predestination rather than foreknowledge, it may be relevant to comment about the verses which seem to refer to people’s names not being written in the book of life from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8; 17:8). These verses seem to say that the names were not written from the foundation of the world, but the placement of the phrase *ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου* (from the foundation of the world) indicates in Revelation 13:8 that the phrase should modify the “lamb slain” and in Revelation 17:8 it should modify the book of life. Thus, these verses are not a statement about God’s foreknowledge of people’s salvation, but about the book of life and the plan of God to send Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb.

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man should sin shows God's understanding of all the possible ramifications of the choices he would make, but it does not necessitate absolute foreknowledge.

### **I Peter 1:1, 2**

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.”

Though this is the way this passage is commonly translated, the Greek text here is actually in a different order. It reads:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctifying work of the Spirit, unto the obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.”

Read in this fashion, the intent of this verse appears similar to Romans 8:29. Peter is writing to the “chosen sojourners,” to the church, and the existence of this chosen group was foreknown by God. The method of this choosing was also foreknown. People became part of this chosen group through the work of the Spirit, obedience, and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus. Thus, neither God's plan to have a group of chosen people, nor God's provision of salvation through the blood of Jesus required God's absolute foreknowledge of future choices.

Another way to look at this verse is that the *sojourning* was foreknown by God. To a people who were suffering under persecution and consequent dispersion, God's foreknowledge of this situation would be a great comfort. God knew that those who were sanctified, obedient, and cleansed would become targets of persecution, so this attack on the church was no surprise to him. II Timothy 3:12 states “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” So if even the *desire* to live a godly life will

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provoke persecution, what will a truly sanctified, obedient, and cleansed life produce?<sup>11</sup>

### **People with Foreknowledge?**

It is interesting that there are two references in the Scriptures to people with foreknowledge. This shows us that the word “foreknow” does not imply anything other than something was known ahead of time. The word itself does not tell us the method of the foreknowing or how long in advance of the event the foreknowledge existed.

“Since they have known about me for a long time previously, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.” (Acts 26:5)

In the Greek, this verse literally says, “foreknowing me from the first,” which indicates the concept of foreknowledge is 1) not limited to God, 2) not always explained as to the method of the foreknowing, and 3) not defined as to time except by context.

This verse also illustrates the object of “foreknowledge” is not necessarily even a future event. Paul applied the word “foreknow” to the Pharisees’ knowledge of Paul’s life as a Pharisee before the time of his conversion. This is knowledge of a present object being spoken of as “foreknown.”

There is one other case in the Bible where people are described as having foreknowledge. Speaking of the destruction of the present earth and the creation of a new heavens and earth, Peter says to his readers:

“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness,” (II Peter 3:17)

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<sup>11</sup>This also explains how God could foreknow that his Son would be rejected when he came to earth. The sinless life of the Lord Jesus would produce persecution from those who did not accept him. On the other hand, in order to know that he would have a group of people who would follow him, God did not have to know the specific future choices of those people. He only needed to know what kind of reactions people would make to the presence of a person who was God incarnate.

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“Knowing this beforehand” is literally “foreknowing this.” Again, the word “foreknow” is used concerning people. They could foreknow these things would happen because God had determined to create a new heavens and a new earth. Of course, it is still not known how long in advance they knew these things, since the events have not yet taken place.

For those who like to think of the foreknowledge of God as some mystical knowledge of future events, the description of humans with foreknowledge helps us to clarify its usage in the Scriptures. Foreknowledge is simply the act of *knowing something ahead of time*. The word *foreknowledge* does not tell us *who* has this knowledge, *how* the event is foreknown, or *how long before* the event the person has that knowledge. Thus, the word foreknowledge cannot be used to support the idea that all events are part of some pre-existent future history which is simply coming to pass as God has already seen it.

### **Genetic Foreknowledge**

#### **Genesis 16:11, 12**

“The angel of the Lord said to her further, ‘Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. And he will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.’”

All God had to know to be able to make these pronouncements concerning Ishmael was Ishmael’s basic genetic makeup and the probable circumstances of his upbringing.

Each of us seems to have a basic attitudinal approach to life. Some are passive, some are more aggressive, and though our environment molds how we will work out this attitude, the basic approach to life remains the same.

How Ishmael would be treated by those around him was also probably not too difficult for God to project. His birth was a result of Abraham’s and Sarah’s lack of faith, and since he was not the promised son through whom all the nations would be blessed, his rejection was very likely. And when an aggressive person is rejected, the reaction is usually one of anger.

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To “live to the east of” is literally “dwell before the face of” and can also be translated “live in defiance of.”<sup>12</sup> So, Ishmael would be a wild donkey of a man and would live in defiance of all his brothers. God only needed to know Ishmael’s basic genetic makeup and probable rejection to predict his stubbornness, anger, and violence.

### **Psalm 139:16**

“Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Thy book they were all written, The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.”

Some interpret the “days that were ordained for me” to mean all the days of David’s life. But there are two ways this text can be explained without recourse to absolute foreknowledge.

First, in the context, David is referring to his gestation period in the womb. He might be alluding to God’s knowledge of the development of the unborn child. We know from the two verses before that he is marveling over how he was “fearfully and wonderfully made” and how his “frame” (or bones) were “made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.”<sup>13</sup>

Genetically, there is a certain period “ordained” for the child to be in the womb, and the God who created that process can know the genetically-determined number of days from conception to birth for any individual. Though there are factors which can change the actual time of birth, e.g. Cæsarean section, still the gestation period is determined genetically.

Second, biologists are just now finding out how accurately our “genetic clock” is set. That is, from our conception we have a pre-set limit on our lives. This biological clock is the subject of much research since if we can find a way to change the setting on the clock, we may be able to extend our lives. Thus, the “days that were ordained for me” could be a reference to this biological limit, though the writer probably did not understand it in this scientific light.

Though the scientific aspects of these explanations may be somewhat speculative, there is one point which is quite clear. When David says, “The days that were ordained for me,” he is speaking with reference to his physical body. The verse before makes it

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<sup>12</sup>From the note on verse 12 in the margin of the 1977 version of the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>13</sup>The “depths of the earth” is a metaphor for the mother’s womb.

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obvious he is referring to his bones and his development in the womb, not the events or choices of his future life.

### **Does God Change His Mind?**

There are numerous instances in the Scriptures when God changed his mind.<sup>14</sup> So, to use texts which state God will not change his mind to prove this does not happen, is either doing violence to the context of these verses, or it is reading into the passage a meaning which the text itself does not support (eisegesis).

#### **I Samuel 15:29**

“And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”

It is most puzzling that people would try to use this verse to support the idea God never changes his mind. This same chapter of I Samuel has two other references stating God *did* change his mind. Using this verse to prove God never changes his mind completely ignores the context of the passage.

In this story, King Saul sins against God and God tells Samuel, “I regret that I have made Saul king,” (v. 11). The word “regret” here is “change my mind” in the Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> So God changed his mind about Saul’s being king over Israel.

When Samuel announces to Saul he is no longer to be king because God has changed his mind, Saul begs Samuel to turn back to worship the Lord with him. It is then that Samuel informs Saul the Lord is not going to change his mind about his decision. God has decided to take away the kingdom from Saul, and he will not change his mind about it.

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<sup>14</sup>There are 36 instances to be exact. Please see Genesis 6:6, 7; Exodus 32:12, 14; Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 32:36; Judges 2:18; I Samuel 15:11, (29), 35; II Samuel 24:16; Psalm 90:13; 106:45; 110:4; 135:14; Jeremiah 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 20:16; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Ezekiel 24:14; Hosea 11:8; 13:14; Joel 1:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2; Zechariah 8:14. Though these are variously translated, the Hebrew is always “to change the mind.” See also Appendix D.

<sup>15</sup>From the root **נָחַם**. Though the word is translated in different ways, the point here is that the same word is used in I Samuel 15 when God says that he both changed his mind and that he will not change his mind.



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After some other attempts by Saul to maintain his reputation before the people of Israel, Samuel does agree to turn again with Saul to worship with him. The end result of this scenario, though, is “the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel” (v. 35). Again, the same Hebrew word is used for “regretted” and means “changed his mind.”

So this verse does not claim God *never* changes his mind, or *cannot* change his mind, but that he *would not* change his mind about his decision to remove Saul from being king.

### Numbers 23:19

“God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man,  
that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

Though these verses seem, on the surface, to teach that God does not change his mind (translated as “repent”), we have to examine the context in which these statements are made.

Balaam has just been forced by God to bless rather than curse the children of Israel. When he reports to Balak what he has done, Balak is furious. Balaam’s answer is that God has decided to bless Israel, and he will not change his mind about it.

There is nothing here teaching that God *cannot* change his mind, but rather that he *will not* change his mind. He had declared he would bless Israel and he was not going to change his mind about the blessing.<sup>16</sup>

Some people, knowing that God states elsewhere that he changes his mind, try to interpret this passage to mean that God changes his mind, but just not the way humans do. This raises the obvious question, “Then does God lie, but just not the way humans do?” This is an unfortunate argument, because it ignores the context of Balaam’s statement. Listen to the parallels:

God is not a man that he should lie —  
Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Nor (is God) a son of man, that he should repent —  
has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

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<sup>16</sup>Richard Rice, in his article “Biblical Support for a New perspective,” in *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 47, observes that, “The issue in these verses is the constancy of God’s character, not the content of his experience.”

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In Baalam’s description, for God to lie or repent would consist of promising to bless the nation of Israel and then choosing to break his promise. And though Baalam might have been able to convince a human to break his promise, he could not persuade God to do so (“When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.”)

Has God ever said he would do something and then not done it? Indeed, he has! He said he would destroy the nation of Israel and make a mighty nation out of Moses. But he did not do either of these things. In response to Moses’ prayer, God changed his mind and did not do what he had said he would do. And has God ever promised something and then not made good on his promise? Indeed, he has? He had Jonah preach, “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” But when the people repented, God changed his mind and did not execute the pronounced judgment on the city.

So, what could Baalam mean other than that God had made a promise he would not break? No matter how badly Balak wanted the promise to fail, God was not a human that he could be persuaded to curse rather than bless the Children of Israel. Thus, these verses do not teach that God *cannot* change his mind, but that in this instance, he *would not* change his mind about his promise to bless Israel.

### Malachi 3:6

“For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”

This verse is in a moral context—the compassion of God—and the text cannot be generalized into some philosophical description of a God who knows no change in his thoughts, choices, or emotions. God is not saying here that he has no changes in his actions, but rather that all of his actions are both just and compassionate. He must judge the sin of the people, but he is also willing to forgive them if they repent. The Lord’s compassionate character does not change, and that is why the sons of Jacob are not consumed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Please see Chapter 5 “Time, Change and God” for a detailed explanation as to how God can change his actions without changing his nature or character.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

### Foretelling the Choices of a Person in the Future

#### I Kings 13:2

“And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, ‘O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, “Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.”’”

We have already seen it is no problem for God to put something into the heart of a person in order to accomplish his will.<sup>18</sup> God can move in history to guarantee a person will be named Isaac, Ishmael, Cyrus, or Jesus.<sup>19</sup> So, having a person named Josiah was not difficult for God.

Neither is it difficult for God to put into Josiah’s heart to destroy all the altars in the land. Since Josiah wanted to follow God, God could easily direct him in this course of action.

In II Kings 23:15-20 it seems the king was both aware of the prophecy and he was acting deliberately to fulfill it. The greatest evidence of this was his question about the monument of the prophet. When he was told it was the prophet’s grave, he commanded his bones not be disturbed. He did not request further information about the prophet or his prophecy. This decision reveals Josiah’s awareness of the prophecy and that his will was involved in its execution.

We are not told explicitly that Josiah sacrificed priests on the altar at Bethel, but we can probably assume he did so since a comparison is made between his actions in Samaria and Bethel, and in Samaria he did sacrifice the priests.

As for the burning of human bones on the altars, this again was God’s activity in Josiah’s heart. God had already declared if the people of Israel would not obey him, he would punish them in a particular fashion. He said, “I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and *heap your remains on the remains of your idols*; for My soul shall abhor you.” (Leviticus 26:30). So Josiah’s idea to put the bones of the people on the altars was simply God’s way of carrying out the punishment he said he would inflict.

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<sup>18</sup>Please refer to chapter 7, “Prophecy and Foreknowledge.”

<sup>19</sup>See Matthew 1:20, 21. God told Joseph in a dream that Mary’s child was to be named Jesus.

## TEXTS INDICATING ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

### **Matthew 26:31**

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, “I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.”’”

Here we have another case of God’s predicting what someone would do given a specific set of circumstances.

The Father had planned, and thus foreknown,<sup>20</sup> that his Son would be murdered by those he came to save. Given the significance of Christ’s death, the Father could know the devil would attempt to derail the event. Satan would also be interested in aborting the plan of God to see the Gospel preached to the whole world through Jesus’ disciples. With knowledge of his own plan, the devil’s tactics, the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion and the propensity of men to run when faced with frightening prospects, the Father could say with certainty what the followers of the Messiah would do when their Shepherd was violently executed.

Some may object that this is a rather weak view of God’s foreknowledge. But this is not so. Which is more impressive, God’s telling someone of an event which he has seen happening for all eternity, and which cannot fail to happen, or predicting precisely what humans will do when there is the possibility it will not occur? In the chapter on prophecy and foreknowledge, we documented some instances where God declared what people would do and then it *failed* to happen. In light of the possibility of failure due to the interference of the human will, it is even more astonishing that God could predict people’s future reactions so accurately, and so often.

### **Matthew 27:7-10 (Zechariah 11:12, 13)**

“And they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter’s Field as a burial place for strangers. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter’s Field, as the Lord directed me.’”

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<sup>20</sup>Acts 2:23 “this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.” What God plans, he can obviously foreknow.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

Some people question how God could so accurately predict the 30 pieces of silver, and that the silver would be used to purchase the Potter's Field.

Before we offer explanations as to how God could "prophecy" these events without absolute foreknowledge, it will be interesting to see exactly what these texts do and do not say.

First, the text in Zechariah is written in the first person ("I took ... and threw"), whereas Matthew's version is in the third person ("They took ... and they gave them"), though Matthew reverts to the first person for the last phrase of the quote "as the Lord directed *me*." This indicates that Matthew was aware of the first-person context of the quote, but still quoted most of the passage in the third person.

Second, Zechariah says that the silver was thrown to the potter, whereas Matthew's account states that the silver was used to purchase the Potter's Field. The potter himself is never mentioned in the Matthew account.

Third, Zechariah writes that the silver pieces were thrown to the potter in the house of the Lord, but Matthew only states that the pieces were given to purchase the Potter's Field. The only reference to how the pieces came to be in the temple is that Judas threw them there (Matthew 27:5).

Fourth, Zechariah's 30 pieces were the undervalued wages given to a hired man, whereas Matthew's were the price paid to Judas for his betrayal of Jesus.

This fulfillment of prophecy is no different from many others. It was either 1) a fulfillment brought about by the direct intervention of God in history, or 2) a passage quoted by Matthew that bore a similarity to a real event in the life of Judas.

If this case falls into the first category, as soon as Judas planned to betray Jesus, God could have worked to bring about the fulfillment of the "30 pieces" prophecy. God may have directed the hearts and minds of evil people to carry out his purposes. As we saw in Chapter 7, there is no problem with God's suspension of a person's free will as long as certain conditions are met.

If God intervened in history to bring this prophecy to pass, the five conditions for the suspension of free will were fulfilled:

- 1) The person is not a righteous person. — God was moving on Judas and the priests who already wanted to kill Jesus.
- 2) The person's will is only suspended temporarily. — There is no evidence that God's control of the situation extended beyond the 30 pieces or their use. In other words, we do not have any evidence that God was controlling the whole life of

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Judas or the priests. He only needed to intervene temporarily to produce these particular events.

- 3) The person's salvation is not affected by the temporary loss of will. — There is no reason to suppose that God's intervention in this particular event had any bearing on the individual salvation of Judas or the priests. Besides, they had already rejected Jesus before that time.
- 4) The event has implications for all mankind. — By fulfilling this statement by Zechariah, God could verify supernaturally that his Son was the Messiah. This would influence all people who heard of it towards belief in Jesus.
- 5) The consequences for that particular action are suspended. — There were apparently no adverse consequences for payment of 30 pieces of silver or for their use to purchase the Potter's Field.<sup>21</sup>

So God could have simply carried out the 30 pieces incident by intervening in history to bring the events about. There is no evidence in these texts, though, that either Judas or the priests had to betray Jesus. Rather, since they had already rejected him, God simply used those circumstances to create a remarkable validation of the truthfulness of Scripture.

As for the second possibility, Matthew could have applied what he knew of the text in Zechariah to the situation in Judas's life because of the similarity of the events. There are enough discrepancies between the "prophecy" and the fulfillment, to question whether this might be just such a case. Either way, it is not necessary to suppose the absolute foreknowledge of God to explain these events.

That Matthew puts words from Zechariah into the mouth of Jeremiah upsets some people, but it need not be so troublesome. Matthew records that the words were *spoken* by Jeremiah, not *written*. There are probably many things Jeremiah prophesied verbally that were not written down. It could be that Zechariah was aware of something Jeremiah said, and used it as part of his description of Israel's mistreatment of God. This reference would have been much more troublesome if Matthew had said that the prophecy had been *written* by Jeremiah, rather than *spoken*. But even then, a text could have been written by Jeremiah, but not preserved by God as part of the body of Scriptures.

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<sup>21</sup>Please refer to Chapter 7 for a complete explanation of these five conditions.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

### John 6:64, 70, 71

“‘But there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. (70) Jesus answered them, ‘Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?’ (71) Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.”

What could it mean that Jesus knew “from the beginning” who would betray him? From the beginning of what? “From the beginning” will have to be defined by the context, since the phrase itself does not specify which beginning is intended. There appear to be at least four possibilities of what this could mean: from eternity (poetically speaking), from the beginning of creation, from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, or from the beginning of their disbelief and betrayal. But which of these makes sense in the context?

Unless you are predisposed to read timelessness and absolute foreknowledge into this passage, the phrase itself does not include the meaning “eternally” (poetically speaking), or “from the beginning of creation” all on its own. One would have to read ideas into the text which are not part of the passage to reach that conclusion.

This leaves us with “from the beginning (of his ministry)” or “from the beginning (of their disbelief).” Is there anything in the text which can clarify which beginning? Fortunately, the tenses of the Greek verbs will shed light on the meaning of “from the beginning.”

In the phrases “who they were who *did not* believe” and “who it *was* that would betray Him,” the verbs in italics are actually present tense verbs in the Greek.<sup>22</sup> Coupled with “from the beginning,” the whole sentence could be translated: For Jesus knew from the beginning which are those not believing, and which is the one who would betray him.

Jesus knew those who “are” (present tense) the ones not believing and who “is” (present tense) the one betraying him (or who would betray him). This indicates the knowledge was of the *present* disbelief of some of the disciples and the *present* intention

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<sup>22</sup>ἦδει γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὁ Ἰησοῦς τίνες εἰσὶν οἱ μὴ πιστεύοντες καὶ τίς ἐστὶν ὁ παραδώσων αὐτόν. The future active participle παραδώσων (would deliver up) indicates that Judas’s betrayal was yet future, while the present tense verb emphasizes Jesus’ present knowledge of Judas’s intentions.

## TEXTS INDICATING ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

of betrayal in Judas. This kind of *present* knowledge could not happen until the choices were being made by the disciples. Otherwise it would have been described as knowledge of the future, not the present. Thus, the knowledge could start “from the beginning” of their disbelief and continue to the present, thereby accounting for both the phrase “from the beginning” and the use of present tense verbs to describe the object of Jesus’ knowledge. That Jesus’ knowledge of Judas’s betrayal was knowledge of his present intentions is also borne out in verse 71. In the Greek, the words “was going to” are actually “was about to,” indicating the immediacy of Judas’s intentions.<sup>23</sup>

Since there is nothing in the text which warrants our interpreting “from the beginning” as “from eternity,” “from the beginning of creation,” or “from the beginning of his ministry,” it seems most reasonable, especially in light of the present tense verbs in the Greek, to understand the phrase to mean “from the beginning of their disbelief.”<sup>24</sup>

### John 13:18, 19

“I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.’ (19) “From

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. also, John 6:6; 7:39; 11:51; Acts 21:27; Revelation 3:2. Arndt and Gingrich believe ἔμελλεν should be translated as “about to” in John 6:6 and “intending to” in John 6:71. (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 502, αα, cy.) But it seems as if “about to” would work just as well in John 6:71 and the Nestle Interlinear Greek-English New Testament renders it thus.

<sup>24</sup>Some verses use “from the beginning” to designate “from eternity,” and this is obvious from the context because the verses refer to the existence of God (I John 2:13, 14). This phrasing is also used to refer to the personification of wisdom in Proverbs (Proverbs 8:23).

There are also verses which tell us directly which beginning is intended, because the wording is “from the beginning of ...” (Deuteronomy 11:12; II Samuel 21:10; Mark 10:6; II Peter 3:4).

And lastly, there are passages in which the intended beginning is implied in the context, such as the beginning of creation, the beginning of the sin of the devil, the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, or the beginning of someone’s belief in Christ (Ecclesiastes 3:11; Isaiah 40:21; 46:10; Jeremiah 17:12; Matthew 19:4, 8; Luke 1:2, 3; John 8:25, 44; 15:27; Acts 26:4; II Thessalonians 2:13; I John 1:1; 2:7, 24; 3:8, 11; II John 1:5, 6). John 6:64 falls into this last category, since we can tell from the context that the beginning intended is the beginning of their disbelief or betrayal.



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now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He.”

Here Jesus makes a comparison between the betrayal of David by one of his close friends, perhaps Ahithophel,<sup>25</sup> and his own betrayal by Judas. Though there is a similarity between the events such that Jesus could use it as an illustration of his own situation, there is no prophetic language in Psalms 41:9, the passage Jesus is quoting. A connection is made between David’s close friend and Judas by way of analogy, but there is nothing predictive in the language of the passage itself.

Perhaps an illustration will help. I once had a missionary colleague who came to me for counsel. After a few minutes of explaining his problem, I launched into forty-five minutes of advice. At the end of that time, my patient colleague said, “That was all good advice, Mike, but that was not my problem.” I felt very foolish and ashamed I had answered before I really knew what the problem was. Someone looking on might say, “Thus it was fulfilled in the life of Mike, ‘He who answers a matter before he hears it, it will be counted folly and shame to him.’” In this case, the Scriptures did not determine that I would make a fool of myself, but the general principle was fulfilled in my life, thus making my experience a “fulfillment of the Scriptures.”

This could also be the case of the fulfillment of Psalm 41:9. Evidently, Jesus saw a similarity between David’s situation and his own, and used David’s betrayal by his close friend as an analogy to his betrayal by Judas.

### **John 17:12**

“While I was with them, I was keeping them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

While it may appear as if Jesus is saying the loss of Judas was the fulfillment of some kind of Scripture, there is no prophecy in the Old Testament to that effect. Some Bibles may cross-reference this verse with Psalm 41:9, but that verse says nothing of the loss of the son of perdition. It seems much more likely, then, that Jesus is referring to the fulfillment of the Scriptures in his impending death

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<sup>25</sup>II Samuel 15:12; 16:23.

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and resurrection. Through Judas's betrayal, the Scriptures were fulfilled which foretold the death of Jesus, but the Scriptures did not foretell (much less determine) the actions of Judas as the "son of perdition."

Later that evening, Jesus deliberately protected the disciples in order to fulfill his own words (John 18:8, 9). When the crowd came to apprehend Jesus, he told those arresting him to let the disciples go. This he did "that the word might be fulfilled which He spoke, 'Of those whom Thou hast given Me I lost not one.'" In light of this statement, the word "perished" in John 17:12 must refer to physical and not spiritual death.

This lends further evidence to the idea that Jesus only saw the betrayal of Judas as the occasion for the fulfillment of the Scriptures concerning Jesus' death, and that he was not making reference to some kind of prophecy concerning Judas himself. And since the perishing spoken of was physical, Judas's spiritual state was not even mentioned, much less foretold.

Peter quotes two passages from the Psalms as he connects scriptural examples of betrayal to the life of Judas. In Acts 1:20, we read that Peter said, "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no man dwell in it'; and, 'His office let another man take.'"

The first quote is from Psalm 69:25, and the pronouns in the Psalm are plural, not singular. If this were a prophecy about an individual, we would expect the pronouns would be singular. But they are not. Peter makes a correlation between a general statement in the Psalm and the life of Judas, but it is clear from the language in the Psalm that it is not a prophecy about an individual.

Actually, since the context reveals the people under consideration are those who gave Jesus gall and vinegar to drink (v. 21), it is more likely it refers to the Roman soldiers than to Judas. But Peter sees the same kind of enmity and betrayal in the life of Judas and draws the parallel between the general Old Testament description and the specific New Testament event.

As for the second quote, "His office let another man take," though the pronoun here is singular, this verse is found in a plural context in Psalm 109. Verses 1-5 of this Psalm are a cry from David to God for vengeance on David's adversaries. He then switches to the singular, but is still speaking of the same people. He proceeds directly from, "*they* have repaid me evil for good," to, "Appoint a wicked man over *him*." This makes it clear David is simply using the individual as an example of the group who is persecuting him.

It appears as if Peter's use of Psalm 109:8 is as an analogy from David's enemies to Judas as the enemy of Jesus. There is no

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prophetic language in the Old Testament text and no mention of Judas by name.

There is no specific prophecy stating that it would be Judas who would betray Jesus. And since the three references to Judas's betrayal are made on the basis of similarity with general texts, it seems clear God did not foretell or determine what Judas would do. The correlations between the Scriptures and the events were made after the fact as a matter of analogy, not as a case of predictive prophecy.

### **John 21:18, 19**

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go. Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me!’”

Since people would hate Peter for his preaching and holiness, God would only have to direct their desire to kill Peter into a particular method of execution. This had just happened in the life of Jesus.

Just as the Assyrians fulfilled their own desire for conquest, but God directed their anger to punish Israel,<sup>26</sup> so God could channel the hatred of Peter's enemies into a specific mode of martyrdom.

### **II Thessalonians 2:3-4**

“Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.”

It is not hard to imagine that Satan, who desires to be “like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14), will one day want to have his own

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<sup>26</sup>Isaiah 10:5-16.

version of the Christ. To do this, he will have to use a man, perhaps inhabit a man, who will then declare he is God.

As for the apostasy's coming first, God only needs to know how the hearts of men work to know people will tend to fall away when the time of the end draws near.

## II Thessalonians 2:13, 14

“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Since the Greek texts of the New Testament were written without spaces between the words, it is up to the translator to divide the string of letters into separate words. This is one of the cases where the division makes a difference in the meaning.

The string of letters in question is ἀπαρχήν. Should this be one word or two? The letters could be divided to form two words—ἀπαρχήν—making a phrase something like ἀπ’ αρχῆς “from the beginning,” or they can be left as one word—ἀπαρχήν—meaning “firstfruits.” When the preposition ἀπό (abbreviated ἀπ’) is used with the genitive αρχῆς, the meaning is clearly “from [the] beginning.” But since the accusative form ἀρχήν appears here, it makes no sense. The only way we can make sense of this is if the two words are really supposed to be only one word ἀπαρχήν—firstfruits. Thus the phrase should not be “chosen you from the beginning for salvation,” but, “chosen you as firstfruits to salvation.”

This translation fits both the use of the words and the context. God had chosen the Thessalonians as “firstfruits to salvation” in Greece. Though there were individual converts in Philippi, Paul’s first real establishment of a church in Greece was in Thessalonica. Thus, they were really the firstfruits of Paul’s missionary efforts in that country.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

### The Ministry of Jeremiah

#### Jeremiah 1:5

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah does not tell us here *what* God knew about him, only that he had such knowledge before Jeremiah was formed. This could be taken two ways, either 1) God knew Jeremiah from his conception, or 2) God planned Jeremiah’s birth, perhaps to the extent of arranging Jeremiah’s genetic makeup to be suitable to his ministry.

Neither of these options is foreign to God. Since God can have knowledge of every thing and every event in the universe at any moment, he can know every child who is conceived. And the consecration of an unborn child to a ministry, though it is a great exception to the general method of God’s calling, is not beyond the scope of God’s knowledge, power, or will.

Nevertheless, none of the events in Jeremiah’s life requires an interpretation indicating God’s absolute foreknowledge of Jeremiah’s actions.

It is interesting to note that the same person who wrote “before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” later wrote that God said, “Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way” (Jeremiah 26:3). This means that Jeremiah, the prophet who was “foreknown” by God, also wrote that God said “perhaps,” or “maybe,” about the future choices of his people. Jeremiah also wrote that God had an incorrect thought about the future choices of Israel (Jeremiah 3:7), and three times recorded that the thought never entered God’s mind that they would sacrifice their children to false gods (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35). Since the statement “before I formed you in the womb I knew you” is the most obscure of these passages, it must be interpreted in light of the other, clearer passages. Thus, God’s foreknowledge of Jeremiah cannot be interpreted to mean a knowledge of Jeremiah’s future choices.

## **The Mourning of the House of David**

### **Zechariah 12:10**

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born.”

This passage goes on to say the people will mourn by separate families, with the wives of each family mourning by themselves. This is a clear prediction of the future actions of a group of people.

Of most significance, though, is the reason why this event will happen. God says he will pour out the Spirit of grace and of supplication on the people to the extent that they will respond by looking on him whom they have pierced. The influence of the Spirit of grace and of supplication, coupled with the influence of seeing their crucified Messiah, is enough to explain the reactions of mourning in the people. As for the wives mourning separately, this could be a cultural response to the situation, the precedent having been established at Hadadrimmon.<sup>27</sup>

So, it is not necessary to look further than the influence of the Spirit and the crucifixion of the Messiah on the hearts of men to explain why the people would respond in this manner. God could predict this event will happen because it is something he plans to do in the future.

## **The Eternal Purpose of God**

### **Ephesians 3:10, 11**

“in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,”

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<sup>27</sup>Unfortunately, this passage appears to be the only reference to this event of mourning.

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God had an eternal purpose which he carried out in the life of Jesus. This purpose had something to do with the manifestation of his wisdom to “rulers and authorities.” The means of this manifestation was to be a group of people who are following God—the church. Again, the eternal purpose was centered in a group of people and there is no indication here of God’s foreknowing the pre-existent future choices of an individual. Also, the “eternal purpose” is not defined for us, it is only revealed that the purpose was accomplished through the life of Jesus.

### Characteristics of the Latter Times

#### I Timothy 4:1-3

“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.”

When man is intent on evil, he follows a predictable downward progression. This is evident in Romans 1:18-25, which describes how man, when he turns away from God, worships the creation rather than the Creator. In his rejection of God, man first worships what is most like God—human beings. Next he turns to birds, then four-footed animals and then creeping things. This progression from the worship of the true God to pantheism is quite reasonable, given the options man has after turning from God.

In the future, men will become more evil, and as a part of that evil they will become involved in the occult. Listening to doctrines of demons, they will be influenced to turn away from marriage and eating certain foods. Knowing the doctrines of demons is not a difficult matter for God who knows the hearts of all men, and knows our thoughts before we speak them.<sup>28</sup>

This general description of the activity of people in later times is similar to the prediction of Jesus that the circumstances just before his coming will resemble the days of Noah.<sup>29</sup> It is not necessary for God to know the exact choices of people to be able to predict this

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<sup>28</sup>II Chronicles 6:30; Acts 1:24; Psalm 139:4.

<sup>29</sup>Matthew 24:37, 38.

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state of affairs. God only needs to know how wicked men react to be able to predict this future situation.

### II Timothy 1:9, 10

“who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,”

That God has an eternal purpose for mankind in general, or for the church specifically, need not be an indication that God has absolute foreknowledge of all events.<sup>30</sup> It only requires that the purpose be in the mind of God for all eternity before its fulfillment.

As for grace, this is an aspect of the character of God which has existed in him for all eternity past, is now expressed, and will continue for all eternity. The particular expression of grace which provided for our salvation was revealed in the life of Jesus Christ.

In this verse, the phrase translated as “from all eternity” is most interesting. The Greek here is *πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων*, literally “before times eternal.” This phrase only appears in one other place in the New Testament, Titus 1:2, where it is translated in the NASB as “long ages ago.” The words *χρόνοις αἰωνίοις* (times eternal) appear in one other place, Romans 16:25, and are rendered “for long ages past” in the NASB.

Considering the words themselves, we can understand why the translators of the NASB would find a literal rendering unacceptable. To say something happened *before times eternal* would be confusing indeed. If time is eternal, never having had a beginning, then you could not have anything *before* this eternal time.

The original Greek text is obviously a euphemistic phrase or poetic exaggeration (hyperbole). Today’s young person might exclaim, “He has been doing that since *before forever!*” We would not interpret this statement literally, but would understand the phrase to mean “a long time ago” or “for a very long time.” This is probably why the NASB translators have opted for the translations “long ages ago” and “for long ages past.” A literal “before eternal time” simply does not make sense.

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<sup>30</sup>But to have a purpose and then to carry it out does require a duration or sequence of events and choices for its fulfillment.



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Another reason the translators of the NASB probably chose “for long ages past” as the meaning of χρόνοις αἰωνίοις (Romans 16:25) is that the context will not allow a literal translation. Paul is speaking of the mystery which has been kept secret. But if God was keeping this secret before he created anything else, from whom was he keeping this secret? When only God existed, how could he have a secret? According to the context, the only reasonable translation is as a euphemism or hyperbole. God’s having a secret from himself would be a ridiculous and impossible notion.

The NIV’s rendering of πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων as “before the beginning of time” in I Timothy 9:9 and Titus 1:2 is a clear manifestation of the prejudice of the translators. The words “before times eternal” themselves indicate time itself is eternal and thus could not have had a beginning. Translating χρόνοις αἰωνίοις as “for long ages past” in Romans 16:25 showed more restraint and attention to context on the part of the NIV interpreters.

Speaking of time, people sometimes have trouble with Revelation 10:6, which says “time shall be no more” (χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται - literally “time no longer will be”). The NASB translates this phrase as “there shall be delay no longer” and for good reason. The next verse defines the time which is coming to an end, which is not time itself, but the finishing of the time of the “mystery of God” which was “preached to His servants the prophets.” It is a period of time which is ending, not the cessation of duration or sequence in the fabric of existence. Thus, the translation “there shall be delay no longer” is better suited to the context than “time shall be no more.”<sup>31</sup>

Some people may reason that if God created all things, then time must also be part of the creation, and time itself would have had a beginning. But is it true of all aspects of creation that they never existed before God’s creative act? Knowledge, free-will, emotions, unity and diversity, spatial extension, power, and spirit are all aspects of the created order which also existed in God from all eternity. So why not time? Since there are no statements in the Scriptures that God created time, we have to ask if the Scriptures indicate in any other way if time (sequence, duration) may be part of

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<sup>31</sup>That the word “time” can be used to represent a period of time is evident from the many passages where the word is used in the New Testament. Please see Matthew 25:19; Mark 2:19; Luke 18:4; John 5:6, 7:33, 12:35; Acts 13:18, 14:23, 28, 15:33, 18:20, 23, 19:22, 20:18; Romans 7:1; I Corinthians 7:39, 16:7; Galatians 4:1; Hebrews 4:7, 5:12; I Peter 1:17, 4:2; Revelation 6:11, 20:3. See also Mark 9:21; Luke 1:57, 8:27; John 14:9; Acts 1:21, 8:11, 7:17, 23; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 11:32; I Peter 4:3; Jude 1:18.

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the being of God. And, yes, there is abundant evidence that God both lives and acts in time, since statements about his activity are always time related, even those activities which occurred “before the world was.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Prediction of the Devil’s Choices**

#### **Revelation 2:10**

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

In this passage, the language itself should clarify God’s seeming ability to foretell the devil’s choices. God declares what the devil is “about” to do. It is possible, if not probable, that the devil had already planned to attack the church in this way, and God’s knowledge of this plan was a simple matter of knowing what the devil was thinking.

Knowing the Christians would be in prison for ten days can be explained either by 1) God’s plan to deliver them after that time, or 2) the ten-day period was also part of the plan of the devil.

It is not necessary to assume God’s absolute foreknowledge of future choices or events to explain his ability to warn the church of this impending tribulation.

### **Prophecies in Revelation**

There are some passages which could be cited as cases of God’s foretelling the future choices of humans or other free-will agents (Revelation 9:20, 21; 11:2-12; 12:6-9; 16:9, 11). But since these are statements of God’s intentions for the future, they fall into the same category as other prophecies, and are explainable on the grounds that what God has declared he will do, he is able to bring to pass.

In reading these passages it is also good to keep in mind that when God says a group of people had done, will do, or will not do a particular thing, he can speak in general about the group. This does not mean all of the individuals in the group fit the general

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<sup>32</sup>John 17:5, 24; cf. also Ephesians 1:4 and I Peter 1:20. It is ironic that some of the verses people use in an attempt to prove timelessness also prove that there was time before the earth was created.

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pattern.<sup>33</sup> Thus, when God predicts a group of people will not repent (Revelation 16:9, 11), this can be a description of the group in general with the possibility that some individuals may respond differently.

### Summary

The verses above which seem to indicate God had knowledge of the future choices of human beings can all be explained without presupposing either timelessness in God or absolute foreknowledge of a presently-existing future history.

God can know what people will do by knowing their hearts and the circumstances they will encounter. He can predict their actions by knowing what they are planning in the present. And he can foretell what groups of people will do as a general response to his activities in history. Thus, God has ways of telling what people will do without viewing some fixed, pre-existent future which leaves no room for the free-will of man.

In light of the lack of clear verses which say he can know the future, and the many verses which illustrate God did *not* know people's future choices, it is not necessary to adopt the common, popular view of God's absolute foreknowledge of future human choices.

Verses indicating God's lack of foreknowledge will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>33</sup>For example, in Numbers 14:11 we read, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?'" Yet there were notable exceptions to this disbelief—Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. We also read in this passage, "But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land." (v. 24). Also, "Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun." (v. 30). So God can speak of a group of people in general and yet individuals within the group can be exceptions to the general rule.

It is interesting to note God asked, "How long?" Why would he ask such a question if he already knew exactly how long their unbelief would last?

# Chapter 10

## Texts Against Foreknowledge

In the last chapter we explored those texts which people often quote to support the idea that God has absolute foreknowledge. We saw in each case there is at least one good explanation as to how God could have prior knowledge of the future events in question, without presupposing either timelessness or absolute foreknowledge in the nature of God.

This chapter will examine texts which indicate many future events are unknown to God, especially the free-will choices of moral agents. When God says to Abraham, “*now I know,*” or , “and if not, *I will know,*” or to Jeremiah, “*perhaps they will repent,*” or, “the thought *never entered my mind,*” do these verses really mean what they say? Discovering the meaning of these scriptures and many like them will be the goal of this chapter.

The interpretation of these texts must proceed without the presumption that God knows the future, because that is the very point we are attempting to discover. Presupposing God’s absolute foreknowledge as part of the interpretive process would be reading a meaning into the text rather than allowing the text to speak for itself.

Neither can we treat all of these texts as poetic,<sup>1</sup> because the texts are neither poetic in nature nor in a poetic context. Even those texts which are stories or illustrations are followed by concrete,

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<sup>1</sup>That is, as anthropopathic descriptions of God. While Hebrew poetry is defined according to structure, people still look at much of the content as prosaic if its content is clearly historical in nature. In casual discussions, the term “poetic” is often used to indicate an anthropopathic usage of language, whether the actual text is technically poetic or not. Please refer to chapter 6, “Exegetical Considerations,” for a more complete discussion of the use of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic statements in the Scriptures.

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historical interpretations.<sup>2</sup> People want to interpret these texts as poetic because of their previous commitment to the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge. But since this is the very point we are trying to prove, until we have conclusive evidence from good Bible study that God has absolute knowledge of the future, we cannot use that idea as part of the interpretive process.

There are two reasons why it may not be obvious that the scripture under consideration indicates God does not have absolute foreknowledge.

First, all of the events in the Bible are presented in the framework of time (sequence or duration). This makes it easy for us as readers to overlook a revelation about the nature or character of God because of its familiar phrasing. When God says to Abraham, “Now I know,” in Genesis 22:12, it is easy to slide over the adverb “now.” But this word really does mean “now”—now as opposed to before. And when God says he knows something now because of an event which took place, namely the choices of Abraham to sacrifice his son, then this indicates he *did not know* that fact before. It can be easy to miss these kinds of references because the entire Bible reads in this time-related fashion.

Second, if we are used to interpreting all verses related to God’s knowledge in light of the presupposition of God’s absolute foreknowledge, it can be difficult to lay aside our preconceptions in order to see the text from a new perspective. Again, when God says to Abraham, “Now I know,” we are tempted to think, “Well, he was just saying that, but he really knew before what Abraham was going to do.” This kind of thinking reveals the subtle introduction of a presupposition into our interpretation. We have already presupposed what God is like before reading the text, and so we force our prior understanding onto the text as part of our interpretation.

Though there is no such thing as a completely objective observer, we should at least attempt to let the Scriptures speak for themselves about what God is like. If necessary, we should then respond to this knowledge by adjusting our ideas accordingly, rather than re-interpreting the entire Bible to fit our preconceptions.

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<sup>2</sup>Two examples are the song of the vineyard and the vinedresser in Isaiah 5:1-6 with its literal interpretation in verse 7, and the story of the potter and the pot in Jeremiah 18:1-4 with its literal interpretation in verses 5-10.

**Genesis 6:5-7 (1:31)**

“Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. And 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.’”

1:31 And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

This poignant episode in God’s relationship with men clearly reveals a change in the Lord’s attitude towards his creation. After pronouncing all he made was “very good” on the sixth creation day, God is moved by man’s wickedness to declare he was sorry he had ever made them.

Such a change in the emotions of God requires a duration or sequence for its occurrence. Otherwise, God would be in the strange situation of having both joy and sorrow over the same event at the same time. If God knew on the sixth day man would eventually cause him such sorrow, how could he have declared everything he made was “very good”?

Again, how could we sympathize with God’s grief if we knew he had been experiencing this emotion for all eternity in his “eternal now”? God would have been in the odd position of knowingly creating his own sorrow. If this were true, how could we feel sorry over his grief?

God changed his mind about having made man after seeing the wickedness of men’s hearts. This kind of response to man, if it is to be taken as sincere, must happen as a true reaction and not just a revelation of some emotion God was always having. A simple, straight-forward reading of this scripture requires the conclusion that God was reacting to man in a sequence of time, in a duration, and not from some timeless, ever-present existence.

Lastly, God declared he would destroy man and all the animals, and yet this did not happen. This is another example of a declaration of God’s proposed actions which did not take place because of the intervention of a human being. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, to be sure, but we also read in Hebrews 11:7 it was through his faith and reverence that he and his household were saved. Thus,

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God again changed his mind about what he planned to do as he responded to Noah's faith and reverence.

### **Genesis 18:20-21**

“And the Lord said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’”

God had heard, possibly through the angels ministering to Lot, that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was “exceedingly grave.” His response was to “go down now, and see”<sup>3</sup> if this outcry was true. Then, based on what he saw, he would know whether or not what he had heard was true.

When God said, “and if not, I will know,” he was speaking to Abraham about the real, historical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God was revealing to Abraham the judgment he was going to bring on the cities because of their great evil. There is no hint here the situation was not real or the language is poetic (or anthropopathic). The only reason people want to interpret this phrase as poetry is they have already decided God has absolute foreknowledge, and taking the phrase at face value would contradict their presupposition.

If we allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, they plainly state God was going to Sodom to verify the reports of their evil so he could know for himself if the outcry were true. A straightforward interpretation of this text requires a conclusion God was investigating a situation in order to acquire new facts upon which to make a judgment. Since he would have new information *after* his investigation, we must also conclude he did *not* have that information at the time he was speaking to Abraham. God was going to “find out” what was happening in Sodom.

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<sup>3</sup>This verse also presents an interesting problem concerning the doctrine of omnipresence. God was going to “go down” to see what was happening in Sodom. Though it is outside the scope of this book, it would be interesting to revisit the idea of omnipresence in the light of such verses. Is God simply everywhere, or is it possible that he has control over his presence? He is the one whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, but hell is also described as “eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord*” (II Thessalonians 1:9). Perhaps a more radically-biblical definition of omnipresence is in order—one that includes God's control over his presence.

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By assuming “and if not, I will know” means exactly what it says, are we limiting God? Not at all. However, this phrase may limit some people’s understanding of God, if that understanding includes attributes which are not part of God’s self-revelation in the Bible.

If a person claims God can do both good and evil, is it a limitation on God to assert, as the Scriptures state, that God cannot lie (I Timothy 1:2)? No, this is not a limitation on God, but it is a limitation on the mistaken concept of God proposed by the person who says God can do evil. Again, if a person teaches God is both spirit and matter, is it a limitation on God to insist “God is spirit” (John 4:24) is a definitive statement concerning God’s metaphysical nature? No, but it is a limitation of the unbiblical idea that God is both spirit and matter.

In the same manner, it is not a limitation on God to say he went to Sodom to “find out” if what he had heard was true. But it is a limitation on the idea that God’s knowledge encompasses all events—past, present, and future. Any concept of God which is in conflict with the Bible’s revelation of God’s nature and character deserves to be limited by the clear words of Scripture. Asserting what God’s Word says about him will not limit him in any way, but it will limit the ideas of those who presuppose the attributes of God apart from the Scriptures, and then try to use the Bible to prove their point. Those unscriptural ideas *should* be limited by what God says about himself in his word.<sup>4</sup>

### Genesis 22:12

“And he said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’”

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<sup>4</sup>It has often amazed me that the very people who lament about the anthropocentric, humanistic tendencies of modern theology, will also protest that using the Scriptures to define God’s attributes is somehow going to limit God. If the phrase “and if not, I will know” does not fit in a system of theology, it seems obvious that it is the theology which must be amended, and not the the Scriptures. In a discrepancy between the thoughts of men and the Word of God, the Word of God must always prevail. Reinterpreting the Scriptures to fit a preconceived idea of God is the height of humanism. We must let the Scriptures dictate our doctrine of God, and not twist the Bible to fit our own, humanistic reasonings about him.



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When God<sup>5</sup> says, “now I know,” it is clear from the context he is talking about knowing that Abraham fears God because he was willing to sacrifice his son.

The adverb of time “now” indicates there was a “before” when God did not know—the time before he tested Abraham. After Abraham responded to God’s command, God then knew Abraham did indeed fear him. Thus, God came to have knowledge about Abraham through his obedient response to the test.

Let us consider a couple of ways this phrase could be taken to mean something other than what it appears to say.

First, the phrase could be poetic, an anthropopathic usage of “now I know.” In this case, God supposedly knew ahead of time what Abraham would do, but he spoke in human terms for Abraham’s sake because Abraham seemingly would not understand if God used words like “I really knew before, but didn’t tell you.” The bigger problem, of course, is why God would put Abraham and Isaac through such an ordeal if he already knew what Abraham would do. One could argue it was for Abraham’s sake, but if so, why did God say, “now *I* know,” and not, “now *you* know”?

Second, God could have known ahead of time what Abraham would do, but he was experiencing the reality of the situation for the first time. This is based on the idea that the word “know” can be used to indicate either mental knowledge or experience. But there are two difficulties with this explanation. If God is supposed to live in an eternal now, all of his experiences would also be happening at the same time, and he could not say he was experiencing this event for the first time as it happened to Abraham. And why would God put Abraham and Isaac through such agony to experience something which was already a given? One other problem with this view is if God knew the outcome beforehand but did not experience it until it happened, God is viewed as living in a sequence, having a before and an after, a now and a then. This refutes one of the major tenets necessary for supporting the idea of absolute foreknowledge—the eternal now. If God lives in an eternal now, he cannot *experience*

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<sup>5</sup>Since the speaker here is the “angel of the Lord” one might be tempted to think that the speaker is only a created angel. But since the speaker says, “You have not withheld your only son *from Me*,” then goes on to say, “by Myself I have sworn,” and repeats the covenant YHWH made with Abraham, it is obvious from the context that the “angel of the Lord” spoken of here is God himself. (See also these verses for instances which indicate that the “angel of the Lord” was sometimes an appearance of God himself: Genesis 16:7-11; 22:11-18; 32:24-30; Ex. 3:2 (with Matthew 12:26; Lk. 20:37); Numbers 22:22-35 (with v. 38); Judges 2:1; 3:13-18.)

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something which he *previously* only *knew*. All of his experiences and knowledge must happen at the same time—now.

It seems far easier just to accept the simple, literal meaning of the text and let the theological chips fall where they may. God said, “now I know,” and he meant just that. He came to have knowledge about Abraham—knowledge he did not have before—because of Abraham’s response to the test.<sup>6</sup>

### Exodus 4:8, 9

“And it shall come about that if they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign. But it shall be that if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

God had to arrange a second and third sign for Moses, based on the premise that the people might not believe the first and second signs. God said, “If they will not believe you,” and again, “they may believe,” and yet again, “if they will not believe.” This is not the kind of language one would expect from someone who knows every future choice of every moral being. Arranging multiple signs based on the possible rejection of the people is a clear indication that God did not know how the people would choose to respond.

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<sup>6</sup>This kind of “new” knowledge should not be confused with unimagined knowledge on the part of God. That God found out what Abraham *would* do in that situation does not imply that God did not know all of the possible choices Abraham *could* make. Out of all those possible choices, Abraham chose one—obedience—and God came to know which one Abraham would choose.

As we will discuss later, when God says, “the thought never entered my mind” that they would do such a horrible thing (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35), it is not as if God did not know the possibility that the Israelites could sacrifice their children to idols. It just never came into his mind that they would make this choice as opposed to the other choices they could have made. Evidently, God trusted them to do the right thing, but was disappointed by their disobedience.

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### **Exodus 13:17, 18**

“Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt.’ Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt.”

God led his people one direction rather than another because he did not know how they would respond to war with the Philistines. Entertaining the possibility the people could change their minds and return to Egypt, God led them into the wilderness instead. It is instructive that God did not say, “The people will change their minds,” but rather, “*Lest* the people change their minds.” This meant God did not know exactly what they would do, and being concerned they might panic and return to Egypt, directed them away from war and towards the Red Sea.

### **Exodus 16:4**

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.’”

Though this verse does not directly state God did not know the future choices of the Israelites, it still creates two questions.

First, “Why the test?” If God knew exactly what they would do, why would he put the people through a test? God does test people by giving them a command and then waiting to see what they will do. This is reasonable if God does not know what will happen. But if God knows already what the outcome will be, the test is no longer a test, but a cruel manipulation. God is not testing the person, but willing his failure and judgment. Even if God offers a way of escape with the temptation (I Corinthians 10:13), if he absolutely knows the person will fail, he is still presenting the person with a test which he knows will result in evil and condemnation. Why not just withhold the test?

Second, why say, “whether or not”? Why not just state which the people would be—either obedient or disobedient? The language here implies God is giving the test to see whether or not they will

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obey. But if God already knew the outcome, why speak in this manner?

### **Exodus 32:9-12, 14<sup>7</sup>**

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.’ Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why doth Thine anger burn against Thy people whom Thou hast brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, “With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth”? Turn from Thy burning anger and change Thy mind about doing harm to Thy people.’ ... So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.”

The sequence of events in this passage reveals a great deal about the knowledge of God and his interaction with his people:

- 1) The people sin.
- 2) God declares to Moses that he intends to destroy the people.
- 3) Moses prays, asking God to change his mind.
- 4) The Lord changes his mind and does not destroy the people.

A straight-forward reading of this text leaves the reader with three clear impressions: 1) all of the events happened in a sequence (this, then this, then this, etc.), 2) God changed his mind and did not do something he had previous planned to do, and 3) God’s decision to change his mind was a direct response to the intercession of Moses.

What happens to the plain meaning of these verses if they are re-interpreted in light of the absolute foreknowledge of God? If God knew ahead of time what Moses would do, could he be sincere in his pronouncement that he would destroy the Israelites? Worse yet, was he not lying when he told Moses he would destroy the people, knowing full well he would ultimately not destroy them? Maybe

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<sup>7</sup>See also Numbers 14:11-35, Numbers 16:20-35, Numbers 16:44-48, Deuteronomy 9:13-14, 18-20, 25-29, and Deuteronomy 10:10 for similar passages. In each of these cases, God changed what he was going to do to his people based on the choices of Moses, Aaron or the people.

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God was simply testing Moses? But if God can lie to us to test us, could we ever trust his guidance?

Arguing from the eternal now that God's statements were true at both times they were uttered, even though they were contradictory, will not resolve the problem. First, the problem is not that the statements were opposite, but that God knew he would do something different in the future. God's knowledge of his future actions would make his present statements lies. Second, if Moses were not aware of the future events, he could not suppose God meant anything other than he would destroy the people. So, from Moses' perspective, the first statement would still have to be viewed as a lie, and it is Moses' understanding of the statement which is crucial here.

We are left with two alternatives. On the one hand, we can accept the clear, simple reading of the text and adjust our doctrine of God to agree with his Word. This requires viewing God as living in a sequence of time, having the ability to change his mind,<sup>8</sup> and not knowing what humans will do in the future. On the other hand, we can force the notion of absolute foreknowledge onto the text, re-interpreting the plain meaning of the words to fit our presupposed view of God. But if we take this course, we must try to live with a God who lies to test his people.

In light of the scriptural revelation that God "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2), and that he is "just in all his ways and kind in all his deeds" (Ps. 145:17), it seems expedient and biblical to adopt the former view.

### **Exodus 33:5**

"For the Lord had said to Moses, 'Say to the sons of Israel, "You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I will do with you."'"

For the Children of Israel, the wearing of ornaments could have been evil for at least two reasons. In chapter 32 we read the people took off their earrings so Aaron could fashion them into a golden calf. God may have viewed the remaining ornaments as an occasion for future sin, and so required their removal as a commitment to holiness. Or, the ornaments may have indicated a dedication to

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<sup>8</sup>The Scriptures record 36 instances where God changed his mind.

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idols, such that, as long as the people wore them, they displayed an outward sign of their violation of the first commandment.

Regardless of the reason, God saw the removal of their ornaments as a necessary condition for his decision as to their treatment. God's knowledge of what he would do was dependent on what they did with their ornaments. Notice God did not say, "that *you* may know what I will do" but rather, "that *I* may know what I will do." God's future knowledge was dependent on his people's present choices.

Why would God speak in this manner if he already knew what the people would do and how he would respond? The phrase "that I may know" clearly indicates God does not know the future, and his future knowledge and choices can be dependent on the choices of others.

### **Numbers 11:1**

"Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord; and when the Lord heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp."

This passage is similar in structure to the Genesis 6 example already discussed. In Genesis 6, God saw the wickedness of man and was grieved to the point of sorrow. In this text, God hears the complaining of the people and he becomes angry to the point of judgment.

Why would the Scriptures tell us God became angry when he heard them complaining? If God knew from all eternity they would grumble, and if he had been experiencing this anger at every moment of his existence, what is the point of this remark? Romans 15:4 tells us "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction." But this verse loses any instructive value if we presuppose the absolute foreknowledge or timelessness of God. If "when the Lord heard it, His anger was kindled" does not mean exactly what it says, then the whole reason for recounting the event is lost.

How much easier it is to read the Scriptures for just what they say and allow them to reveal God's nature and character to us. God heard them and he became angry. This clear, meaningful story teaches us much about God and our relationship to him, if we take the words at face value. But if we force the doctrines of absolute

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foreknowledge and timelessness onto the text, we forfeit the whole point of the account.

### **Numbers 14:11, 27**

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?’ (27) ‘How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me.’”

“How long?” is not a reasonable question if one already knows the answer. Speaking hypothetically, if God knew that the people would be rebellious for three months, four days, six hours and thirty-seven minutes, why would he ask how long they would continue in their rebellion? God even inquires about his own future history when he asks how long he will have to put up with their grumbling. This kind of language clearly indicates that God both 1) lives in a duration of time, and 2) does not know the future choices of human beings.

### **Deuteronomy 8:2**

“And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.”

This would be a strange statement indeed if God already knew how the people would respond before they wandered in the wilderness. God led, tested, and humbled them *to know* whether they would obey or not. If we take this scripture at face value, it means God did not know what they would choose.

While one might argue “to know” could refer to the people rather than to God, there are other scriptures, such as II Chronicles 32:31, which clearly state God brings about circumstances so he, God, can know how a person will respond. If God knew ahead of time what

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they would do, why not just state it in those words? Why not say, “He tested you, though he already knew what you would do”?<sup>9</sup>

Taking the literal meaning of this text is so much easier and reasonable than making the words conform to a presupposed foreknowledge on God’s part. God wanted to know if the people would obey, so he tested them. Though this may not fit the doctrinal assumptions of many people, the message is so much more meaningful if we just accept the words of Scripture as they stand.

### **Deuteronomy 13:1-3**

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

If God already knew all of Israel’s future choices, why would he have to test them to “find out” if they loved the Lord with all their heart and soul?

The natural and beautiful meaning of this text is lost immediately if we try to interpret it in the light of absolute foreknowledge. God appears to have questionable motives and methods if he allows a false prophet to tempt his people when he already knows what they will do.

But if God does not know the outcome, it is reasonable to test his people, since they have the choice to obey or disobey.<sup>10</sup> According to this passage, God does this to “find out” if they love him. This is a clear indication he does not know ahead of time what we will choose to do.

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<sup>9</sup>To assume that “those poor, ignorant people way back then” could not have understood the meaning of such words would only be cultural arrogance on our part.

<sup>10</sup>From the word “arises” in the text, it appears as if God does not directly send the false prophet to tempt the people, but once the person is there, God uses the situation as a test to find out if his people love him.



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### **Judges 2:20-22 (3:4)**

“So the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He said, ‘Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not listened to My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk in it as their fathers did, or not.’”

3:4 “And they were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses.”

God chose to leave the heathen nations in the land of Caanan as a test to “find out” if the people would obey. Why would this be necessary if God foreknew their choices?

To “find out” is to discover something new about a situation. If God used the nations to “find out” if they would obey his commandments, this indicates he did not know beforehand what they would do. A person cannot “find out” information which he already knows. He might verify previously known facts, but he cannot be said to “find out” something unless he did not know those facts before.

The implication of these verses, then, is God did not foreknow the choices of his people, but had to arrange a test so he could gain knowledge about what they would do.

### **Judges 10:13-16**

“Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress.’ And the sons of Israel said to the Lord, ‘We have sinned, do to us whatever seems good to Thee; only please deliver us this day.’ So they put away the foreign gods from among them, and served the Lord; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer.”

After telling the Israelites he would deliver them no more, God was moved by their repentance, changed his mind, and delivered them through Jephthah the Gileadite. This series of events required the sequence of time for its occurrence, not just in the human events,

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but also in the mind of God. God said he would not deliver them, but the misery of Israel in their oppression was too much for God to bear. Their rejection of foreign gods to serve the Lord moved God to deliver them anyway.

These events reveal at least two changes in God's attitude. First, God had been delivering them previously, but their worship of other gods prompted him to abandon them. Then, after declaring he would no longer help them, he was moved by their suffering to provide deliverance through Jephthah.

Note also the idea of duration expressed in the phrase, "He could bear the misery of Israel no longer." He had borne it for a period of time, but was eventually moved by their misery to help them. This is not the description of a God who was experiencing their misery for all eternity in an "ever-present now" and who would go on experiencing the misery after their deliverance. These words reveal God endured their misery through a sequence of time, then took action, delivering the people, and was relieved of his misery by their freedom. All of this requires a sequence in the experiences of God. Such a response to his people would have been impossible for a God who lived outside of time.<sup>11</sup>

### I Samuel 13:13-14

"And Samuel said to Saul, 'You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.'"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Those who propose that God is both inside and outside of time probably do so in order to avoid this dilemma. Or they may describe God as *living* outside of time but possessing the ability to *act* in time. Either way, their exegetical problem remains. There is evidence to support the idea that God lives in time, but the "eternal now" conception of God is not found in the Scriptures.

<sup>12</sup>Refer also to these examples of situations in which if God or men had chosen differently in the past, the present would have been different from what it is (Genesis 31:42; 43:10; Exodus 9:15; Leviticus 10:19; Numbers 22:33; II Samuel 12:8; Isaiah 48:18; Jeremiah 23:22; Matthew 11:21, 23; 12:7; 24:43; Luke 10:13; 12:39; 19:42; John 15:22, 24; I Corinthians 2:8; Hebrews 4:8; 8:7; 11:15; I John 2:19.). See also Appendix E for explanations of each verse.

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This fascinating insight into the fabric of history reveals that the future would have been different for Saul if he had only kept God's commandment. Not only that, but Samuel declares the Lord would have done something differently if Saul had responded properly. Thus, the future activities of God and the future itself could have been different if Saul had only obeyed.

This kind of flexibility in history is not possible if God lives outside of time knowing all future events. If God sees the whole future right now, how can it be different from what he currently sees? How could Samuel say "the Lord *would have*" if God's choices in the future must transpire as he has already seen them? If the future of Saul's kingdom could have been different depending on Saul's choices, then history is not a fixed event, but a blank page, ready to be written by the free-will decisions of God and man.

Samuel goes on to say that the Lord has looked for, found, and appointed another ruler in Saul's place. Again, these events would not be possible from the "ever-present now" viewpoint. Even Augustine and Boethius, who held to the "eternal now" position and espoused absolute foreknowledge, acknowledged that history had to be fixed if God lived outside of time knowing all future events.<sup>13</sup> Though they claimed we maintain our freedom in spite of God's foreknowledge, they did not deny the future must happen as God has seen it.

But Samuel denies this view with two important revelations, one about history and one about God. Saul's present could have been different if he had obeyed in the past, not just because his choices would have been different, but because the Lord would have established his kingdom rather than removing it. And beyond that, God adjusted his actions to respond to Saul's rebellion by finding and choosing David to replace him as king. This view of history and of God's choices is not possible in the framework of absolute foreknowledge.

This passage is reminiscent of another enlightening text about the future. Isaiah 48:18 says, "If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea." So, in I Samuel and Isaiah we have statements that the future could have been different for people if they had made different choices in the past. Statements such as these require that the future be non-existent and flexible, dependent on our present decisions.

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<sup>13</sup>Please see chapter 2, "A Brief History of Timelessness," for a description of Augustine's and Boethius' view of the future.

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Rather than fixed and certain because of a supposed absolute foreknowledge in God, the future is flexible, open, contingent, and free, created by the choices of God and men.

### **I Samuel 15:11, 23, 26, 35**

“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.’ And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night. ... ‘For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king.’ ... But Samuel said to Saul, ‘I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.’ ... And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.”

In this text we see four clear references to God’s ability to change his mind or his plans.

People often like to quote verse 29 of this passage to support the idea that God does *not* change his mind. The verse reads, “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.” This is ironic, since the context states four times that God either changed his mind or his plans concerning Saul. When Samuel states God will not change his mind, he is referring to not changing his decision about removing Saul as king. All of Saul’s pleading could not convince God to make him king again. God had changed his mind and he would not change it back.

But what does the changing of God’s mind reveal about his relationship to time and knowledge? In order to change, something must go from one state in one moment to another state in another moment. That is, change requires time because change involves a “before” and an “after,” both of them in different moments.<sup>14</sup> So if God changes his mind, it means he has one thought at one moment

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<sup>14</sup>Objecting to this point because Malachi 3:6 states that God does not change is not a valid use of this scripture. The context of this statement concerns God’s moral attributes, not his metaphysical essence, and so cannot be applied to discussions about the changing of God’s mind or his actions. God can change his mind without changing his moral character.

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and a different thought at a later moment. A being who is outside of time in an “ever-present now” does not have “moments,” he only has “now.” So, if the 36 biblical references to God’s changing his mind are to be taken seriously, we have to conclude God lives in a sequence of time and not in a timeless state.<sup>15</sup>

Again, the changing of God’s mind tells us something about the knowledge of God. If God has differing thoughts at different times about the same issue, then his thoughts happen sequentially. But the “eternal now” view of God requires that God’s thoughts all happen at the same time. Those who assert it must be possible for God to have exactly opposite thoughts simultaneously, will have to present the scriptural evidence to prove such events have, or at least could have, happened. The problem here is the Scriptures indicate exactly the opposite. God is presented as going from thought to thought, from choice to choice, all in a sequence of time. There are simply no references in the Bible to God’s having opposite thoughts simultaneously.

### **II Samuel 7:10-11 (I Chronicles 17:9, 10)**

“I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you.”

This was a wonderful promise God made to David about the people of Israel. The problem was that it failed to come to pass! God proclaimed the Israelites would not be disturbed again, nor afflicted by the wicked. All of this happened to them, though, because they broke God’s covenant and were taken away into captivity by Assyria and Babylon.

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<sup>15</sup>Or people could claim that these 36 references are poetic. This some do, of course, because they have presupposed that God has absolute foreknowledge and so must interpret any references to the changing of God’s mind as anthropopathic statements. But since whether or not God has foreknowledge is the very thing we are trying to prove, the texts cannot be interpreted in the light of a presupposition we have yet to establish from the Scriptures. These texts give no evidence of being in the genre of poetry by their words or context. Calling them poetic rather than taking them at face value only indicates a bias on the part of the interpreter.

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Any event God predicts but which fails to happen indicates God did not have complete knowledge of the future. If he had known the people would rebel and be taken into captivity, could he make such a definitive statement to David about their future? This passage, along with many other references to failed prophecies, contradicts the notion of the absolute foreknowledge of God.

### **II Samuel 12:14, 22**

“However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.’ ... And he said, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, “Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.”’”

Even though God had declared David’s child would die, David evidently believed God might be persuaded to change his mind. While some might speculate David did this because he did not know enough about the nature and character of God, David was certainly in line with all of those references in the law which taught that God can change his mind about his judgments.

### **II Samuel 24:16, 25 (I Chronicles 21:7-15)**

“When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity, and said to the angel who destroyed the people, ‘It is enough! Now relax your hand!’ And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the Lord was moved by entreaty for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.”

Out of three options presented by the prophet Gad, David chose three days of pestilence at the hand of the Lord as a judgment for his sin. But two things happened which changed this predicted course of events. First, God changed his mind about the calamity when he saw the angel was about to destroy Jerusalem. Second, David offered offerings and entreated the Lord to stay his hand. As a response to these offerings, the Lord was moved to hold back the plague. These two factors—God’s changing his mind and David’s

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entreaty—brought about the rescue of Israel from certain destruction.

The only way we can make sense of this story is if God does not know all future events. If God knew he would not afflict Israel for the entire time, how could he, in good conscience, direct Gad to tell David the pestilence would last three days? Would he not be lying? And if God knew ahead of time he would not complete the plague, how could he be truthfully described as relenting from the calamity and being moved by entreaty for the land? Only a God who can truly change his mind in a sequence of time can explain these events.

### **I Kings 21:21, 22, 27-29**

“Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked Me to anger, and because you have made Israel sin.”

“And it came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days.’”

God responded to the humility of Ahab by postponing the judgment he had decided to bring on Ahab’s house. Only a God who lives in a sequence of time can truly change his actions as a response to the choices of human beings. Any description of God which places all of his actions and thoughts in the same moment, will eventually lead to a suspicion of either insincerity or outright deception in the communications of God.

How liberating it is to simply let the Scriptures speak for themselves. God changes his mind. God changes his plans. And to do that, God has to exist in a sequence or duration.

## **II Kings 20:5, 6 (Isaiah 38:1-5)**

“Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.””

In verses 1-3 of this chapter, we read Hezekiah was told he would die and not live. As a response to this, Hezekiah prayed and wept, and in return, God changed his mind, adding fifteen years to his life.

God told Isaiah that Hezekiah was going to die. If God knew ahead of time this would not happen, but he was going to add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life instead, then God lied to Isaiah.

Including the possibility of God’s changing his mind as part of the process will not eliminate the problem. The Lord would have known Hezekiah was going to pray and that God would respond by sparing his life.

The only way this story can make sense is if God lives in a sequence, not knowing what will happen in the future, making him capable of responding to Hezekiah’s prayer by changing his mind about the situation.

## **II Chronicles 12:5-7**

“Then Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam and the princes of Judah who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak, and he said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, “You have forsaken Me, so I also have forsaken you to Shishak.”’ So the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, ‘The Lord is righteous.’ And when the Lord saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the Lord came to Shemaiah, saying, ‘They have humbled themselves so I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some measure of deliverance, and My wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by means of Shishak.’”

After having declared through Shemaiah that the people would be forsaken to Shishak, God responded to the humility of the people



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and changed his mind about the punishment. He decided his wrath would not come to the people at that time through Shishak, but would be put off to a later time to be accomplished through Nebuchadnezzar.

This changing of God's mind and actions requires a sequence of time for its fulfillment, not only in the earthly history, but also in the being of God. Without sequence in God's being, the changing of God's mind or intentions would make no sense. If all of God's thoughts, choices, and emotions—his functions of personality—were to happen at the same time, it could never be said of God that he changed anything.

Sequence must be part of the being of God if he can be described as going from thought to thought, from choice to choice, or as having different emotional responses at different times.

### II Chronicles 32:31

“And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.”

If God knows all future events, even the free-will choices of human beings, why would God have to test someone to find out what was in his heart? This is not a description of a God with absolute foreknowledge.

Solomon said of God, “Thou alone dost know the hearts of all the sons of men.”<sup>16</sup> But if God knows the hearts of all men, why would he have to test Hezekiah to know what was in his heart? This test must have been to see what Hezekiah's *future* choices would be, since God already knew what was in his heart in the present. The decision the king made about the envoys of Babylon would reveal to God the motivations of Hezekiah's heart.

This verse clearly implies God did not know what Hezekiah would do. Testing someone in order to know what is in his heart is only necessary if you do not already know. If this verse means what it says, then God does not have absolute foreknowledge of the future choices of human beings.

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<sup>16</sup>1 Kings 8:39.

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### **Psalm 14:2; 53:2**

“The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men,  
To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God.”

“God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men,  
To see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God.”

“The Lord looked ... to see if” is a description of a discovery process. But this process is attributed to God, the Lord, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Any definition of God’s knowledge will be incomplete if it does not include this aspect of discovery.

Though the verses could be read to mean God does not have knowledge of some present-tense facts in the universe, it is not absolutely necessary to view the words in this way. Since the text says God was looking to see if there were any who were understanding or seeking after him, the meaning could be similar to that of II Chronicles 32:31—it could be referring to a kind of test. The Lord could have been looking to see how people would respond to him. Would they understand? Would they seek him? So, the knowledge God gains through “looking to see” could be related to the future choices of the sons of men rather than their present choices.

Either way, this text precludes the idea that God’s knowledge extends to all events—past, present and future—for why would God need to “look to see” if he already knew?

### **Psalm 78:21-22; 58-61**

“Therefore the Lord heard and was full of wrath, And a fire was kindled against Jacob, And anger also mounted against Israel; Because they did not believe in God, And did not trust in His salvation.”

“For they provoked Him with their high places, And aroused His jealousy with their graven images. When God heard, He was filled with wrath, And greatly abhorred Israel; So that He abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh, The tent which He had pitched among men, And gave up

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His strength to captivity, And His glory into the hand of the adversary.”

These verses are more a denial of timelessness in God than of absolute foreknowledge.

There are several phrases in these verses which require a sequence in God’s being.

First, “when God heard” implies the people spoke and God heard it. This speaking and hearing demands a duration in time for its occurrence.

Second, “and was full of wrath” means God became angry over what he heard. God’s reaction to what the people said necessitates a sequence in the being of God as God moves from hearing to emotional response.

Third, God’s anger “mounted” against Israel. This implies an increase in emotional intensity. But if God had been having these emotions from all eternity as a present-tense experience, how could it be said his anger intensified? We also see the increase in intensity expressed in various phrases in the second passage. God heard, then was filled with wrath, then he greatly abhorred Israel, and he finally abandoned them by leaving his dwelling place at Shiloh. God’s increasing emotional intensity requires a duration in time for its occurrence.

Fourth, the changing activity of God can only happen in a sequence of time. God heard, then became angry, then he judged the people for their idolatry.

Trying to say God was hearing, thinking, feeling and acting all at the same time in an “eternal now” makes utter confusion out of an otherwise simple record of God’s interaction with his people.

### **Psalm 106:23, 43-45**

“Therefore He said that He would destroy them, Had not Moses His chosen one stood in the breach before Him, To turn away His wrath from destroying them.”

“Many times He would deliver them; They, however, were rebellious in their counsel, And so sank down in their iniquity. Nevertheless He looked upon their distress, When He heard their cry; And He remembered His covenant for their sake, And relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness.”

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Psalm 106 is one long record of the dealings of God with his people. The passage recounts various episodes of rebellion, the decision of God to judge, and God's relenting about his plans to punish Israel. Some instances include intercession as a factor in God's change of mind.

The common element in all of these stories, however, is the necessity of time for the occurrence of the events. Forcing the idea of timelessness or absolute foreknowledge onto these passages eliminates any meaning they may have for the relationship of God to his people.

### Isaiah 5:3-7

“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. And I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.”

In this song about the vineyard and the vinedresser, the vinedresser represents the Lord, and the vineyard is the house of Israel (or the men of Judah). Though the song itself is a form of poetry, the interpretation is completely realistic and historical. God brought Israel out of Egypt and “planted” them in the land of Caanan.

In the song, the vinedresser *expected* the vine to produce good grapes, but it produced worthless ones. The interpretation of this parallel is he “looked for “justice” and “righteousness” but found “bloodshed” and “a cry of distress.” Looking for one thing and finding another is correlated here with God's expectation of good grapes but the production of worthless ones. God expected the people to be righteous, but they were wicked instead.

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How can a God who knows what everyone will do in the future have an incorrect expectation about a future choice? Even if we say God looked for one thing but found another, we still have to ask why God would even look if he already knew what he would find. While a human might look for something he knew was not there, the reason he looks is to be sure his recollection is correct. God would not have such a problem with his memory, so his looking for righteousness and finding bloodshed must indicate he really expected the people to be righteous.

In addition to God's frustrated expectation, we read that God had done everything he could do to encourage the vineyard (i.e., Israel) to produce good grapes (i.e., do righteousness and justice). Some theologies teach God's will is always done and God causes people to be saved and to follow him. If this were true, how could God say here he had done everything he could do, but the people turned out wicked anyway? Evidently, God's "doing all he could do" does not include the coercion of the human will, but only influence towards obedience.

So, God *expected* the people to do one thing, but they did another. This kind of language cannot be used of a God who knows all future choices. God's failed expectation with Israel teaches us he does not know everything we will do in the future.

### **Isaiah 63:8, 10**

“For He said, ‘Surely, they are My people, Sons who will not deal falsely.’ So He became their Savior. ... But they rebelled And grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.”

This is at the same time both a tragic and an instructive narrative.

God, with his great trusting heart, became the Savior of his people, believing they would not deal falsely. But the people did not do what God expected. They rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. As a result, God had to become their enemy because of their rebellion.

But this tragedy also teaches us something about the knowledge of God. If God said the people would not deal falsely, he must have sincerely believed their future choices would be faithful. But since the people did not do as God had said, we can only conclude God did not know exactly what they would choose in the future.

**Jeremiah 3:6, 7**

“Then the Lord said to me in the days of Josiah the king, ‘Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. And I thought, “After she has done all these things, she will return to Me”; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.”

Consider the words: “I thought she would return, but she did not.” This means God had an incorrect thought about the future! He thought the people would do one thing, but they did another.<sup>17</sup>

This is not poetic language, but a real narrative about the history of Israel. Those who desire to call this passage poetic only do so because they have already decided God must have absolute foreknowledge, and any texts which do not fit their preconceived ideas must be forced to mean something other than what they clearly say.

God thought his people would do one thing, but they did something else. The only reasonable explanation for this statement is that God did not know what the people would do in the future.

**Jeremiah 7:31 (19:5, 32:35)**

“And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.”

“and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind;”

“And they built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”

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<sup>17</sup>Using the literal word “said” in place of “thought” does not change the meaning of the text. It only changes the contemplation of God to a prophecy. Either way, the Lord thought or said something about the future which was incorrect.

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Three times in the book of Jeremiah God says, “The thought never entered my mind.”<sup>18</sup> How can this happen if God knows all future events? If God knew the Israelites would eventually offer their children as sacrifices to idols, how could he say the thought never entered his mind?

God cannot be referring to the general issue of child sacrifice here, because he had already dealt with whole nations of people who so destroyed their children. God must have been referring to the particular choices of his own people to follow the example of those nations. Thus, it never entered God’s mind they would do such a horrible thing.

What else can this mean but that God does not know the future choices of free-will beings? How can a God who has absolute foreknowledge of all future events not have a particular future event in his mind? If we take the text for what it says, however, we have a clear, compelling story about the grief of God over the sins of his people. The thought that they would sacrifice their own children to idols was so abhorrent to God that it never entered his mind.<sup>19</sup>

### **Jeremiah 18:7-10**

“At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.”

This passage is the interpretation of the famous “Potter and the Pot” illustration of Jeremiah. The potter made the pot, but it was marred in his hand, so the potter made the pot again, as it pleased him to make it.

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<sup>18</sup>This phrase could also be translated “it never came up in my heart.” But regardless of the translation, the problems with God’s foreknowledge remain.

<sup>19</sup>It is also possible that since God is referring to a time in the past, he may have seen nothing in the hearts of the people *at that time* which would lead him to believe they would ever sacrifice their children to Molech. But this kind of trust in his people is only possible if God does not know their future choices.

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Not following God's own interpretation of this metaphor, people often remove the conditional aspect of the potter-pot relationship. They portray God, the potter, as doing whatever he wishes to people, the pots, and the people simply do whatever God wills they should do.

But the interpretation of the potter-pot story is recorded for us so we can understand what God meant by the metaphor. How is the potter "pleased" to deal with the pots? He treats them exactly according to what they deserve. And the pots themselves determine how they will be treated by the potter. God changes his reactions to his people according to their choices, and this response of God is made according to a strict morality. If the people sin, God plans to destroy them, but if they repent, God will change his mind and will bless them instead.

All of this would seem commonplace if it were not for the word God uses to describe his change of attitude. God says if the people change their choices, he will "relent" or "think better" of the reaction he was going to have. These two phrases are translated from the same word meaning "to change the mind."

So God changes his mind in response to the actions of people. To do this he must exist in a sequence of time, so he can have one attitude toward the people at one time, and a different attitude at another time. Simultaneously-opposing attitudes in the mind of God are illogical, and such a situation is never described in the Scriptures.

Further, the changing of God's mind implies he did not know what he was going to do until he saw the response of the people. If he did know what they would choose, the previous attitude of God would have been inconsistent with his knowledge of the people's future choices.

### **Jeremiah 26:2-3**

"Thus says the Lord, 'Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah, who have come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I have commanded you to speak to them. Do not omit a word! Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds.'"

Why would God have to say *perhaps* they will listen and repent? If God knew their choices beforehand, why not say, "Speak



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to them, but I know they will not listen or repent”? But God does say “perhaps” and he uses the word in exactly the way we would. God even says he will change his mind about his judgment if the people will turn from their sin. These two things, that God had to say “maybe” and that God could change his mind about his judgment, indicate God does not know the future choices of humans and God lives in a duration of time.

### **Jeremiah 26:13, 19**

“Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and *the Lord will change His mind* about the misfortune which He has pronounced against you.”

“Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and *the Lord changed His mind* about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them? But we are committing a great evil against ourselves.”

These are two more illustrations of God’s changing his mind. The second example includes all the elements to conclude God lives in a duration and he does not have absolute foreknowledge. The people sinned and God pronounced judgment against them. But when the people feared the Lord and prayed, God changed his mind. Thus, the prophesied judgment did not happen because of the choices of the people and the changing of God’s mind. These events could only have happened in this way if God lives in a sequence of time and does not know what will happen in the future.

### **Ezekiel 2:5, 7**

“As for them, whether they listen or not-- for they are a rebellious house-- they will know that a prophet has been among them. (7) But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious.”

“Whether they listen or not,” God said. Did he not know what their response would be? And if he knew, why did he not just tell Ezekiel what they would do? He could have said, “They will not listen,” but he did not. Rather, he left it open as to whether or not

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they would pay attention to the prophet. Why would God speak in this manner? He clearly did not know what the people would do.

### **Ezekiel 12:3**

“Therefore, son of man, prepare for yourself baggage for exile and go into exile by day in their sight; even go into exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand though they are a rebellious house.”

Again God says, “maybe.” Maybe they will understand. God had to say “perhaps” because he did not know whether or not they would understand Ezekiel’s object lesson.

Some people try to avoid this interpretation of the text by saying God had to speak to Ezekiel in this way because he could not understand any other way. This explanation is inadequate for two reasons.

First, it presupposes absolute foreknowledge and then forces that notion onto the meaning of the text. So, though God said “maybe” to Ezekiel, he did not really mean “maybe” but something else, since he already knew what the people would do.

Second, it is the height of human and cultural arrogance to think Ezekiel could not have understood terms such as “I already know what they will do,” but we, in our “superior,” modern understanding know what God meant by “maybe” (as opposed to what he actually said). If God spoke to Ezekiel in this way because as a human he could not understand it any other way, which of us rose above the level of human being to be able to understand what God really meant by the word “perhaps”?

Lastly, we cannot claim greater revelation from God as a reason for understanding Ezekiel’s words better than he did. Ezekiel was familiar with many of those verses which modern-day proponents of timelessness and absolute foreknowledge use to support their position. Why would he use a word like “perhaps” if he knew God could not really mean “maybe”?

### **Ezekiel 20:8-9, 13-14, 15-17, 21-22**

“But they rebelled against Me ... Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them ... But I acted for the sake of My name ... by bringing them out of the land of Egypt.”

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“But the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness. ... Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them in the wilderness, to annihilate them. ... But I acted for the sake of My name ....”

“And also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them ... Yet My eye spared them rather than destroying them, and I did not cause their annihilation in the wilderness.”

“But the children rebelled against Me ... So I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish My anger against them in the wilderness. But I withdrew My hand ....”

These four episodes in the history of Israel reveal much about God’s knowledge and his relationship to time. Each case has a similar sequence of events: God promises to bless the people, the people rebel, God resolves to judge or destroy the people, but then God changes his mind and does not carry out the promised judgment.<sup>20</sup>

The changing of God’s mind necessitates a sequence or duration of time for its occurrence. Otherwise, God would be in the awkward position of having two opposing states of mind in his consciousness at the same time. There is nothing in the Scriptures which indicates God ever had, or could have, completely opposite states of mind simultaneously.

On the contrary, there are numerous examples, including those in this chapter, indicating God goes from one state of mind to another in a sequence of time. And if God describes himself in this fashion, never taking the trouble to inform us this is not the real nature of the case, then we should take him at his word that this is how he lives.

### **Ezekiel 22:30**

“And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.”

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<sup>20</sup>It is interesting that the first of these sequences took place in Egypt. Though it is not mentioned in Exodus, God had determined to destroy the people in Egypt, before he brought them out, because they would not forsake the Egyptian idols. Thus, it appears as if God’s judgment on all the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12) was for the sake of the Israelites as well as for the Egyptians.

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Why would God search if he already knew his efforts would be in vain? Would God need confirmation of his knowledge? Would he need to search to convince *us* there was no one who would intercede? Obviously, the Creator of the universe would not need to verify what he already knew, for his sake or ours.

Again, if God knew from all eternity he would find no one, why should we be moved by this account? A natural reading of this story should reveal that the compassionate heart of God is his desire to spare his people. It should also encourage us to become intercessors so God will not be disappointed by our lack of involvement. But if we interpret this passage to mean God already knew the outcome, then the whole point is lost. We cannot feel the slightest empathy for God if he searched already knowing his search would be futile.

Lastly, searching happens in a duration of time. Though God may be able to search unimaginably fast, still, searching implies sequence. And to say he found no one implies he made a conclusion about each person he considered. All of this requires a sequence in the being of God for its accomplishment.

### **Ezekiel 24:14**

“I, the Lord, have spoken; it is coming and I shall act. I shall not relent, and I shall not pity, and I shall not be sorry; according to your ways and according to your deeds I shall judge you,” declares the Lord God.”

This is not the language of someone who lives outside of time. If all of history is “now” to God, how can he speak in these terms? “*It is coming and I shall act*” are not the words one would use to describe an event which is occurring now and has been happening for all eternity. “*I shall not relent, I shall not pity, I shall not be sorry, and I shall judge*” are declarations of God’s future intentions, not the words of someone who has no past, present, or future.

### **Hosea 8:5**

“He has rejected your calf, O Samaria, saying, ‘My anger burns against them!’ How long will they be incapable of innocence?”

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Though it may appear from the quotes in this text that the words, “How long will they be incapable of innocence?” are spoken by the prophet, this is not the case. The entire passage is God’s pronouncement against Israel. Other translations do not even include quotes in this verse because all of the words are spoken by God.<sup>21</sup>

So, why would God ever have to ask a question beginning with “how long”? If God knows the future, there is no reason to ask questions about when a particular event will transpire. If we allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, however, we must conclude God did not know when the people would repent and return to their innocence.

### Joel 2:12-14

“Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; And rend your heart and not your garments.’ Now return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, And relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a libation For the Lord your God?”

God can change his mind about the judgment which he plans for those who rebel against his commandments. This possibility of change in God provides the hope to Israel that God might bless rather than destroy them. “Who knows,” they say, “he might relent (change his mind) if we repent.”

Viewing God as having made all of the choices he will ever make leaves us with a static God who cannot respond to our needs. And he would certainly not be able to change any of his decisions if he has already made them from all eternity.

This kind of moment-by-moment response of God to his people would be impossible if God experienced all moments as “now.” Even if we can somehow explain how God could be both in and outside of time simultaneously, he still *speaks* as if he were in time.

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<sup>21</sup>The KJV reads: “Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off; mine anger is kindled against them. How long will it be before they attain to innocence?” The New American Catholic Bible reads: “Cast away your calf, O Samaria! my wrath is kindled against them; How long will they be unable to attain innocence in Israel?”

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His reactions to our choices require the element of sequence in his being for their occurrence.

Having to re-interpret all statements of God as meaning something other than what he says would lead us to question all he says. If God does not mean “changes his mind” by the words “changes his mind” then maybe he does not mean “God so loved the world” either. Maybe this is just a metaphor used for our sake, but God does not really love us. Could we live with this kind of uncertainty?

If we cannot be sure God means exactly what he says by the words he uses, then someone will have to tell us what God means by what he says. Of course, some people who hold to the notion of God’s absolute foreknowledge and timelessness want us to trust *them* to re-interpret all these verses for us. But which is better, to trust what another human says he *believes* God is like, or to trust what God *actually* says about himself in his Word?

Some people fear this literal approach to God’s word because they are afraid we will “make God in our own image” if we take his word exactly as it written.<sup>22</sup> But we would never want to reduce God to someone other than who he is. The question is, “What is God like?” and the body of information we have to answer this question is the Scriptures. When we say God can change his mind, are we saying he is like us? Not at all, we are saying we are like him, because he made us in his own image. We can change our minds because he can change his mind. It is not the other way around.

### Amos 7:1-3, 4-6

“Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, He was forming a locust-swarm when the spring crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop was after the king’s mowing. And it came about, when it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, ‘Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, For he is small?’ The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said the Lord.”

“Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, the Lord God was calling to contend with them by fire, and it consumed the great deep and began to consume the farm

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<sup>22</sup>For example, Norman Geisler’s book, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997).

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land. Then I said, ‘Lord God, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?’ The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘This too shall not be,’ said the Lord God.”

God’s revelation of judgment to Amos prompted the prophet to plead for God’s mercy. As a result, God changed his mind and declared that what he had planned to do would not come to pass.

This changing of God’s mind and intentions requires both a sequence of time and a lack of absolute foreknowledge. Otherwise, how could God seriously tell the prophet he was going to judge the people, if he knew the prophet would pray, God would change his mind, and the pronounced judgment would never happen? It seems far better to assume God actually changed his mind, in a sequence of time, than to accuse God of lying to Amos.

### **Jonah 3:2, 10**

“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”

“When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.”

Again we find God changing his mind about a pronounced judgment.

Though there is no condition recorded in Jonah’s proclamation,<sup>23</sup> the people of Nineveh assumed God could change his mind and he might be persuaded to do so by their repentance. When they repented, God saw their deeds and changed his mind. All of this required a sequence or duration of time for its occurrence, not only in the history of the people, but also in the being of God.

The changing of God’s mind also indicates the future states of God’s mind can depend on people’s present choices. For this to be true, God must not know his own thoughts in the future or the choices people will make to prompt those thoughts in God’s mind.

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<sup>23</sup>The assumption that there was a condition stated but not recorded is countermanded by the king’s statement, “Who knows, God may turn and relent?” and by the anger of Jonah over God’s changing his mind. Jonah would not have appeared as a false prophet to the people if a condition had been stated in the proclamation.

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Thus, the changing of God's mind excludes the notion of the absolute foreknowledge of God.

### **Jonah 4:2**

“And he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.’”

Jonah knew God could relent (change his mind) concerning calamity, and this prompted his prodigal episode.

There are perhaps a couple of different explanations as to why Jonah would flee. First, he could have desired to see Nineveh destroyed. Thus, when God had compassion on the people, he became angry. Second, he could have reasoned that if God did not destroy the people after announcing this would happen, he would appear to be a false prophet. So Jonah could have fled to preserve his reputation. Though the text does not fully reveal Jonah's intentions, it does tell us that he fled because he knew God could change his mind.

### **Zechariah 8:14-15**

“For thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Just as I purposed to do harm to you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘and I have not relented, so I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear!’”

God assuages the fears of his people by promising he will not change his mind about doing good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. This could only be comforting to the people if there were the possibility God *could* change his mind about his actions.

It is also interesting to note that God says, “I have again purposed *in these days*.” This is not the language of someone who lives outside of time, experiencing all of his thoughts, choices and emotions in the same “eternal instant.” God says he purposed before, and he has again purposed *in these days*. This kind of language requires a sequence in God's being for its



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accomplishment. God could not speak in this way if he lived outside of time, since his purposing would have been happening for all eternity. When God says he has purposed something in these days, the only reasonable way to interpret this is that God lives in time and has chosen in these days, and not before, to do good to Jerusalem.

### **Matthew 19:28**

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”

Was Judas a true disciple of Jesus? Jesus seemed to think so. He called him after a night of prayer, sent him out to preach the gospel, and gave him authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). He also expected Judas would be one of the twelve who would sit on the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. If Jesus already knew Judas would turn aside from this ministry and apostleship to go to his own place (Acts 1:25), could Jesus have been sincere in his prediction of Judas’s future position of authority?

There was nothing wrong with Jesus’ declaration about the future. What Jesus said was true at the time. But Judas changed that future by his choice to betray Christ and to abandon his ministry and apostleship. This failure of a predicted event is no different from the other instances of unfulfilled prophecy in the Scriptures. It reveals that the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophetic statement was conditional on the choices of the apostles to be faithful to their calling.

Jesus’ prediction and Judas’s failure to fulfill that expectation helps to further explain the statement that Jesus “knew from the beginning” who it was who was “about to deliver him up.” That Jesus predicted Judas would occupy one of the twelve thrones indicates Jesus did not know at that time Judas would be his betrayer. This thought must have come to Judas later, and once it entered Judas’s mind, Jesus could know what he planned to do. Thus, the “beginning” spoken of here must be referring to the beginning of Judas’ thoughts of betrayal, and not to the beginning of creation or of Jesus’ ministry.

**Matthew 25:41**

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;’”

Two interesting aspects of eternal judgment are revealed in this passage, and both of these points indicate a lack of absolute foreknowledge on God’s part.

First, hell was prepared, that is to say, it has not always existed. God prepared it—he brought it into being for a purpose. If hell had always existed, “prepared” would be a poor choice of words. The eternal nature of the fire is spoken of in reference to the future existence of hell, but there is no indication hell has existed for all eternity in the past (Matthew 18:8; Mark 9:48; Jude 7; Revelation 20:10).

Second, the eternal fire was prepared for a particular group of beings—the devil and his angels. But in this text in Matthew, we see groups of humans (nations) being sent away into the fire which was prepared for someone else. As Isaiah 5:14 says, “Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; And Jerusalem’s splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry, and the jubilant within her, descend into it.” Why would Sheol have to enlarge its throat or open its mouth? Could this be because hell was made for the devil and his angels, and humans were never expected to go there? If God knew from all eternity who would be in hell, why did he not make it the right size from the beginning? That God had to change the size of Sheol indicates that when it was first prepared—for the devil and his angels—it was not large enough to accommodate the humans who chose, by their own will, to join the angelic beings in this place of punishment.

Lastly, if hell was prepared for the devil and his angels, this indicates it was prepared after the rebellion in heaven. Otherwise, if a God with absolute foreknowledge made hell for all who would eventually rebel against him, why was it not made large enough in the first place?

**Mark 13:32 (Mt. 24:36; Acts 1:7)**

“But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

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“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

“He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;’”

It was said of Jesus that he knew “all things” (John 16:30; 21:17).<sup>24</sup> So the revelation of Jesus himself that he did not know the day or the hour of his coming must be used to modify the other claims concerning his knowledge. Some people use the phrase “you know all things” to prove Jesus had absolute knowledge of all events, past, present, and future. But the extent of the knowledge in the phrase “you know all things” will have to be defined by the context of the phrase, since Jesus himself said he did not know everything.

When the disciples asked if Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel, he said the Father had fixed that time by his own authority. Though many people read this to mean the Father has a specific time in the future when this event will transpire, the text does not have to be read in this fashion. The Father could have determined the “times” and “epochs” by requiring conditions for their fulfillment. The Apostle Peter commands us to be “looking for and *hastening* the coming of the day of God.”<sup>25</sup> The word “hasten” means to make something happen sooner. Evidently, we can make the day of God happen sooner, most likely by fulfilling the great commission.<sup>26</sup> But if the day of God can be “hastened” by our choices, then it is not a fixed date in the future, but an event which is fixed by the conditions necessary to bring about its occurrence.

Also, the command to hasten the coming of the day of God is presented in the context of the delay of Jesus’ return due to the patience of God. God is not willing that any should perish, so the second coming of Jesus may be put off until the Father is satisfied that all those who should have the opportunity to repent have been given that chance.

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<sup>24</sup>It is also interesting to note that Jude made the same claim of his readers (Jude 5).

<sup>25</sup>II Peter 3:12.

<sup>26</sup>This is based on Matt. 24:14 which states, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”

**John 14:2**

“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.”

That Jesus was going ahead of the disciples to *prepare* a place for them implies the places were not prepared at the time of Jesus’ promise. This gives us insight into the nature of two very important things—the Father’s house, and the resurrected Christ. If places are still being prepared in the Father’s house, this means duration or sequence is a factor in its existence. And if Jesus is *going* to prepare places in his Father’s house, this indicates the resurrected Christ operates in a sequence of time.<sup>27</sup>

**Acts 15:7**

“And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.’”

Saying “in the early days God made a choice” places the choice of God in a time framework. This was not a choice made “from the foundation of the world” or “eternally” or “outside of time.” Since Peter is referring to his call to preach to Cornelius and his household, we know God’s choice was in the “early days” of the preaching of the Gospel.

God planned all along to offer salvation to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. But God chose to use Peter to start this process at a particular time, “in the early days,” and not at some other time in history. Thus, God’s choice took place in a sequence of time, not in some “ever-present now.”

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<sup>27</sup>Some may argue that God does not technically do anything new, since according to Hebrews 4:3, “His works were finished from the foundation of the world.” But verse 4 tells us which works are in view here. Verse 4 says, “For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.’” Thus, it was the work of creation which was finished “from the foundation of the world.”

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

### Revelation 3:5<sup>28</sup>

“He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.”

As far as we know, God has written only one book—the book of life.<sup>29</sup> Another book was written before him, a book of remembrance, but the Scriptures do not attribute the writing directly to God.<sup>30</sup> It is not difficult to see that the book of remembrance did not exist from all eternity, but was written in response to God’s hearing the conversations of those who feared the Lord. The people spoke, God gave attention and heard it, and a book was written before him. This series of events requires a sequence for its occurrence and contradicts the idea that all of God’s experiences happen simultaneously in an “ever-present now.”

But what about the book of life? Was it written from all eternity? Did God record in his book who would be saved and lost because he already knew what the people would choose? Though some derive this idea from Revelation 13:8 and 17:8, we have already seen how these verses do not prove the *writing* happened “from the foundation of the world,” but that the *book of life* and *God’s plan to send his Son* have existed from that time.<sup>31</sup>

There are two possible interpretations of God’s writing the book of life. First, this could be a poetic reference to the eternal knowledge in God’s mind. God either knew or planned<sup>32</sup> from all eternity who would be saved and lost, and the writing of a book is a metaphor for his foreknowledge of the status of each individual’s salvation. Second, God could have started writing a record of the

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<sup>28</sup>The other passages pertinent to the discussion of this verse include: Exodus 32:32, 33; Psalm 69:28; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27.

<sup>29</sup>This does not discount the other things directly written by God, like the ten commandments or possibly the writing on Darius’s wall, but these were not books. (Cf. also Job 13:26; Jeremiah 31:33; Romans 2:15; II Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 3:12; 14:1). The Bible is God’s Word, of course, but since it was written through man, and not directly by God, it is not under consideration here.

<sup>30</sup>Malachi 3:16, “Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.”

<sup>31</sup>Please refer to footnote 10 of chapter 9.

<sup>32</sup>Whether it was foreknown or predestined depends on other theological persuasions of the interpreter.

## TEXTS AGAINST FOREKNOWLEDGE

righteous and is still in the process of adding or removing names from the book based on people's obedience or disobedience.<sup>33</sup>

There is information about the book of life, however, leading us to reject the first alternative in favor of the second. The writing in or blotting out of names appears to depend on the choices of the people. The righteous are recorded (Psalm 69:28), while those who sin are blotted out (Exodus 32:32, 33). Note in Exodus that God refused to blot out Moses' name as a result of his intercession. God would only blot out the names of those who sinned against him. This shows the presence of names in the book is not an arbitrary decision on God's part, but is governed by strict laws of justice. God enters or removes names according to the righteousness or disobedience of the person (Exodus 32:33; Revelation 3:5; Revelation 21:27).

Two factors mitigate against the notion that people's names were written in the book of life as a result of absolute foreknowledge. One, names are described as "not having been written" in the book, and two, it is possible for names to be blotted out of the book. Both of these actions indicate a change in the book of life which precludes the possibility the names were entered or removed on the basis of God's foreknowledge. If a name is entered because of someone's action, then it was not in the book before that time. If it was not in the book, but God foreknew the person would eventually be in the book, why was the name not already in the book? On the other hand, if a name is removed from the book, and God has absolute foreknowledge, then the name should have never been written in the book in the first place. The removal of a name from the book of life indicates the name was previously written in it. Thus, either the writing or blotting out of a name disproves the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge, and the Scriptures are clear that names are entered into, and removed from, the book of life.

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<sup>33</sup>A third interpretation, though not as widely held, is that God writes each person's name in the book when they are conceived, and people's names can only be blotted out if they are disobedient. This interpretation is based on there being more references to people's names being blotted out of the book than being written into the book. But since this alternative is functionally the same as the second with respect to foreknowledge, it will not be included in this discussion.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

### Summary

The previous chapter explored many of the verses people use to support the idea of the absolute foreknowledge of God. In each case the verse is either taken out of its context, which constitutes poor exegesis, or the preconceived idea of absolute foreknowledge is forced onto the text, which constitutes eisegesis. We also looked at one or two ways each passage could be explained without assuming foreknowledge. We concluded there is very little, if any, biblical support for the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge.

This chapter has focused on the verses which directly contradict the notion of foreknowledge, with emphasis on the phrases which require a denial of this concept. When God says “now I know” or “maybe they will repent” or “the thought never entered my mind,” the clear indication of these expressions is God does not know the future choices of human beings. For God to say “and if not, I will know” or “take off your earrings that I may know what I will do with you” or “I thought they would return, but they did not,” he must be living in a sequence or duration of time, not having knowledge of some pre-existent, absolutely-foreknown future.

We cannot simply disregard so large a body of scriptural evidence indicating God does not know the future. Those who do so usually reject this evidence based on their preconceived conclusion that God lives outside of time knowing all future events. This is circular reasoning which has no place in valid exegesis of God’s Word. But if we allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, refusing to import extraneous ideas into our interpretative process, the Bible clearly teaches God lives in a duration or sequence of time, not knowing our future choices. Rather, he exists in a dynamic relationship with his creatures, ready to interact with them to bring about the best possible future for both God and man.

# **Part III**

## **Practical**





# Chapter 11

## Personal Holiness and Absolute Foreknowledge

### Does Theology Influence Behavior?

“Now, you would probably find it hard to believe that God is the author of all sickness, deformity, suffering, war and pain,” the preacher declared, leaning out over the podium for a long time to let the people ponder his words. He continued, “But that is the truth, so you had best get used to it.” A tangible silence fell over the congregation.

The youth pastor in the church, a missionary colleague of mine, told me about this statement his senior pastor made from the pulpit. It was the pastor’s theological opinion that God causes all events, whether good or evil. When he heard it, my colleague tried to dismiss the comment, believing the young people in his care would obviously see through the pastor’s remark. “No one could actually believe God made him do evil,” he thought, trying to put his worries to rest.

Unfortunately, he was mistaken. During a counseling session, as the youth pastor confronted a young man with his sexual immorality, the counselee responded, “But God is the author of all choices, including my choice to sin, so I cannot be responsible for what I do.” The youth pastor was horrified, of course, and informed the counselee he could not use God as an excuse for sin. He also told the young man he believed the idea that God is the author of evil is unbiblical. At least one young person had been listening carefully, and had taken the pastor’s statements to their logical conclusion.

Theological ideas *do* have practical consequences. People live out what they believe to be true, even if they act on that “truth” subconsciously rather than consciously. What people believe is directly related to how they act, so a theological supposition can, and will, influence the life of the person who believes it.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

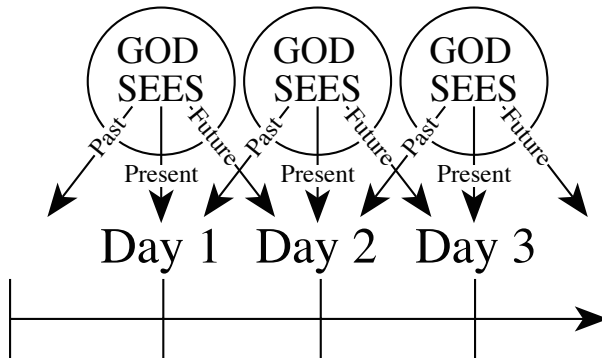
### Does Holiness Make Sense?

Technically speaking, the previous example concerns the influence of the doctrine of absolute predestination<sup>1</sup> on personal holiness. But the idea of foreknowledge yields the same results practically, because if our futures are absolutely foreknown, then they are as fixed as if they had been predestined by God.

If all our actions have been seen from all eternity, then any present action is the same as if it were in the past tense, and thus has the same fixity as any past event. Since according to the “eternal now” theory, God sees all times as “now,” then with respect to any particular day, the day before is always past, even though that day may be today, or in the future, to us. From God’s perspective, my present choices are yesterday’s future choices and tomorrow’s past choices. And if every day is the same as past to God, then all days are fixed and unchangeable. Thus, we cannot choose freely between two alternatives today, because our present choices are already known as past to God, and cannot be any different from what he has already seen we will do (or, technically, have done).

We could picture it this way:

### “ETERNAL NOW”



In the figure above, if Day 2 is today, then it must incorporate Day 1’s history to really be Day 2. On the other hand, Day 2 must not include the events of Day 3, if Day 2 is really considered as

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<sup>1</sup>Absolute predestination here means the predestination of all events. This is opposed to the word “predestination” as it is used in the New Testament, that is, the predestination of the end the believer will attain.

## PERSONAL HOLINESS AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

present. Even if we say God “sees” all of these days as “now,” the *days themselves* must have a definite character if they are to be distinguished from each other as past, present, and future.

One way to avoid this is to define every day as both past, present, and future at the same time. But as we have already seen in chapters three and four, this idea is both philosophically, theologically and practically absurd. If we are going to answer the question, “Does God know the future?,” then there must actually be a difference between present and future.

For any particular day, such as Day 3, the day before it (Day 2) must be past. This would then be true for every day (except the first day of creation), since all subsequent days would have a past and a future. This means if God sees Day 3 as present, he must also see Day 2 as past at the same time. So if Day 2 is today, but God sees it as past, then the present must be as unchangeable as the past, since what is present for us today is past to God as he “sees” Day 3 as “now” and today as yesterday.

It also makes no difference if someone views God as knowing the future but not as living in the “eternal now.” The fixity of the future is based on God’s knowledge of future events as if they were already past, and this results if God knows the future, even if he is not imagined as living in all times as “present.”

So what does all of this have to do with personal holiness? If all present choices are the same as past to God, then no choice is ever really free. The person making the choice may *think* he is free to choose to obey God’s law or not, but he really is only living out what God has already seen he will do.<sup>2</sup>

To put it another way, when we come to the point of choosing whether to be holy or to sin, we *will do* exactly as God has already seen us do. Thus, all future choices are as fixed as any past events, free will is an illusion, and whether we sin or obey the law of God makes no difference. We will do what was determined for us to do before God ever created the world. And God cannot hold us responsible for any of our actions, because we are only living out the history which was set in place before we were ever born.

The counselee shifted nervously in his seat as if I were about to attack him. “But it’s not my fault!” he blurted out. “It’s not my fault I treat my brother the way I do. If God knew I would be like this before I was ever born, then I have to act this way.”

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the difference between man’s and God’s perspectives of future events.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

“Did you hear anyone say God knows the future?” I asked. The look on the counselee’s face was remarkable.

“You do believe God knows the future, don’t you?” he responded, his voice reflecting both surprise and apprehension simultaneously. He was surprised to find I did not hold to the traditional notion of God’s absolute foreknowledge. But he was also apprehensive, suspecting he was about to be held completely responsible for his sin.

“No, I don’t believe God knows what you will do in the future, because I can’t find enough evidence for it in the Bible. You are creating your own future with your own choices, and are responsible for the consequences of those choices. You cannot use God’s foreknowledge as an excuse for your sin. Now, let’s talk about how you can repair your relationship with your brother.”

This young man had thought through the implications of absolute foreknowledge to their logical and practical conclusions. If God knew all his future choices, then he could not really have a free will. He could only live out the pre-existent history God had already seen, and so had no possibility of choosing anything other than what God already knew would happen. Since he could not be responsible for something he *had to do*, then he could not be responsible or feel guilty for the way he treated his brother.

Most people will not consciously carry the presupposition of absolute foreknowledge to its logical conclusion in this way. Rather, they will respond to the practical implications of the idea at a subconscious level. But whether a person thinks these things through consciously, or simply lives out a subconscious understanding of these ideas, the resultant senses of fatalism, hopelessness, and lack of responsibility are the same.

If God knows all that will happen, then those events must occur just as he has seen them. What appear to be free-will choices to us, are simply the outworking of a pre-existent history, so we are not really free, and how we choose makes no difference. Whether we live in sin or love God with all our hearts, these choices were always going to happen in this way, so either lifestyle is irrelevant.

But the Bible reveals in many passages that God does not know what we will do in the future. We are creating our future by our present actions, so our choices are truly significant. We are not destined to live out some pre-planned history over which we have no control, but can cooperate with God to change the future for the better. Whether we bring God glory through our obedience, or cause him grief through our rebellion, both are significant because we can choose to do otherwise.

## Foreknowledge and Responsibility

Responsibility is based on freedom. If a person is not free, he cannot be responsible. Freedom is commonly understood as the ability to choose between alternatives. In the Bible, compulsion is stated to be the opposite of free will.<sup>3</sup> If one is compelled to do something, he cannot do otherwise. This inability, or loss of alternative choice, constitutes a lack of freedom, and with it, a lack of responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

Taking the trouble to define freedom may seem an unnecessary waste of time and words, but there are theologies which define “freedom” in anything but the common manner. Some say that free will is the ability to do only what God has determined you will do. To others it is the capacity to do only what your nature dictates you will do. Still others claim free will is the response of your will to the strongest influence. But all of these definitions *negate* free will rather than *define* it.

There are a limited number of ways free-will can be eliminated in a human being. If freedom is eliminated, then the will must be caused to act by something other than the will itself. This would mean that choices are not effects of the will, but effects caused by some other agent or thing. And there are only so many “things” which could determine our choices. The possibilities seem to be limited to God (directly or indirectly), the person himself, another human being, wicked spiritual beings, or history itself. Here is a brief description of each of these options:

1. Absolute predestination: God determines what man will choose.

In this view, God directly determines what people will do. He acts to guarantee that people only do what he wants. God’s will is never violated. Thus, a person may think he is making free choices, but God is working behind the scenes to make sure only the choices God desires will result.

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<sup>3</sup>See Philemon 14. Cf. also Genesis 24:8; 24:41; Joshua 2:17; 2:20; Jeremiah 40:4; I Corinthians 7:39; and I Peter 2:16 for references implying that alternative choice is the definition of freedom.

<sup>4</sup>Though lack of ability implies lack of responsibility, this cannot be turned around to say that ability automatically implies responsibility. One cannot be responsible without being able, but one can be able and yet not responsible. Knowledge of the obligation is necessary, along with ability, to make one responsible. The only important distinction in this discussion, though, is that lack of ability implies lack of responsibility.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

If God determines every choice people make, however, then all evil choices are also determined by God. This view of history is clearly unbiblical and slanders the holiness of God.

2. Middle knowledge: the circumstances determine what man will choose.

As he created the world, God arranged the circumstances so man will choose exactly as God has foreseen it. This form of determinism may be less direct than absolute predestination, but it is still determinism, and free-will is eliminated because man must do as the circumstances dictate.

In this view, it is difficult to determine if God “saw” what the future would be and then made the earth and its history to conform to his foreknowledge, or if God imagined what the history of the earth should be, and then created the earth in such a way that that history would inevitably result. Either way, God determined what events would take place, so the practical result is identical to that of absolute predestination.

3. The person’s own nature: a person’s nature determines what he will choose.

Some theologies teach that man is fallen to such an extent he cannot choose to do anything other than evil. Even if an unbeliever appears to be doing good, it cannot really be virtuous because the person is only capable of doing evil. If a Christian does good, it is only because God has changed his nature to cause him to live righteously. So, nature determines choice, alternative choice is abolished, and free-will is eliminated.

4. Other people: other human beings make us choose as we do and are thus responsible for our choices.

This did not work in the Garden (“the woman you gave me”), and it is still as lame an excuse today. Other people cannot determine our choices and thus remove our responsibility or free-will.

5. The devil or other wicked spiritual beings: or “the devil made me do it.” Eve tried this in the Garden (“the serpent deceived me”), but God found this just as inadmissible as Adam’s excuse.

6. Foreknowledge: pre-existent history determines what man will choose.

History will happen exactly as God has foreseen it. Since man cannot choose anything other than what is foreknown, he has only one “choice.” This eliminates free will by eliminating all alternatives but one. God’s knowledge does not directly determine what the person will choose, but God’s knowledge implies that the future history is a pre-existent entity which can be foreknown because it is certain to happen. This makes the future an actuality, not a potentiality, and it must happen as God has seen it.

Claiming history is *certain* but not *necessary* will not help here. If a choice could happen any other way than the way God has seen it, then history could not be certain. So, if history is certain, then choices must happen the way they were foreseen. Thus, the foreknowledge of God, based on the certainty of history, eliminates free-will because the person cannot choose anything other than what God has seen.

Who, or what, determined this history is irrelevant, since it is the existence of the history which determines the choices. But it would seem as if God is the only person capable of determining the future history of a creation which did not yet exist. Therefore, absolute foreknowledge necessitates absolute predestination,<sup>5</sup> and absolute predestination eliminates free-will. And with no free-will, responsibility is impossible, and whether we obey or disobey is irrelevant.

### **Do Our Choices Matter?**

“So what?” some may object. “I believe God knows all I will do, and I also believe that my choices are significant.” But while people can *believe* these words, they do so without logical or biblical support. Logically, if God knows the future, then it is certain and fixed, and our choices have no meaning. Biblically speaking, there is not enough evidence to support the idea that God knows all future events, and there is abundant biblical evidence proving that God does *not* know our future choices.

If God’s foreknowledge means we have no free will, then what difference does it make how we choose? Obedience or disobedience is irrelevant if we can not choose anything other than what God sees will happen.

Yet this is not how God describes our choices. God says we can choose life or death,<sup>6</sup> we can choose whom we will serve,<sup>7</sup> we can

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<sup>5</sup>By “absolute predestination”, we mean the predestination of all events. The *biblical* doctrine of predestination includes only those events which God has determined to bring about in history (such as the death of Christ - Acts 4:28), or those ends which the Christian is predestined to attain if he remains a Christian (such as conformity to the image of Christ - Romans 8:29). See also Genesis 41:32; Isaiah 10:22; 65:12; Jeremiah 15:2; Lamentations 2:8; Daniel 9:26; Luke 22:22; Acts 17:26; I Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 1:5; 1:11; I Thessalonians 3:3; 5:9; Revelation 13:10). The biblical doctrine of predestination should not be confused with the definition of some theologies which includes every event in all of history.

<sup>6</sup>Deuteronomy 30:19.



## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

choose eternal life,<sup>8</sup> and we can create a different future for ourselves by our choices.<sup>9</sup> Our choices do count, and our futures are dependent on what we choose to do today.

Further, our choices are real and have real consequences. We can please God and give him great delight,<sup>10</sup> or we can grieve him and make him sorry he created us.<sup>11</sup> We can speak life or death to others.<sup>12</sup> We can heal or wound with our words.<sup>13</sup> Our choices have significant effect on both God and man, but this significance is lost if God knows all of future history.

It would seem best, then, to reject the notion of absolute foreknowledge in favor of a more biblical, logical and practical position. Our choices really do matter, but only if God does not know the future.

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<sup>7</sup>Joshua 24:15.

<sup>8</sup>John 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47. This is not to say, of course, that man can save himself by his choices. We are saved by the grace of God. But by his choices he can meet the conditions necessary for God to save him—repentance and faith.

<sup>9</sup>Isaiah 48:18. See also: Genesis 31:42; 43:10; Exodus 9:15; Leviticus 10:19; Numbers 22:33; II Samuel 12:8; Jeremiah 23:22; Matthew 11:21, 23; 12:7; 24:43; Luke 10:13; 12:39; 19:42; John 4:10; 14:2, 7; 15:22, 24; I Corinthians 2:8; Hebrews 4:8; 8:7; 11:15; I John 2:19. Appendix E contains an explanation of the significance of these verses.

<sup>10</sup>Proverbs 15:8.

<sup>11</sup>Genesis 6:5-7; Psalm 43:24; 78:40, 41; 95:10; Isaiah 1:14; 53:3, 4; 63:10; Ezekiel 6:9; Mark 3:5; Ephesians 4:29, 30.

<sup>12</sup>Proverbs 18:21.

<sup>13</sup>Proverbs 12:18; 15:1.

## Chapter 12

### Prayer and Absolute Foreknowledge

Does it do any good to pray? Our natural intuition tells us it must, but the idea of absolute foreknowledge dictates otherwise. Are there events which will not happen because we failed to petition God? Does prayer itself have any meaning if God knew from all eternity what we would say? If the answer to our prayers is already a known fact to God, can we change history by intercession? These and other questions become serious roadblocks to a person's prayer life if he espouses the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge.

#### Dave's Dilemma

"I just can't seem to get excited about prayer anymore," Dave moaned. "I go through the motions, but there's no more life in my intercession." Dave, one of my colleagues on the mission field, had come to me for counsel.

"Well," I started, "let's take a look at your basic understanding of God and history." Dave seemed a little surprised I would approach the problem from this angle, but he nodded agreement.

"Do you see history as a fixed event, or do you believe it can be changed by your prayers?" The look on Dave's face told me my question had struck a chord in his mind.

"I thought you might ask me about that," he said, "because I have wondered for a long time if my concept of God might be causing problems in my devotional life."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well," Dave continued, "if God knows what I will pray, and also knows how he will answer those prayers, doesn't that mean the answer is already a foregone conclusion?"

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

“Yes, it does. If you believe history is determined because God knows the future, then there really would be no reason to pray. So what are you going to do?”

“Well, I guess I will have to rethink my concepts of God and how he relates to history if I am going to solve the problems in my prayer life.”

Unfortunately, Dave’s predicament is not unusual. Many people suffer with doubts about the efficacy of their prayers because they believe history is fixed due to the foreknowledge of God. People often come to this conclusion subconsciously rather than consciously, but the effect is the same. They wonder whether or not their prayers will make any difference because they believe history must turn out as God has seen it.

The whole point of prayer is lost if we are only living out a history which God has already seen happening eternally. If God already knows we will pray, and that he will answer a certain way, then before we pray, is there any hope that anything will be changed by our prayers? If we do not pray, then that was the history God saw, and the resultant lack of an answer was also already seen by God. Either way, the answer would be just as God saw it from all eternity, as would our petition or abstinence. Any reason for prayer is lost in the absolute certainty of future events.

Dave made the right response. Rather than giving up on prayer, he changed his theology. As he gained a more accurate understanding of God’s nature and character, and the nature of history, his mind was satisfied that it does make sense to pray. As a result, his prayer life revived and his confidence in the God who can change history was restored.

### **The Logic of Prayer**

The biblical idea of prayer is based entirely on a sequential view of history. A person prays, asking God to intervene in a situation. God responds, changing events to correspond with the petition, and history is different than it would have been if the person had not prayed.

This common-sense view of prayer is the only one presented in the Bible. All of the passages having to do with answered prayer are recorded as having happened in this order. Take, for example, the case of Hezekiah and his entreaty to spare the people of Israel:

## PRAYER AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

“Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord changed His mind about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them?”<sup>1</sup>

God pronounced judgment, Hezekiah entreated God’s favor, and God changed his mind. This sequence of events is repeated hundreds of times in the Scriptures. And not once does God say, “Well, of course, this is the way it was going to turn out all along.” There is never even a hint that this view of prayer is not to be understood exactly as it is recorded.

Or consider the case of Moses, who stopped God from destroying the Israelites after they had built the golden calves:

God said, “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”<sup>2</sup>

Moses prayed, “Turn from Thy burning anger and change Thy mind about doing harm to Thy people.”

The result was: So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.<sup>3</sup>

Moses knew if he prayed, the future could be different from what God had declared it would be. But what if Moses had believed that the future could only turn out one way? Would he have prayed any differently? Would he have prayed at all? One only prays the way Moses did if he is persuaded that the outcome of history is not fixed, and that his intercession will really make a difference. And different histories can only result if God and man live in a duration.

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 26:19.

<sup>2</sup>It is interesting to note that though God chose to destroy the people, he did not want to do so. According to Deut. 10:10, God was not willing to destroy the people. But because of their sin, God had to choose to do something he did not want to do. It is also noteworthy that Moses’ prayer was not just a few sentences, as one would suppose from reading the narrative. Moses fell down before the Lord to intercede for 40 days. This was no casual prayer!

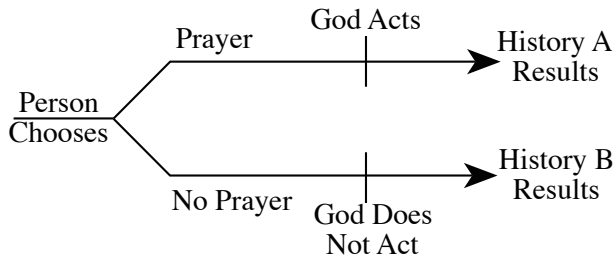
It is also important to remember that God has a specific will. He wants to accomplish certain things in the establishment of his kingdom on earth. We need to pray according to his will if we wish to have our prayers answered (I John 5:14). Because God can change his mind does not imply that we can manipulate God into doing anything *we* wish to happen.

<sup>3</sup>Exodus 32:10-14.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

But if the process of prayer requires a sequence for its occurrence, then what happens to prayer if God knows the future? Perhaps a graphic illustration of the two views will help clarify the positions:

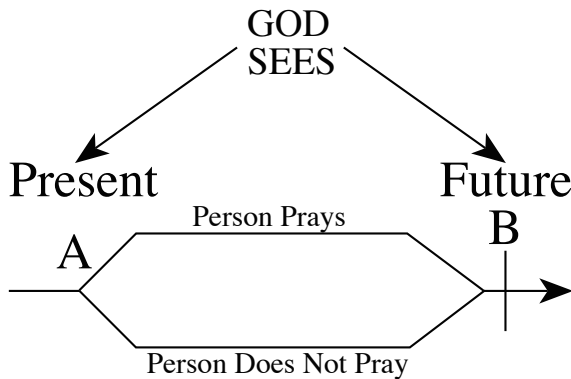
### Duration or Sequence View



In the illustration above, the person chooses to pray or to not pray. God responds to the choice of the person and either acts or does not act, respectively. If God acts in response to prayer, a different history of events occurs than if he does not act. This simple view of the process of prayer is the only one presented in the Bible.

Here is an illustration of the other position:

### Absolute Foreknowledge



## PRAYER AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

In this illustration, the future event (B) will happen as God has seen it, and whether or not the person prays in the present (A) makes no difference. Since history cannot happen in a way other than it is foreknown, the pre-existing event (B) must come to pass. Intercession on the part of a human being to change that event is futile because it will absolutely happen as God has seen it. Actually, since whether or not the person will pray is also absolutely foreknown, the prayer (or lack of it) is just as fixed and certain as the future answer (or lack of it).

Prayer, as the Bible describes it, only makes sense if both God and man are existing in a duration or sequence which is open to change by the choices of man and God. Absolute foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of change and the reasonableness of prayer. And yet God commands us to pray as if it were really necessary. Why would he do that if the future were already a fixed event which could not be changed by our intercession?

### Why Is Prayer Necessary?

The point of intercessory prayer seems to be two-fold: 1) to urge God to *do* something he otherwise might *not* have done, or 2) to ask God to *not* do something he otherwise *would* have done. Either way, we are petitioning God to change his mind about something.

But why would we have to ask God to do something he already wants to do? If God promises to provide for us, why do we need to pray for our daily bread? And how can we stop God from doing something he has decided to do? Moses interceded until God changed his mind about destroying the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> But why should God's responses be based on man's choices? The answer is two-fold: dominion and agency.

When God gave us dominion over the earth, he placed himself in a moral position where he must respect our wills before he acts in our sphere of responsibility. The Psalmist tells us, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; But the earth He has given to the sons of men."<sup>5</sup> Since the earth is now our area of dominion,<sup>6</sup> God must have our permission before he interferes with our stewardship. This

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<sup>4</sup>Exodus 32:12-14. See also Jeremiah 26:19 and Amos 7:3, 6. See Appendix D for a complete list of references to God's changing his mind.

<sup>5</sup>Psalm 115:16.

<sup>6</sup>See also Genesis 1:26-28.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

is not a situation we forced on God, but a position he brought upon himself by committing the dominion of the earth to human beings.<sup>7</sup>

This is where agency becomes important. Agency is acting on behalf of another party. Unless we invite God to be involved in our sphere of responsibility, he is morally restricted as to what he can do. This means we can use our wills to place God in a moral situation where he can do more than he could have before we made the choice. This agency can come in the form of obedience, prayer, praise, worship, thanksgiving, spiritual warfare, etc. Of course, this agency also means we can restrict God from acting if we refuse to ask his help.<sup>8</sup> Probably the most obvious example of this is God's desire to save those who are lost. He is not willing for any to perish, but if they do not repent, he must allow them to go to hell. In this most important of all human decisions, God is limited by the free will of man.<sup>9</sup>

The Apostle James informs us, "We do not have, because we do not ask."<sup>10</sup> This implies that asking is essential to having. Of course, we cannot argue by simply turning the statement around to say, "If we ask, then we will have,"<sup>11</sup> because there are other factors besides just asking which are crucial to receiving an answer. James addresses this when he goes on to say we "ask and do not receive" because we "ask with wrong motives." Could this be true? Does God really determine whether or not he will answer based on

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<sup>7</sup>Please refer to these references for instances where human wills affected God: Genesis 18:22-33; Exodus 32:9-14; II Kings 20:1-7; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 18:5-10; 26:1-3; Ezekiel 22:30, 31; Jonah 3:5-10; Amos 7:1-6; James 4:2. See also these references to God's will not being done because of the will of man: Matthew 23:37; Mark 6:5, 6; Luke 7:30; I Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; I Timothy 2:4; II Peter 3:9; Matthew 6:10.

<sup>8</sup>Refer also to these references giving conditions for answered prayer: I John 5:14, 15; Mark 11:23, 24; John 16:23, 24; I John 3:22; James 5:16; Psalm 66:18; John 15:7; I John 3:24; James 4:2, 3; John 15:16. If there are conditions for answered prayer, then the will of man must affect God such that he is free or restricted in answering prayer, depending on what we choose.

<sup>9</sup>There are two common alternatives offered to the position that God is dependent on the free will of man. The first alternative is that God determines what we will choose, but we are still free to choose it. This notion of "contingent certainties" or "fixed freedom" is blatantly illogical, as has been shown in chapter 4. The second, that God determines who will be saved or lost and man has nothing to do with it, makes salvation entirely God's doing, with people perishing and going to hell because God wills it so. This is an affront to the justice of God, who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

<sup>10</sup>James 4:2, 3.

<sup>11</sup>Arguing by negating the consequent.

## PRAYER AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

whether or not we ask, or if our intentions are selfish or pure? Yes, he does.

But if this is truly the case with prayer, then it also implies God does not know ahead of time what *we* will do or how *he* will respond. For prayer to work as James describes it, the future cannot be foreknown. God's response to our agency must mean the agency is not a fixed event. And if our choices and God's responses are not certain, then there is no future which pre-exists to be an object of God's knowledge. Thus, prayer, as the Bible describes it, precludes the idea of the absolute foreknowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

Some might argue that since we do not know how history will turn out, this is enough reason to pray. But the question is not whether or not *man* knows the future, but if *God* sees what will happen. If God sees we will certainly pray, and that he will answer in a particular way, then was there any reason to pray in the first place? If we do not pray, then *that* was what God saw. Either way, we simply lived out what God foreknew, and the whole point of changing God's mind or of changing history is lost. If God knows the future, then he never changes his mind, but merely lives out the history he has been endlessly viewing in eternity.

### Good Reasons to Pray

There are many good reasons why we should pray. The following six examples are only a few out of many we could list. These are given because of their direct and logical connection to the subject of foreknowledge.

1. *The future is not fixed.* Those who believe history is fixed will not be motivated to pray. Whether the conviction is conscious or subconscious, if a person feels he cannot change history, he will not be able to sustain an active, aggressive prayer life. He also will not feel any deep obligation to pray, since intercession will not make any sense to him. He may even have problems with bitterness toward God, thinking God speaks as if there is hope to change the world, when there really is none.

2. *God can change his mind.* God is not locked into a pre-set series of events by absolute foreknowledge of a certain future. The Bible gives at least thirty-six examples of God's changing his mind. God would not be able to do this if he knew the future. But God can, and does, change his mind, and the most common agent listed

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<sup>12</sup>This would also be true of any event in which God changes his mind. Please see Appendix D for a list of references to God's changing his mind.



## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

for that change is the free-will of man. Whether through prayer, obedience, repentance, or some other choice, man can appeal to God to change his mind about what he is going to do. And God can respond to man's agency by reversing his intentions and doing something different. God can change his mind, and this gives us real hope and reason to pray.

3. *History can be changed.* History is not simply "unfolding" out of some fixed, pre-existent future. Rather, we are creating the future using our present choices. As we cooperate with God in prayer, events can happen which would not have happened if we had not prayed. Some events which would have happened (such as judgments) may not happen if we intercede. The future of the world depends on what we do now, so prayer is absolutely essential to our destiny.

4. *People's lives can be different.* As we intercede, we can bring influences to bear on other people's lives which they would not have experienced if we had not prayed. Our prayers can release God morally to do more in a person's life than he could have done without our petition. This influence can move them towards a closer relationship with God. As a result, their lives can be better than they would have been if we had not interceded.

While it is true that God can influence people without our permission, it is also true that our agency can release God to influence someone more than he could have without that agency. Jesus is the true light who enlightens every person who comes into the world. God does not require our agency to bring this influence to bear on every person. But Jesus also commanded us to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers into the harvest field. This would only be necessary if our agency in the situation were essential to its fulfillment. God will influence laborers to go into the harvest if we pray. If this intercession were not necessary, the Lord Jesus would not have made such a serious point of commanding it.

5. *Our prayers make a difference.* Spurgeon once remarked that we do not pray to change God, but to change ourselves. If this were all prayer could do, why would God be so adamant about praying for others? Why would God command us to pray for all who are in authority? Why should we pray for God's will to be done on earth if we can only change *our* wills through that request?

On the contrary, prayer not only affects us, it can change other people's lives, and even the course of history. The Bible abounds with examples of how prayer changed the lives of individuals and of nations. If we do not pray, some events will not happen, and history will be different. But if we do pray, God can be moved to intervene

## PRAYER AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

in our history to further his kingdom and righteousness. Our prayers *do* make a difference.

6. *God has commanded us to pray.* This reason will be equally applicable whether we believe God knows the future or not, since God, our Ruler, knows what is best for us and has commanded us to pray. But this reason makes more sense if God does not know the future. If God commands us to pray, then he must have a logical reason to do so. But if the future is foreknown and fixed, God would not have a good basis for making prayer a requirement. Only if the future can be changed is there real hope that our prayers will have an impact on history. It is only reasonable for God to command us to pray if the future is not fixed, if God can change his mind, and if our prayers will really make a difference.

These reasons for prayer may seem obvious to anyone acquainted with the subject of intercession, but if God knows the future, the basis for this hope is lost in the fixity of the future.

However, God does not know the future, and we *do* have good reason to pray. The future does not yet exist, and through prayer we can cooperate with God to shape our destiny, and the destiny of the world, as it pleases him.



## Chapter 13

### Evangelism and Absolute Foreknowledge

Jesus has commanded us to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”<sup>1</sup> Does the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge affect the fulfillment of the great commission? Is it really necessary to go? Will it do any good to preach to every creature if the outcome of all our preaching is already determined? Should we spend the time or effort doing something which will ultimately make no difference?

The notion of absolute foreknowledge implies that since all events in the future are known to God, then they must actually exist as events. They are not possibilities or potentialities, but real occurrences which, as far as God is concerned, are as certain and necessary<sup>2</sup> as any past event. After all, if God currently sees who will be saved and who will be lost, then their choices to accept or reject him are past events to God, and so possess the same quality as all past events—they are fixed and certain.

If God sees right now who will ultimately accept or reject him, can our preaching of the gospel make any difference? After all, God has also seen whether or not we will preach the gospel to any particular person. So, if we fail to preach the gospel to someone, but God sees right now the person will be in heaven, then the person must somehow receive the gospel from some other source in the future. Thus, whether we preach to the person or not, somehow they will hear and accept, and will ultimately be saved. On the other hand, if God sees the person will reject him and spend eternity in hell, will our preaching the good news to this person ever produce

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 16:15.

<sup>2</sup>We have already seen in chapter 4 that events which are absolutely certain are also absolutely necessary.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

any fruit? Our evangelism is pointless if the outcome is already determined, so why preach to anyone?

How could God, who declares our “toil is not in vain in the Lord,”<sup>3</sup> command us to spend so much time and effort on activities which will ultimately have no effect on a person’s eternal salvation? If God sees the person will reject him in the future, why should God command us to preach to the person in the present? Since the outcome of the preaching will be fruitless, why spend any effort on evangelism?

Looking at it another way, if God saw who would be saved and lost before he ever created the world, then the reason the people are in heaven or hell does not depend on our choices or theirs, because neither we nor they existed yet to make those choices.<sup>4</sup> Whether we preach the gospel or not, and whether they accept or not, has nothing to do with their eternal state, if that state could be absolutely foreknown by God before they ever existed. We are all simply living out the history God has already seen, a history which was determined before any of our choices existed, and thus had to be fixed by God. Absolute predestination follows logically from absolute foreknowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s take a look at this situation graphically.

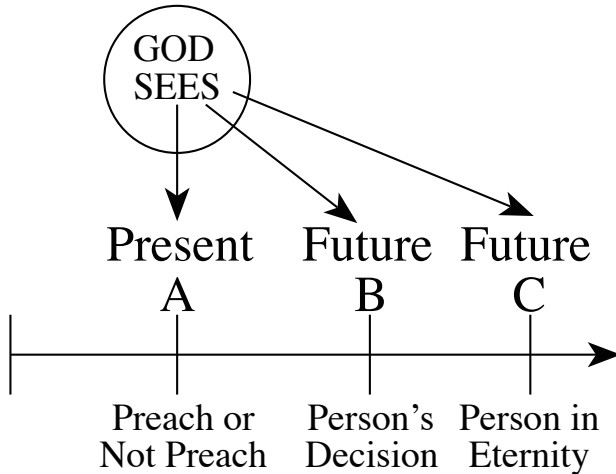
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<sup>3</sup>I Corinthians 15:58.

<sup>4</sup>Also, if all events are eternally present to God, then there was no time when the creation did not exist. This means that there has never been a creation event. This kind of reasoning results in a pantheistic or Zoroastrian view of God and creation.

<sup>5</sup>Lorraine Boettner, an advocate of foreknowledge, rebuffs those who cannot see this point. He says, “The Arminian objection against foreordination bears with equal force against the foreknowledge of God. What God foreknows must, in the very nature of the case, be as fixed and certain as what is foreordained; and if one is inconsistent with the free agency of man, the other is also. Foreordination renders the events certain, while foreknowledge presupposes that they are certain. ... When the Arminian is confronted with the argument from the foreknowledge of God, he has to admit the certainty or fixity of future events. Yet when dealing with the problem of free agency he wishes to maintain that the acts of free agents are uncertain and ultimately dependent on the choice of the person,—which is plainly an inconsistent position. ... We conclude, then, that the Christian doctrine of the Foreknowledge of God proves also His Predestination.” Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing company, 1932), pp. 41-42, 46.

## Absolute Foreknowledge



In the figure above, point A is where someone chooses to preach the gospel or not. Point B is where the person makes the choice to accept or reject Christ. Point C is the person as he will be in the future, whether in heaven or hell.

If at point A (the preaching), God already sees the person at point C (saved or lost), then point B (the decision) must have already occurred. This means that what happens at point A is irrelevant. Whether someone preaches to the person or not at point A, the person is going to make the decision at point B which will result in his state at point C. Otherwise, 1) God would have seen something else, or 2) God's knowledge of the future is incorrect. Since these alternatives are not possible if absolute foreknowledge is presupposed, then B must occur if C is already known by God. Thus, A is irrelevant if C is foreknown,<sup>6</sup> that is, the preaching of the gospel is a useless pastime if God already knows who will be saved or lost.

On the other hand, if God lives in a duration, not knowing what will happen in the future, then whether or not someone preaches the gospel may determine whether someone else comes to know Christ.

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<sup>6</sup>One alternative, but still unhelpful, perspective is that if B is dependent on A for its occurrence, then A is also determined, and the person has no choice whether he preaches the gospel or not. This viewpoint on history was discussed in chapter 4.

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

The person's choice to accept or reject Christ is relevant because his future is not a fixed event, but can turn out differently, depending on his free-will choices. Thus, if God does not know who will be saved, and the person's eternal destiny will be determined by his own choices,<sup>7</sup> then it is both reasonable and loving for God to command us to preach the gospel to every creature. This he did, in his wisdom and love, because he is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."<sup>8</sup>

### **Does Evangelism Matter?**

Whether or not evangelism makes a difference is not primarily a philosophical question. It is first of all a biblical question. What does God's Word say about the effectiveness of evangelism? Does the Bible teach that evangelism might change someone's eternal destiny? If so, then people's choices can change their future, and the history of the world cannot be a fixed event which will certainly occur as God has already seen it.

The Apostle Paul warns us that we should not be taken captive through philosophy which is "not according to Christ."<sup>9</sup> This means our philosophy should be judged by the teachings of Christ and not the other way around. So, what did Jesus think about the relationship of people's choices to their futures? Let's consider three references:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."<sup>10</sup>

"And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>This is not to say that the person can save himself by his good works, but only that his repentance and faith are conditions he must meet in order for God to save him.

<sup>8</sup>II Peter 3:9.

<sup>9</sup>Colossians 2:8.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew 11:21.

<sup>11</sup>Matthew 11:23.

## EVANGELISM AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

“I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”<sup>12</sup>

When Jesus said, given different circumstances, Tyre and Sidon would have repented, and Sodom would have been spared, he clearly taught that the choices people make determine their futures. There is no hint here that the destiny of these cities was fixed and had to occur as God had already seen them. When Jesus says the end of the cities could have been different, he teaches that future history is not certain, but can differ according to the choices people make in the present.<sup>13</sup>

Again, Jesus said if people repent, they will not perish, and if they do not repent, they will perish. There is not one indication in this text it should not be understood literally. Jesus taught that people determine their eternal status by the choices they make, never hinting God had already determined (or even foreknown) which choice they would make. The future is created by the choices we make in the present, and until we choose, the outcome is uncertain.

Though some people make much of the phrase, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” from John 15:16, this verse itself makes it quite clear Jesus chose the disciples to be his apostles, and then appointed them to bring forth fruit. The “choosing” spoken of here was Jesus’ selection of the disciples to become his twelve apostles. The choice had to do with their ministries, not their eternal salvation. The apostles were saved the same way every person is saved—by believing Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus preached a message of repentance.<sup>14</sup> If he knew there was really no point in preaching because the destiny of the audience was already a fixed event, then he was either deluded or a liar. He was deluded if he believed there was hope when there was not, or he was a liar because he offered hope where he knew there was none. But if Jesus was telling the truth, which obviously he was, then his listeners must have had real hope for a different future depending on how they responded to his message. Jesus never taught that people’s future lives were fixed. He always preached hope based on the real possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

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<sup>12</sup>Luke 13:3.

<sup>13</sup>Refer to these examples of situations where if God or men had chosen differently in the past, the present would have been different from what it is (Exodus 9:15; Numbers 22:33; II Samuel 12:8; Isaiah 48:18; Matthew 11:21; Matthew 12:7; John 4:10; John 14:2; John 14:7). See also Appendix E for explanations of each verse.

<sup>14</sup>Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15.



## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

The Apostle Paul also believed preaching was a necessary part of a person's salvation. In Romans 10:14, 15 he states:

“How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!’”

If no one preaches, then no one hears. Without hearing, no one believes. And without believing, no one calls on the Lord to be saved. Thus, Paul believed preaching is essential to salvation. Though Paul goes on to say that even if someone does not have a human preacher, he can hear the “preaching” of the creation,<sup>15</sup> Paul has already shown that the message from the created order is most often rejected by man, resulting in his condemnation.<sup>16</sup> Having already rejected the gospel of creation, man needs a human preacher to tell him the good news of Jesus Christ.

Those who accept absolute foreknowledge would have us believe every step in this process is something God has foreseen will certainly happen. God saw the preaching, the hearing, the believing, and the calling. All of this was part of a pre-existent future before the evangelist ever opened his mouth. But if the result of the preaching already exists as an event which God can absolutely foreknow, then the person has no choice to accept or refuse the good news. The person can only do what God has already seen he will do. If this were true, then any evangelism would be wasted effort, since the person will be saved according to what God has seen, not according to whether or not he hears and believes the preaching of the gospel.

Paul argues that people need to hear a preacher if they are to believe and call on the name of the Lord. The rhetorical question, “And how shall they hear without a preacher?,” elicits the obvious answer, “They won’t!” This chain of logic implies if someone does not preach, then the person does not hear, does not believe, and does not call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Thus, Paul asserts that preachers are absolutely essential to the salvation of the unbeliever.

We are the preachers God has called to deliver his message. God has commanded us to “preach the gospel to every creature” because

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<sup>15</sup>Paul does this by quoting Psalm 19.

<sup>16</sup>Romans 1:20, 21.

## EVANGELISM AND ABSOLUTE FOREKNOWLEDGE

whether or not a person hears the gospel could determine their future. It is an enormous responsibility, but one filled with hope, because those who hear really can choose to turn to Christ and inherit eternal life. Their futures are not fixed in a static, certain, pre-existent history, so preaching can make a difference to their eternal destiny.

The Apostle Peter also teaches that God does not view the future of the unbeliever as fixed and inevitable. When Peter declares the Lord is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance,”<sup>17</sup> he reveals to us the amazing love, grace, and goodness in the heart of God. He is the God “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”<sup>18</sup> He is “the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.”<sup>19</sup> God wants all men to know him and to have eternal life. What a wonderful, loving Father we have!

God’s desires would seem quite strange, however, if he already knows who will be saved and who will be lost. Is he constantly desiring the salvation of someone he knows will never come to him? If God knows there is no hope this person will repent, why should God spend time desiring his conversion? Constantly desiring something which one knows ultimately and absolutely will not happen is a foolish waste of emotional energy.<sup>20</sup> This portrays God as knowing something will not happen, but continually wishing for it anyway. Such a strange view of God is foreign to the Scriptures.

If God constantly wishes all would come to repentance, then he must not know what their final end will be. He is desiring their salvation because he knows as long as they are alive there is still hope. Not only does he desire their conversion, but he actively participates in influencing them in that direction. He speaks to their minds, he convicts them of sin, he reveals himself in creation, and he sends us to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ. All of this would be an illogical waste of time and energy if God already knew the person would never come to him. God’s desire and activity to save the lost indicate he must not know what their end will be.

Jesus, Paul and Peter all thought evangelism is crucial to the salvation of the lost. If there is hope that unbelievers can be saved, then the future must not be fixed and certain. And if there can be different futures, then one single history cannot exist to be an object

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<sup>17</sup>II Peter 3:9.

<sup>18</sup>I Timothy 2:4.

<sup>19</sup>I Timothy 4:10.

<sup>20</sup>God himself tells us that, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Prov. 13:12). Why would God do something which he knows will only make his own heart sick? Would this not display a lack of wisdom on God’s part?

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

of God's knowledge. Thus, if God desires that all men be saved and commissions us to preach to every creature, then these desires and activities indicate God must not know what the future will be.

Many people who believe in absolute foreknowledge will still claim evangelism is necessary and effective, and that people's destinies are determined by the choices they make. The problem with this claim is it is inconsistent with the notion of foreknowledge. If the future is certain, then it is also necessary and fixed, and we are deluding ourselves if we think our choices will make a difference. Foreknowledge is not possible without the existence of a future to be known. The existence of one specific history excludes the possibility of alternative futures, and with it, the possibility of alternative choice. And the lack of alternative choice eliminates free will. Thus, no matter how much people would like both foreknowledge and freedom to be true, the former logically excludes the latter.

While absolute foreknowledge renders evangelism irrelevant, many believers still participate in what could be called a "happy inconsistency." Though their theology precludes the value of evangelism, they still believe it is necessary to preach the gospel, and so they send out missionaries to deliver the good news to unbelievers. This activity is clearly inconsistent with their theological presuppositions. Though their theology should tell them it is useless to evangelize, their commitment to obeying God's word urges them to take the gospel to the lost. Their philosophy is in direct conflict with their actions, but the unbeliever will still benefit from their obedience. They are to be commended for their obedience to God's Word, though their evangelistic efforts contradict their theology. This is inconsistent, but it is a "happy inconsistency."

How fortunate we are to have God's word on this matter! God tells us we can have a different future depending on our present choices. He says our path toward destruction can be changed into one leading to eternal life. His offer of hope is real because the future is not fixed. Our efforts in evangelism are valuable, because the future of the unbeliever is not fixed and certain, but free and contingent, depending on his response to God and to the gospel.

### **Foreknowledge and the Unbeliever**

The problems created by the teaching of absolute foreknowledge are clearly understood by the unbeliever. While witnessing one often hears questions in the form, "If God knew, then...?" Ranging from foreknowledge versus free-will to the problem of the innocent

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suffering, the questions assume many forms, but all share one quality—they all question the justice of God. “If God knows what I will do, how can I have free will?” “If God knew my mother would die in an accident, why didn’t he stop it?” “If God knew most of us would end up in hell, why did he create us?” “If God knew Adam and Eve would sin, why did he put the tree in the garden?” “If God knows whether I will be saved or lost, what difference does it make if I believe in him or not?”

The unbeliever is usually brutally honest with his questions about God. While we Christians play theological ping pong, the unbeliever usually argues using a philosophical shotgun. He goes straight to the heart of the matter and any target is fair game, as he realizes, maybe better than we, the stakes are commensurate with eternal life or death. The dishonest unbeliever, seeking to avoid the demands of the Gospel, will present any argument against God which will allow him to remain in his unbelief. Unfortunately, absolute foreknowledge presents many opportunities for the non-Christian to question God’s justice. He deserves honest, intellectually-satisfying answers, but the concept of absolute foreknowledge, especially as it relates to free-will, almost always becomes a stumbling block to belief.

Unbelievers have very little patience with people who use phrases like “contingent certainties” or “fixed freedom” or “pre-determined free-will.” They will not play with words as many Christians do, and arguments such as “certain events are not necessary events” will not satisfy their demands. Claiming  $A=B$  will not fly on the street, and the non-Christian will be quick to point out that denigrating our finite minds as insufficient to understand God is no excuse for bad philosophy. Unbelievers want honest, consistent, intelligent answers, but the doctrine of foreknowledge only creates problems, it does not solve them.

The relationship between God’s foreknowledge and responsibility was clearly seen by the humanist philosopher Bertrand Russell. In his essay, *Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?*, he presents his argument concerning foreknowledge as follows:

“The world, we are told, was created by a God who is both good and omnipotent. Before He created the world He foresaw all the pain and misery that it would contain; He is therefore responsible for all of it. It is useless to argue that the pain in the world is due to sin. In the first place, this is not true; it is not sin that causes rivers to overflow their banks or volcanoes to erupt. But even if it were true, it

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would make no difference. If I were going to beget a child knowing that the child was going to be a homicidal maniac, I should be responsible for his crimes. If God knew in advance the sins of which man would be guilty, He was clearly responsible for all the consequences of those sins when He decided to create man.”<sup>21</sup>

Technically speaking, this is not a question about the compatibility of foreknowledge and free will, but an argument against the justice of God in the light of absolute foreknowledge. Russell’s argument does not deny that the choices of human beings may be free. Rather, he sees it as irresponsible on God’s part to bring a flawed creation into existence. Even if man is free and sins of his own volition, he argues, if God creates the world knowing catastrophe will result, then God is responsible for the condition of the world because he could have chosen not to create at all.<sup>22</sup>

Though Russell argues God is responsible for the *consequences* of sin if he has foreknowledge of the events, the argument also applies to the *sins themselves*. If God knew people would sin, then he is responsible for the sins also, since he could have foregone creating, thus eliminating even the possibility of sin.

Russell probably assumed God knows the future because he had heard this is what “Christians believe.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, he was responding to what he believed to be Christian truth,<sup>24</sup> and may have been unaware that some Christians reject the notion of absolute

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<sup>21</sup>Bertrand Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian” in *Why I Am Not a Christian: and other essays on religion and related subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), pp. 29-30.

<sup>22</sup>Of course, whether or not God could have refrained from creating is questionable, if the future must exist as God has already foreseen it. The history of a creation demands the occurrence of a creative act.

<sup>23</sup>Russell also assumed that God is timeless, though we do not know how he came to adopt this idea. “...since all experience is in time, and the Deity is timeless, no experience is experience of the Deity...” Bertrand Russell, *Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is*, in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, ed. Paul Edwards. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), p. 102.

<sup>24</sup>Bertrand Russell’s essay, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, is rife with straw men. He describes Christian belief in an astoundingly naive way and then rejects his own mistaken definitions of “Christian truth.” It is obvious from his definitions that he was responding to a social definition of Christianity and not to the truth revealed in the Bible. His arguments are framed more in emotional than philosophical terms, which is surprising for Russell, but is understandable in light of the subject matter. His philosophical clarity is quite evident, though, when he addresses the subject of foreknowledge and responsibility.

foreknowledge as unbiblical. It makes one wonder how Bertrand Russell's life may have been different if he had heard the Bible does not teach the absolute foreknowledge of God.

There are many unbelievers, who, like Russell, question the goodness and justice of God because they have been told God knows the future. In most cases, unbelievers are only responding to what they have heard Christians say, since they do not espouse Christian presuppositions or ideals for themselves. Though they are sometimes mistaken about what we believe, they readily spot philosophical inconsistencies in our doctrines. It is sad that many people may have been kept from believing in Christ because of the unbiblical idea of absolute foreknowledge.

### Summary

If God knows the future, and that future is certain, then any reason to preach the Gospel is eliminated, and Christians will be discouraged from taking the Good News to the lost.

Adopting a radically biblical idea of God's knowledge is not only good for our own spiritual lives, it also shows us the reasonableness and necessity of the great commission. Since God does not know who will be saved or lost, and their decisions are not part of some fixed future history, then they really are responsible for their own actions. Our preaching is relevant, and their decisions are significant, because their futures will differ according to their free-will choices.

Jesus, Paul, and Peter all believed preaching was an essential part of a person's coming to salvation. The Bible teaches evangelism is necessary, so there must be a logical reason why God commands us to preach the Gospel to every creature.

Foreknowledge raises many problems for the unbeliever, offering him an intellectual basis for rejecting the Gospel. But if God does not know the future choices of human beings, this answers many of the unbeliever's questions, leaves him no excuse for his unbelief, and makes him responsible for his own destiny. He is free to serve God or not, but he cannot use God's foreknowledge as a reason to continue his rebellion against God.



## Chapter 14

### Dealing with Insecurity

When people first hear that God might not know the future, they have a variety of reactions. “But if God doesn’t know the future, how can I feel safe? Doesn’t he have to know the future to protect me?” Others might respond, “But this is not what I have always been taught. Doesn’t the Bible teach that God knows everything we will do?” Still others may ask, “How can we explain God’s prophesying of future events if he doesn’t know the future?”

These responses range in intensity from indifference to hostility, with most responses somewhere in-between. But there is a common element to all of these reactions—a sense of insecurity. This insecurity manifests itself in different forms, depending on the personality and gifting of the individual making the response. Some are afraid of the idea just because it is new to them. Others react to the idea intellectually, approaching the issue as a philosophical challenge. Some are more concerned about what the Bible has to say on the subject.

But most people, whether they have doctrinal, philosophical, or biblical questions, respond to the idea on a practical level with insecurity. They seem to be threatened by the idea that God might not know everything in their futures. The initial emotion appears to be fear that God will somehow be incapable of helping them if he does not know all that is coming in their lives. While this response is understandable, we still have to ask if it is reasonable.

Many things can make us feel insecure until we understand them better. Just the thought that God exists can frighten some people, until they learn God loves them and has only their well-being at heart. Learning about demons makes some people nervous, until they realize God has given them authority over all the power of the enemy. Any new idea can cause insecurity until we receive additional knowledge to help mitigate the fear.



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God's not knowing the future seems to be one of these subjects, but as people learn more about it, they tend to calm down, start reasoning with their minds rather than their emotions, and eventually the initial shock and fear subsides. Some even come to the conclusion it could be more frightening if God *does* know the future than if he does not.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the outcome, and whether the person ultimately accepts or rejects the idea, just thinking it through helps many to relax and not feel so threatened by the subject.

### Practical Security

Is there anything about knowing the future which would make God better able to help us in our lives? Though most people immediately answer, "Yes, of course it would!," when questioned closely, they find this position difficult to defend. Usually these people have never had to defend this idea because they have never met anyone who disagreed with their position.

If God knows I will be in a car accident tomorrow, how does this make me more secure than if he does not know? If God knew it would happen, I have to trust him after the accident that he loves me and will provide for me. If God did *not* know it would happen, I have to trust him after the accident that he loves me and will provide for me. So, practically speaking the situation is the same, and we are no more secure if God does know than if he does not. That God knew a split second before, or a million years before, makes no difference to me the instant after the accident.

"But," some might argue, "if God knows beforehand, then he can prepare us for the accident." This might sound comforting initially, but it does not hold up logically. If God knew the accident would happen, then the accident was an event which *had to happen* as God saw it. And if God knew that he would prepare us for the accident, then his preparation also *had to happen* as he saw it. Thus, the preparation is as fixed and inevitable as the accident, and we cannot credit God with caring for us, because he had no choice in whether or not he would help us.

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<sup>1</sup>Since God's absolute knowledge of the future logically implies his responsibility in the existence of that history, God must be the author of all events, including all evil. That God might be responsible for the existence of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot would be more than frightening, it would be terrifying. How could we have an open, loving relationship with a God who creates evil?

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Further, if God could choose to change our history by preparing us, why could he not change the history of the accident by having it not take place? We cannot have it both ways. Either events in the future are fixed, or they are open to change. Claiming that the accident had to take place, but God's help did not, is redefining the nature of historical events differently, depending on how the nature of those events affects our emotional security. While this is emotionally understandable, it is philosophically inadmissible.

In his book *The Case for Freewill Theism*, David Basinger makes this enlightening observation about simple foreknowledge (SFK):

“Since there can never be a time when a God who possesses complete SFK does not know all that will occur, and since foreknowledge can be utilized in a providentially beneficial manner only if there is a time at which what is foreknown can influence a divine decision that is itself not also already foreknown, there can exist no conceivable context in which SFK would enable God to make providentially beneficial decisions that he would not be able to make without this knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, the logic goes like this:

1. If God absolutely knows the future, then he knows what will happen to me.

2. If God absolutely knows the future, then he knows what he will advise me to do.

3. If my situation and God's advice are both absolutely foreknown by God, then they cannot happen any other way than the way he has already “seen” them.

4. Therefore, God's knowledge of the future cannot help him to give me better guidance about my situation.

Or, to put it another way, if God already knows what his advice will be, and he cannot change his advice, what good does it do to ask?

If I am praying about whether or not I should go to China as a missionary, and I ask God's guidance in this matter, God's foreknowledge makes his guidance irrelevant. If God already knows that he will advise me to go, and he already knows that I will disobey his counsel, then when I ask for guidance, what he will answer and what I will do are already fixed events that will certainly

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<sup>2</sup>David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 55.

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take place in the future. Thus, when I ask for guidance, God's answer is already determined, and so is my response. So asking God for guidance is futile if God knows the future.

What people do in their thinking is to combine the results of absolute foreknowledge with the results of the opposite view. They start with the idea that the event is foreknown and certain, but treat the request for advice and the giving of advice as if they could change the future. But if all events are foreknown, the request for advice, the advice, and the response to the advice are all fixed events which will happen exactly as God has seen them. No part of this foreknown history can be changed.

Of course, practically speaking, people live their lives as if God does not have knowledge of the future—as if the future is open to change—and only claim that God knows all future events because that is what they have been taught to believe. They *say* they believe in foreknowledge, but *live* as if the opposite were true.

The *feeling* that God's knowing the future offers greater security is based on some unstated assumptions. Someone may claim, "If God knows someone will be in an accident, then he can warn the person so he will not be hurt." But there is a subtle assumption here which does not follow from absolute foreknowledge. If God absolutely knows that someone will be in an accident, then there is nothing he can do about this. This is an event which *must* take place because God has seen it happening just that way from all eternity.

The subtle assumption here is that God is seeing what *might* happen if all circumstances remain the same. When the person thinks that the situation *could be changed* if God warns him, he is assuming the accident *does not have to happen*. Thus, the person believes the future is subject to change by the choices of God and man, but is trying to support that idea based on the absolute foreknowledge of God. The person is taking refuge in God's foreknowledge, while tacitly assuming exactly the opposite view to support his feeling of security.

Perhaps some people feel secure because they think that if God knows the future, then nothing unexpected can happen to them. Obviously, if God knows all future events, then from his viewpoint, nothing can happen unexpectedly.<sup>3</sup> But if he knows as soon as it

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<sup>3</sup>This is contrary to the Scriptures, of course, which state that God expected one response from Israel, but received another. Jeremiah 3:7 records God as saying, "And I thought, 'After she has done all these things, she will return to Me'; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it." So God had an incorrect expectation about the future choices of Israel. See also Isaiah 5:4, 7 -

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happens, what is the difference? He is aware of it then, and the situation is the same then as if he knew from all eternity. What is the difference between, “I know it will happen and then I will help him,” and, “I see it has happened and I will help him.” If there is a real difference, then in the first instance God expected the accident, did nothing to stop it, but decided to help afterwards, whereas in the second instance, God did not know it would happen, but decided to help afterwards. Practically speaking, the cases are the same—the accident happened and God helped afterwards. So, God’s response to the event is the same whether he foreknows the accident or not. Thus, foreknowledge yields no emotional or practical advantage over immediate knowledge.

Some might argue that God’s foreknowledge of the event means he not only knew, but planned that the accident would happen for our benefit. But the idea that God somehow wanted the accident to happen so some kind of good would result is a blatant denial of the Scripture’s teaching about the goodness and justice of God. Can the God who tells us we will be rightly condemned if we “do evil so that good may come”<sup>4</sup> bring about evil himself to do good? Paul calls it slanderous to accuse someone of this motivation. So, if we say God does evil so good may result, we slander the One who is “righteous in all his ways, and kind in all his deeds.”<sup>5</sup>

As for the question of the innocent suffering, foreknowledge offers no advantage in explaining why God did not stop the accident. If God knows about the accident from all eternity, and does nothing about it, then how can we feel secure in his love? We have to question why he did not intervene. On the other hand, if God only knows a split second before the accident, he still has plenty of time to decide whether or not he can (morally) do something about it. So there is really no difference from this perspective. Either way, we have to work out the problem of the goodness of God in light of the innocent suffering.<sup>6</sup>

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“What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? ... For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.” The vinedresser (God) expected good grapes (justice and righteousness), but found only worthless grapes (bloodshed and a cry of distress).

<sup>4</sup>Romans 3:8.

<sup>5</sup>Psalms 145:17.

<sup>6</sup>There are good biblical and rational explanations for the limitation of God’s actions in such cases, but that will have to be discussed in another book.

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In this case, foreknowledge of the event provides no better explanation than immediate knowledge. Neither view can answer this question, because the dilemma is not based on the knowledge of God, but on why God did not, or could not, intervene in the situation. Thus, the basic question is one of God's morality, not his knowledge, and the answer will have to be based on different principles.

There is one way, though, that the two cases are very different. If God knew from all eternity this would happen, then the events are fixed and he is the only one who could have fixed them. Thus, God is the author of all history, and for some reason unknown to us, wanted us to be in the car accident. In this case, foreknowledge threatens our security, because it implies God planned the accident, or at least knew about it and did nothing to stop it. If God knew, we are tempted to question the justice and goodness of God. But if God does not know, and the future is not fixed, then we can see how he is not responsible for the accident, but loves us, and wants to help us in spite of the circumstances. This may also help us to look for and recognize the true reason for the accident—perhaps a drunk driver or mechanical failure.

So what practical advantage is there if God knows ahead of time what will happen to us? Either way, we have the accident. Either way we have to trust God that he loves us and will take care of us. And either way, we must answer the question of the innocent suffering. The one big difference is that we do not have to question the justice of God if God did not know from all eternity that the event would take place. Thus, a lack of foreknowledge exhibits a distinct advantage over absolute foreknowledge when we consider the emotional impact of the doctrines on our lives.

### **Philosophical Security**

Our hearts cannot rest  
In what our mind tells us is not true.

This pithy proverb<sup>7</sup> accurately describes the state of many people who are struggling with the idea of absolute foreknowledge. Though they may have learned the philosophical justification of free-will in light of God's foreknowledge, they still feel in the back of their minds that something is not quite right about it. They can quote

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<sup>7</sup>Attributed to Pascal, in his *Pensées*, but I could not find an exact quote when I read his work.

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rational arguments like “God’s foreknowledge does not make the event happen” or “certainty does not entail necessity” or “God’s perspective of the event is different from man’s perspective,” but they still question, even if only subconsciously, how absolute foreknowledge can be compatible with man’s free will.<sup>8</sup>

Though we will never have all our philosophical questions answered, we must resolve intellectual doubts about fundamental issues such as the goodness and justice of God. We cannot grow in our relationship with God if we are constantly questioning his justice, even if the question is not fully formed in our conscious mind. Though some people refuse to address basic philosophical issues because they are afraid of being led astray from the truth, the questions will not go away by ignoring them. They must be answered, or they will continue to plague the person’s spiritual life, and may result in bitterness towards God.

Unfortunately, many people perform a “disconnect” at this point. They disconnect their logic from their theology. They assert that though God has absolute foreknowledge, God is still just and good, man is free and responsible, the future is open and contingent, and God is not the author of evil. They want all of these things to be true at the same time, but are unwilling to drop the premise that makes them incompatible. All these things would be true, and logically consistent, if they only assumed what the Bible says—that God does not know the future.

So, how will the person answer these philosophical questions? Obviously, no amount of browbeating with Bible verses is going to make the doubts go away.<sup>9</sup> Only intellectually-satisfying answers will dissolve the doubts, and these answers can only proceed from valid presuppositions. Since the basic presupposition of the Christian philosopher is the nature and character of God, the scriptural concept of God must be the starting point for resolving these intellectual dilemmas. Thus, good Bible study provides the foundation for building the logical structure necessary to answer

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<sup>8</sup>Or they could ask many of the other free-will related questions, such as, “Why did God create the world knowing that most of the people he created would end up in hell?”

<sup>9</sup>Although Robert E. Picirilli has suggested that we tell ourselves that God’s foreknowledge does not negate man’s free will over and over again until we believe it. “One needs only to follow that with a forthright and confident statement—repeated, if need be, until he “sees” it is so—that though God knows the way I will choose, I will be free to choose that way or another when the time comes.” Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 43, No. 2, June, 2000, pp. 270-71.

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philosophical questions about the correlation of absolute foreknowledge with the free will of man.

Once a person is convinced he understands what the Bible teaches about God's knowledge, he can apply his mind to the philosophical questions arising from the biblical concepts. He must be careful, though, to follow good rules of logic, avoiding logical fallacies whenever he encounters them. Sloppy philosophy is dangerous, especially when the subject under investigation is the nature of God.

And what if his reasoning leads him to question his Bible study? Then he can return to the Bible, re-applying good hermeneutical principles to see if perhaps his understanding of the Scriptures has been faulty. In a conflict between the clear teaching of Scripture and the mind of man, we should always accept the Word of God before human reasoning. But since God is the most reasonable being there is, we should expect, and work toward, compatibility between good Bible study and good logic.

We do not have to fear asking good intellectual questions about theological subjects as long as we are willing to be honest and follow the rules of logic. A good understanding of biblical truth will keep our foundation secure as we build our philosophical arguments.<sup>10</sup> Our honesty will protect us from error as long as we are willing to do God's will.<sup>11</sup> God has given us the Spirit of Truth to guide us into all truth.<sup>12</sup>

Exploring philosophical issues does not have to make us insecure as long as we search the Bible diligently, reason honestly, and depend on God's Spirit to guide us.

### **Biblical Security**

People sometimes overreact emotionally to the idea that they may have learned something incorrect about God. "How can I trust anything I believe," they wonder, "if I am wrong about what the Bible says on this subject?" But we have the right to grow and learn, and God has never said it is somehow unspiritual or immoral to

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<sup>10</sup>Colossians 2:8. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

<sup>11</sup>John 7:17 - "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."

<sup>12</sup>John 16:13 - "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth."

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change our minds. Having correct doctrines does not mean God loves us more, and having incomplete knowledge does not mean he loves us less. He knows we are growing and changing, but we are the ones who sometimes become nervous about the process.

In *The Openness of God*, Clark Pinnock observes,

“I realize that reconsidering one’s model of God may be a delicate issue for some readers. It may feel as if, when a familiar way of thinking about God is questioned, God himself is lost or has become distant. But the experience of reconceptualizing can be positive. After the initial anxiety of rethinking, one will find God again in a fresh way around the next bend in the reflective road. Rather than worry about *our* discomfort, perhaps we should be concerned about *God’s* reputation. Does it not concern us that God’s name is often dishonored because of poor theologies of God? How can we expect Christians to delight in God or outsiders to seek God if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect and existentially repugnant ways? We cannot expect it.”<sup>13</sup>

Questioning one unit of knowledge does not mean that the rest of our doctrines are suspect. We can isolate the one area of inquiry and concentrate on that, while we hold to our other beliefs without changing them. While the results of our studies may affect other doctrines, we can still hold to the old teachings until we see a good reason to modify them. Our whole life does not need to be shaken because we question one doctrinal subject.

The only way to alleviate insecurity about our doctrines is to gain a better understanding of God’s Word. This may require intense Bible study over an extended period of time, but God is not going to suddenly change or disappear while we investigate the Scriptures. Our feelings of insecurity do not mean God has changed. After all, it is only our understanding of God, and not the nature or character of God, which may be different after our study. If we gain greater biblical understanding of God’s nature, character, and ways, then we will only be drawn closer to him through our efforts.

Asking how much God knows is not on the same level as asking whether or not the Bible is the Word of God, or whether Jesus is the Christ, or if man can be saved by good works. Some doctrines are

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<sup>13</sup>Clark Pinnock, et al, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 104.



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directly related to our salvation while others are not. Whether or not God knows our future choices does not determine the status of our salvation. So we can relax and enjoy our study of the Word. Whether we end up believing God knows the future or not, our study of the Scriptures will enrich our relationship with God.

### Does This Idea Limit God?

Are we limiting God if we say he does not know the future? Not if that is what the Bible says about him. But we may be limiting what some people *think* God is like. This distinction is very important when it comes to biblical doctrine.

If a person believes the Bible teaches that God is both good and evil, am I limiting God if I say God is only good? Of course not, I am only trying to say what the Bible teaches about the character of God. What I say may limit what the other person *believes* God is like, but that concept *needs* to be limited if it does not agree with God's Word. Doctrines which exceed the revelation of the Scriptures need to be corralled by the application of sound biblical teaching.

Again, if someone says God is both spirit and physical, am I limiting God by saying he is only spirit? No, but I am limiting what the other person believes God is like. And that idea needs to be limited because it is not biblically accurate.

So, if we say God does not know what we will choose in the future, are we limiting God. No, we are not—not if this is what the Bible teaches about God's knowledge. But this idea will obviously limit some people's concept of God. The question should not be whether or not we are limiting God, but whether or not what we believe is biblical. If our ideas are not well supported by the Scriptures, then we need to allow the Bible to modify our thinking.

The idea that God must not be limited originates in the definition of God as "infinite." "God is infinite," people say, "so we cannot say anything about him that limits him." But this unrestricted definition of "infinite" is not found in the Bible. As C. S. Lewis astutely observed, if our use of the word "infinite" has us defining God as everything and nothing at the same time, it would be better to drop the word altogether.<sup>14</sup> The word "infinite" is often used to introduce unbiblical qualities into the definition of God's nature or character. If we are going to say that God is "infinite" with respect

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<sup>14</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 89.

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to a particular quality, we must be prepared to explain exactly what that means from the Scriptures.

For example, God obviously has more power than we. But we must be careful not to define God's power as "infinite," and then use our finite minds to make that mean anything we want. We must define God's power as he reveals it in his word, and when we come to the end of what the Bible says, we must stop speaking.

Once, during a time of street evangelism, my witnessing partner, Mark, a young Christian, was asked by an unbeliever if God could do anything. I almost spoke up, but decided that my partner should learn to answer such questions for himself. "Sure he can," Mark responded. "Well, then can God make a rock bigger than he can move?" Mark stumbled around for a few sentences, finally realizing that he could not answer the question. I rescued Mark, but it was good for him to experience this kind of dilemma for himself. We talked later about not dealing with absurdities when witnessing, and he learned not to go beyond the Bible's definitions of God in his evangelism. Mark had gotten himself into trouble because he did not limit his ideas of God's power to the revelation in God's Word. Rather, he agreed with the unbeliever's unlimited or "infinite" idea, and then could not answer the absurd question based on the faulty definition of God's power.

The same is true of God's knowledge. If we go beyond what the Bible says about God's knowledge, then our ideas need to be reigned back to what the Scriptures actually teach about the subject. In this, we are not limiting God, but simply trying to arrive at the Biblical definition of how much God knows.

We need to approach the Scriptures with an open mind, not asking, "How can I prove God knows the future?" which will only result in our forcing pre-conceived ideas onto the text, but rather, "How much does God know?" This attitude encourages us to take the Scriptures for exactly what they say, allowing the theological chips to fall where they may.

God is never limited by good biblical teaching, but our ideas should and must be limited if they differ from the clear revelation of God's Word.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>John Sanders uses this same logic when he explains, "The biblical model of God as a personal being who enters into genuinely reciprocal relations with us fits nicely with human libertarian freedom. God is not being reduced—unless one has in mind some particular model of deity that cannot in any way be contingent on the actions of creatures. If God actually does respond, change his mind and dialogue with his creatures, then the model here explained is not a reduction of God but an affirmation of how God really operates in relation to us." *The God Who Risks*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 222.



## **Part IV**

### **Appendices**



## Appendix A

### Verses Against Absolute Foreknowledge

Taken in their contexts, most of these texts are simple historical narratives. If we allow the texts to speak for themselves, they indicate that God does not have absolute foreknowledge. As stated earlier, simply dismissing these verses as poetic, based on a preconceived notion of absolute foreknowledge, constitutes eisegesis and is contrary to good hermeneutical principles.

**Note for the second edition:** It was brought to my attention that I had not given Gordon Olson credit for his time and effort in collecting the lists of Scripture texts listed in Appendices A, B, and C. I am sorry for this omission. Those of us who are persuaded of a governmental view of theology are indebted to Gordon Olson's dedicated and tireless research. Gordon C. Olson, *The Foreknowledge of God* (Arlington Heights, IL: Bible Research Corporation, Inc., 1941).

<p>Gen. 2:17            (1:5; 5:5)            6:5-7 (1:31)            18:20-21, 22-33            22:1, 12</p>	<p>11:11-13            21:27-29 (21, 22)            II Kgs. 20:1-7            23:26, 27            (I Kgs. 9:3)</p>
<p>Exod. 4:8, 9            13:17, 18            16:4            32:7-14, 30-35            33:5</p>	<p>I Chr. 17:9, 10            21:7-14, 15 (1)            (II Sam. 24:1)            II Chr. 7:16            12:5-8</p>
<p>Num. 11:1            14:11-24, 27-35            16:20-35, 44-48</p>	<p>Job 2:3            Ps. 14:2 (53:2)</p>
<p>Deut. 8:2            9:13-14, 18-19            (20) 25-29 (10:10)            13:1-3</p>	<p>78:21, 22, 58-61            106:23, 44-45            Is. 5:3-7            38:1-5</p>
<p>Judg. 2:18, 20-22            (3:4)            10:13-16</p>	<p>(II Kgs. 20:1-7)            63:8-10            Jer. 3:6-8</p>
<p>I Sam. 2:3            (3:12-14)            13:13-14            15:11, 23, 26, 35            (28:18; 8:4-9, 22;            12:13-19)</p>	<p>7:31            18:7-10            19:5            26:2-3, 4-6, 12-13,            18-19            32:35</p>
<p>II Sam. 7:10-11            12:22 (14)            24:12-16 (1), 25</p>	<p>Ez. 2:5, 7            12:1-3            20:8-9, 13-14, 15-17,            21-22</p>
<p>I Kgs. 9:3, 4-9</p>	

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22:30  
24:14  
Hos. 8:5  
Joel 2:12-14  
Amos 5:14-15  
7:1-3, 4-6  
Jonah 1:2  
3:2, 4-10  
4:2  
Zech. 8:14-15  
Matt. 10:2-4  
(Mk. 3:13-19;  
Lk. 6:12-16)  
19:28  
25:41  
Mark 13:32  
(Mt. 24:36; Acts 1:7)  
John 14:2  
Acts 15:7  
Rev. 3:5  
17:8  
(13:8; 20:12, 15;  
21:27)  
22:18-19

## Appendix B

### Verses Used to Support Absolute Foreknowledge

These verses represent the best passages people present to support the idea of absolute foreknowledge.

Since prophecy is a revelation of what God plans to do in the future (Isaiah 46:8-11; 48:3), these cannot be used to prove foreknowledge directly. Please refer to the chapter “Prophecy and Foreknowledge” for details on how God can prophesy the future without absolute foreknowledge. The prophecies are underlined for easier reference.

Gen.	<u>15:13-15</u> 16:12 <u>17:20</u> <u>25:23</u>	<u>12:32-34</u> 13:18, 19, 21, 26 17:12 <u>19:24, 28, 36, 37</u>
Num.	23:19	21:18, 19
Deut.	31:16-21, 29 (21, 27)	Acts <u>2:3</u> <u>13:29</u>
I Sam.	15:29	Rom. 8:28-30
I Kgs.	13:2 (II Kgs. 22:1; 23:15, 16)	11:2
Ps.	<u>22:16, 18</u> <u>69:21</u>	I Cor. <u>2:7</u> Gal. <u>3:8</u> Eph. 1:3-5, 11 3:11
Isa.	<u>44:28-45:7</u> 46:9-11 <u>52:13-15</u> <u>53:1-12</u>	II Thess. 2:3-4, 13-14 I Tim. 4:1-3 II Tim. 1:9, 10
Jer.	1:5 <u>25:11, 12</u> <u>29:10-14</u>	I Pet. 1:1, 2, 20 Rev. <u>1:1, 7</u> 2:10 4:1 6:11
Zech.	12:10	<u>7:4-8, 9, 14</u> 9:20, 21 (16:9, 11) 11:2-12, <u>13</u> 12:6, 7-9 <u>13:1-7, 8, 11-18</u> <u>14:20</u>
Mal.	3:6	<u>17:7, 8, 12</u> <u>19:19-21</u>
Matt.	<u>16:21</u> <u>20:17-19</u> <u>21:1-5</u> <u>24:1-25:46</u> 26:31-34 <u>27:9</u>	<u>20:1-3, 7-10</u> <u>22:6</u>
Mark	<u>9:31</u> <u>14:13-16</u>	
Luke	<u>24:25-27, 44-47</u>	
John	6:64, 70, 71	





## Appendix C

### God Lives In Time

These references give ample evidence that God lives in a duration or sequence of time. The verses given here are the best out of over 3,000 references.

Because the entire Bible is presented in a framework of time, it can sometimes be easy to miss the point in these verses, so the reader may need to examine the words carefully to see the time element.

References in parentheses are verses which clarify the original quotation.

Gen.	1:26, 27	14:8, 20-24, 27, 28
	2:3 (1:5, 8, 13, 19,	25:3, 4, 10, 11
	23, 31; Ex. 20:11;	32:13
	31:17)	35:34
	6:5, 12, 13	Deut. 1:30-33, 34, 37
	8:21	2:25
	9:16	4:14
	11:5-8	5:24, 28, 29
	17:1, 22	9:7, 8, 10, 11, 19,
	18:1, 10, 14, 21, 33	20, 22, 25
	19:22, 24, 29	10:1, 2, 4, 8
	35:9, 13	11:12
Exod.	2:23-25	13:17, 18
	3:4, 7-9	23:14
	4:14	26:6-9
	6:2-5	28:63
	9:5, 6, 18	29:20, 27, 28
	12:23, 29	32:21, 39
	14:24	Josh. 5:2, 9
	19:3, 10, 11, 20	7:1, 26
	24:16	10:14
	31:18 (32:16)	23:16
	32:9-14, 32-34	24:20
	33:11, 17-23	Judg. 2:20-22
	34:1, 2, 5	10:7, 16
Num.	1:1	I Sam. 2:35
	11:1, 33	3:8, 10
	12:2, 4-9	9:16

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

<p>15:11, 35</p> <p>II Sam. 11:27</p> <p>24:1, 16</p> <p>I Kgs. 8:34-40, 46-50, 59</p> <p>11:9</p> <p>22:19</p> <p>II Kgs. 13:3, 4, 23</p> <p>14:26</p> <p>17:18</p> <p>19:16, 20, 25, 28</p> <p>20:5 (20:1)</p> <p>22:13, 17</p> <p>23:26</p> <p>24:20</p> <p>I Chr. 28:9</p> <p>II Chr. 1:7</p> <p>7:12-16</p> <p>16:9</p> <p>29: 8, 10</p> <p>30:8, 9</p> <p>Neh. 1:6, 11</p> <p>9:16, 17, 32</p> <p>Job 1:6</p> <p>2:1</p> <p>7:17</p> <p>28:23, 24</p> <p>31:4</p> <p>36:26</p> <p>38:4</p> <p>Ps. 7:11</p> <p>18:6</p> <p>25:6, 7, 10</p> <p>30:5</p> <p>33:11, 13-15</p> <p>35:23</p> <p>40:17</p> <p>78:21, 38, 58, 59</p> <p>80:14</p> <p>90:2, 4</p> <p>95:10, 11</p> <p>102:19, 24-27</p> <p>103:13</p> <p>105:19</p> <p>106:23, 24</p>	<p>125:2</p> <p>139:17</p> <p>149:4</p> <p>Prov. 15:3</p> <p>Isa. 1:18</p> <p>2:19</p> <p>9:1</p> <p>10:25</p> <p>11:11</p> <p>12:1</p> <p>13:9, 13</p> <p>25:8</p> <p>30:27, 28</p> <p>37:26</p> <p>40:28</p> <p>42:14</p> <p>43:10</p> <p>45:18</p> <p>46:9-11</p> <p>48:16</p> <p>49:15, 16</p> <p>55:8, 9</p> <p>57:11, 15</p> <p>60:10</p> <p>65:19</p> <p>Jer. 4:4</p> <p>8:18</p> <p>15:1</p> <p>16:17</p> <p>17:10</p> <p>23:24, 25</p> <p>29:11</p> <p>32:17-19, 30-32</p> <p>44:21, 22</p> <p>51:6</p> <p>Ezek. 5:13</p> <p>6:9</p> <p>8:18</p> <p>16:42</p> <p>20:33</p> <p>21:17</p> <p>22:20, 31</p> <p>34:11, 12</p> <p>35:10-15</p>
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## APPENDIX C

38:18, 19  
39:23, 24, 29  
43:7  
Dan. 9:14, 15, 17-19  
Hos. 5:15  
6:1  
7:2  
11:1, 3, 4, 8, 9  
13:11  
14:4  
Joel 2:12-14, 18  
Amos 9:4, 8  
Jonah 1:2, 6  
3:10  
Mic. 1:3  
3:4  
4:12  
5:3  
7:18, 19  
Nah. 1:2, 3, 6, 7  
Zeph. 1:18  
2:8, 9  
3:5, 8, 17  
Hag. 1:8  
Zech. 1:12-16  
4:10  
7:12, 13  
8:14, 15  
10:6  
Mal. 2:17  
3:16  
Phil. 2:5-11  
Heb. 1:1, 2  
10:13  
Rev. 1:4, 8  
8:1  
22:10



## Appendix D

### God Changes His Mind

Though these instances of God's changing his mind are translated in different ways, they are all rendered from the same Hebrew word (from the root **נָחַם**) meaning to change the mind, to be penitent, comforted, or eased. The translation of the word is given in italics.

Genesis 6:6, 7 - "And the Lord *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. And 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.'"

Exodus 32:12, 14 - "Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Thy burning anger and *change Thy mind* about doing harm to Thy people. (14) So the Lord *changed His mind* about the harm which He said He would do to His people."

Numbers 23:19 - "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should *repent*; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

Deuteronomy 32:36 - "For the Lord will vindicate His people, And will *have compassion on* His servants; When He sees that their strength is gone, And there is none remaining, bond or free."

Judges 2:18 - "And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was *moved to pity* by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them."

I Samuel 15:11, 29, 35 - "I *regret* that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night. (29) "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or *change His mind*; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

(35) “And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord *regretted* that He had made Saul king over Israel.”

II Samuel 24:16 - “When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord *relented* from the calamity, and said to the angel who destroyed the people, ‘It is enough! Now relax your hand!’ And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”

I Chronicles 21:15 - “And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it; but as he was about to destroy it, the Lord saw and *was sorry* over the calamity, and said to the destroying angel, ‘It is enough; now relax your hand.’ And the angel of the Lord was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.”

Psalm 90:13 - “Do return, O Lord; how long will it be? And *be sorry for* Thy servants.”

Psalm 106:45 - “And He remembered His covenant for their sake, And *relented* according to the greatness of His lovingkindness.”

Psalm 110:4 - “The Lord has sworn and will not *change His mind*, ‘Thou art a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.’”

Psalm 135:14 - “For the Lord will judge His people, And will *have compassion on* His servants.”

Jeremiah 4:28 - “For this the earth shall mourn, And the heavens above be dark, Because I have spoken, I have purposed, And I will not *change My mind*, nor will I turn from it.”

Jeremiah 15:6 - “You who have forsaken Me,” declares the Lord, “You keep going backward. So I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you; I am tired of *relenting!*”

Jeremiah 18:8, 10 - “if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will *relent* concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. (10) if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will *think better* of the good with which I had promised to bless it.”

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Jeremiah 20:16 - “But let that man be like the cities which the Lord overthrew without *relenting*, And let him hear an outcry in the morning And a shout of alarm at noon;”

Jeremiah 26: 3, 13, 19 - “Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may *repent* of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds.” (13) “Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and the Lord will *change His mind* about the misfortune which He has pronounced against you.” (19) “Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord *changed His mind* about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them? But we are committing a great evil against ourselves.”

Jeremiah 42:10 - “If you will indeed stay in this land, then I will build you up and not tear you down, and I will plant you and not uproot you; for I shall *relent* concerning the calamity that I have inflicted on you.”

Ezekiel 24:14 - “I, the Lord, have spoken; it is coming and I shall act. I shall not *relent*, and I shall not pity, and I shall not be sorry; according to your ways and according to your deeds I shall judge you,’ declares the Lord God.”

Hosea 11:8 - “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me, All My *compassions are kindled*.”

Hosea 13:14 - “Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting? *Compassion* will be hidden from My sight.”

Joel 2:13, 14 - “And rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, And *relenting* of evil. (14) Who knows whether He will not turn and *relent*, And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a libation For the Lord your God?”



## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

Amos 7:3, 6 -"The Lord *changed His mind* about this. 'It shall not be,' said the Lord. (6) The Lord *changed His mind* about this. 'This too shall not be,' said the Lord God."

Jonah 3:9, 10 - "Who knows, God may turn and *relent*, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?" (10) "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God *relented* concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it."

Jonah 4:2 - "And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who *relents* concerning calamity.'"

Zechariah 8:14 - "For thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Just as I purposed to do harm to you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and I have not *relented*,'"

## Appendix E

### The Present Could Have Been Different

The following scripture passages give examples of situations where the present would have been different if God or men had made different choices in the past, or if circumstances had been different. Situations like this indicate that the future is not fixed, but can vary depending on our present choices. If the future is not certain to transpire in a particular way, then it cannot pre-exist objectively such that it can be an object of God's knowledge.

Genesis 31:42 "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night."

Jacob would have been treated differently by Laban if God had not made certain choices in the past. So God's past choices determined Jacob's present circumstances, and Jacob's situation would have been different if God had made different decisions.

Jeremiah 23:22 "But if they had stood in My council, Then they would have announced My words to My people, And would have turned them back from their evil way And from the evil of their deeds."

Jeremiah reveals that if the prophets had listened to God and spoken only what he commanded, the people would have responded differently. So the present condition of the people could have been different if the prophets had responded differently in the past.

Exodus 9:15 "For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth."

The status of Pharaoh and his people would have been different at the time of God's statement if God's actions had been different in the past.

Numbers 22:33 "But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside

## DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live.”

Balam was spared by his donkey’s reluctance to approach the angel of the Lord. Since the angel of the Lord is equated with the appearance of God himself in the Old Testament, God is saying here that Balam would have been dead, rather than alive, if the donkey had not turned aside three times.

II Samuel 12:8 “I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!”

Through the prophet Nathan, David is informed that if Saul’s house, wives, Israel, and Judah had been too little, God would have given him even more. So David’s current possessions would have been different if God had thought, in the past, that David’s possessions had not been enough.

Isaiah 48:18 “If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.”

If the people had obeyed God in the past, their current condition would have been better than it was at the time of God’s statement. God himself says that a person’s present is dependent on his past, and by saying this affirms that a person’s future is dependent on his present. Thus, if future history can be different depending on what we do now, then it cannot actually exist such that God could know it in advance.

Matthew 11:21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”

Here Jesus reveals that if the circumstances in Tyre and Sidon had been different, their response would have been different. The implication is that the cities would not have been judged and destroyed because the inhabitants would have repented. This makes it quite clear that the future is not determined, but can turn out differently depending on the choices we make in the present.

See Luke 10:13 for a parallel passage.

## THE PRESENT COULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT

Matthew 11:23 “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.”

Again, Jesus says that Sodom would have existed during Jesus’ own lifetime, if the circumstances had been different. Thus, present history during the time of Jesus would have been different if the miracles done in Capernaum had occurred in Sodom.

Matthew 12:7 “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.”

Given different knowledge (or moral character) on the part of the Pharisees, Jesus says that their present choices would have been different. This means also that if a person’s present choices are different, their future will vary accordingly.

Matt. 24:43 “But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.”

In this illustration, Jesus warns his listeners to be on the alert concerning his coming. In saying this, Jesus teaches us that we can produce different futures depending on how we respond now. We can be on the alert and not be surprised by his coming, or be lazy and pay the penalty.

This is not just a propositional statement. Propositional statements concern the future. “If you do this, then this will happen.” But here Jesus says that if something had been different in the past, then the present would have been different. By phrasing the statement this way, he declares that the present condition of the head of the house could have been different if he had only made different choices in the past. This is a revelation of how history works, and not just a warning concerning Jesus’ return.

See Luke 12:39 for a parallel passage.

John 4:10 “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, “Give Me a drink,” you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.’”

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The Samaritan woman's response to Jesus would have been different if she had understood who Jesus was. In saying this, Jesus acknowledges the flexibility of history. If there had been different circumstances in the past, the woman would have acted differently, and the present would have been different than it was when Jesus spoke.

John 14:2 "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you."

Jesus would have told the disciples something different if the circumstances had been different.

John 14:7 "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."

Speaking here to Philip, Jesus reveals that Philip never really understood who Jesus' real father was (see John 1:45). If Philip had really known Jesus, he would have known the Father also. Given different past circumstances, the present would have been different.

John 15:22 "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sinned, but now they have no excuse for their sin."

Jesus here declares that if he had refrained from speaking, then the present moral situation of the Pharisees would have been different. So, the present could have been different if Jesus had acted differently in the past.

See John 15:24 for a similar example.

I Corinthians 2:8 "the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;"

Paul tells us that if the earthly rulers had had different understanding, their reaction to the Lord Jesus would have been different. Again, if the past had been different, the present would have differed accordingly.

Hebrew 4:8 "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that."

## THE PRESENT COULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT

The writer of Hebrews tells us that if true rest had come through Joshua, David would not have mentioned another day of rest in Psalms. David's words would have been different in his present if there had been a different past history. And if David's present had been different, then the words of the Psalms would have been different for the writer of Hebrews and for us.

Hebrew 8:7 "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second."

Since the first covenant was not perfect, God moved in history to establish a second covenant through the blood of Jesus. But, the writer of Hebrews acknowledges that if the first covenant *had been* perfect, there would have been no reason to establish a second. Here we have the amazing declaration that *God's* actions would have been different if the past had been other than it was.

All of these passages clearly reveal that the present would have been different given different past choices or circumstances. This means the future can be different given different present choices. So the future is not certain and fixed as many would have us believe.

This flexibility of history also makes it impossible for anyone, including God, to know what the future will be, since it can turn out any number of ways depending on the present choices of God and man. And if the future does not currently exist, it cannot be an object of God's knowledge.



# Appendix F

## Fred Heeren on Time and God

**Note:** These comments are not intended as a criticism of Fred Heeren or his work, but only as a discussion of some of his arguments. These arguments are commonly presented by many who hold to the timelessness of God.

Some authors have suggested that God must be outside of time, because time for the created universe had a beginning. Take, for example, this paragraph from Fred Heeren's book *Show Me God*:

“The consensus of modern science is that the universe—and time itself—had a beginning. Nothing that is confined to time could have created the cosmos. God must not only be separate from His creation, but He must exist outside of time. Again, from ancient days, the Bible specifically defined God as the I AM, operating outside of time and existing before the universe He created.”<sup>1</sup>

While modern science may find time *as part of the creation* has had a beginning, this still does not tell us anything about the possibility of time *in the being of God*. There is nothing essentially inconsistent with the possibility that a spiritual being living in a duration created a finite universe which exists in its own duration (time).

Modern science is very limited in its scope and can only deal with observable and repeatable phenomena. Therefore, any conclusions science reaches may tell us something about matter and energy, but it will not tell us anything about the nature of a spiritual being. How much spirit has science observed? How many experiments have been performed which involve the relationship of spirit to time? Experimenting with spirit is outside the scope of “modern science” so the only recourse we have for information about God's relationship to time is what he reveals in his Word.

Why must God exist outside of time in order to create the universe? Just because the universe shares qualities God has (existence, duration, unity and diversity, power, etc.), this does not require the logical rejection of these qualities in the being of God. It

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Heeren, *Show Me God: what the Message from Space is Telling Us About God* (Wheeling, IL: Day Star Publications, 1997), p. 395.



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simply means God created something which has some of his qualities.

Take, for example, the characteristic of unity and diversity in the creation. Does the presence of this quality in the created order mean we have to reject it as part of the nature of God? Yet Heeren uses this same kind of logic with reference to time (“Nothing that is confined to time could have created the cosmos.”) But why should it be impossible for a spiritual being who exists in an endless duration to make a finite universe which exists in its own finite duration? After all, there is nothing inherently inconsistent with spiritual beings existing in a duration. There are many kinds of finite spiritual beings—angels, cherubim, seraphim, demons, unnamed creatures, etc.—all of whom operate in our finite time. They share the quality of spirit with God, so why not duration as well?

As for his reference to the name of God as the I AM, we have already seen in chapter 8 that this scripture is at least obscure since it can be used to prove either theory. At best it states that God is in the present and so lends itself to the duration interpretation. Any reading of this name as indicating the absence of time would constitute eisegesis since the passage itself does not define the name as including the notion of timelessness. We would have to look elsewhere in the scriptures to support the idea of an eternal now God, and those passages simply do not exist.

Lastly, it is interesting that Heeren concludes his comments with the claim that God must exist “...*before* the universe he created.” (emphasis mine). In this, he is correct, and the words of Jesus support his statement (John 17:5, 24; cf. also Ephesians 1:4 and I Peter 1:20). There was a time before the world existed, but to have such a situation, one must also have time (duration or sequence) existing before the creation of the universe.

There are two explanations people who believe in timelessness may present for using the word *before* with reference to the creation. First, they may say this word is only being used from the standpoint of the creation itself. The problem with this explanation is that the perspective does not matter. Whether they look at the creation from God’s standpoint or ours, if there was a *before*, then there was time (duration, sequence) *before* the creative act. The second reason people give for this kind of language is that there is no alternative vocabulary for us as humans. But why not say God created the universe *timelessly* or *eternally*? They can use the words, but then they will have to explain the ramifications of such concepts. If the creation happened timelessly or eternally, there is a problem with the idea of the *beginning* of the creation. If the

beginning of creation did not happen in time, what is a *beginning*? It is this kind of reasoning which has prompted some theologians to postulate that there has never really been a creation, rather the universe has always, eternally existed with (or in) God. Thus, it is probably the possibility of sounding pantheistic which keeps most people from speaking of eternal or timeless creation.

It is also intriguing that those who hold to the timelessness of God (or the “eternal now”) venture to claim God existed “before” the creation. If all times are “now” to God, then the “time” before the creation must be just as much “now” to him as any other “time” in the creation. Since all times are exactly the same in this view (they are all “now”), it is impossible to claim God existed “before” anything.

Cause and effect as related to the beginning of the universe is another interesting problem. Fred Heeren, in *Show Me God*, makes this comment:

“Now that 20th-century science has supplied us with ample evidence that our universe and time itself had a beginning ... , we know that time is not infinite; its beginning requires an explanation. Nothing that is confined to time could cause the universe. Time, by definition, is that province where cause-and-effect events happen, where every effect must have its cause. God, by the Bible’s ancient definition, is not confined to time. Thus, while events in time certainly require a cause, an entity outside of time may not.”<sup>2</sup>

While science may have shown us that time, as part of the creation, had a beginning, this does not tell us anything about time *before* the creation. Since scientific process cannot be applied to non-observable, non-repeatable events, modern science can have nothing to say about the nature of existence before the beginning of the universe. Information about eternity past is strictly a matter of revelation, and for that we will have to turn to God’s word for illumination.

The statement, “we know that time is not infinite,” is a speculation about all time based on the idea that time in the universe may have had a beginning. Again, the domain of science does not extend to the time before the creation, so definitive statements about *that* time will have to be based on revelation.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

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If Heeren wants to define time as the “province where cause-and-effect events happen,” then what about the greatest cause-and-effect event of all—the creation? Did this event happen without time? Then Heeren will have to explain how the effect of the universe happened without time in which to have a cause-and-effect event. And if the creation effect happened timelessly or eternally, what happens to the definition of *beginning*? He says, “events in time certainly require a cause” and yet the creation event could not have happened in time (according to his theory) because time had not yet been created.

Heeren’s claim that, “God, by the Bible’s ancient definition, is not confined to time,” is made without any supporting scriptural evidence. While it is true that Heeren’s subject matter is not biblical in nature, such a sweeping statement without any evidence can only be taken as speculation on his part, not biblical truth.

The statement that an “entity outside of time may not (certainly require a cause),” presents a difficulty. The unspoken supposition here appears to be that all entities which have duration must have had a cause. But is it required of all entities existing in a duration that they have a cause? It is just as easy to imagine a God who is in a beginningless, endless duration as it is to imagine a timeless being. It may even be easier to picture the former. The final word on the subject will have to come from the Scriptures since we have no scientific way to judge the nature of God’s eternal existence.

The above quotes from *Show Me God* are found in a section of Heeren’s book which deals with the nature of God (pp. 87-96). The basic logical structure Heeren follows is a common one which appears to be valid as long as it is used consistently. The argument goes something like this. If we see a quality in the creation, and since the cause must always be greater than the effect, then God must at least have the quality we see expressed in the creation, and we would expect his expression of that quality to be infinite (with respect to that quality).

Heeren’s example of personality is a good one. If we see personality expressed in the creation, we expect God is at least a personal being. We would also expect his personality to be on an infinite scale, that is, he should have infinite intellect, emotion, and will (or intention as Heeren puts it). This argument seems valid to this point.

Heeren also uses this kind of reasoning to support the idea that God must be powerful, because we see power expressed in the creation; he must be intelligent, because we see design in the universe; and he must be a spiritual being, because he must be greater than matter and energy (though I think the idea of not having

entropy in his being may have supported this conclusion better than the idea that God must transcend space).

In all of these, we expect the quality in God to be like the creation but on an infinite level. But we do not expect the extension of the quality to the infinite to *eliminate* or *be the exact opposite of* the quality. The personality of God may be infinite, but he does not somehow become impersonal. God may be powerful, but he does not somehow lose all power when he comes to have infinite power. And God does not cease to be anywhere because he has the capacity to be everywhere.

Oddly enough, only when Heeren deals with time does he break this pattern. If there is time in the creation, he says, then there must be no time in God. Following his logical pattern would lead us to conclude that there is time in God, but it is infinite time, that is, it would be time with no beginning as opposed to our time which had a beginning. To say time is eliminated in the being of God as duration is extended to the infinite, is to reason in exactly the opposite manner as all his other arguments. *Infinite* duration could never, by any stretch of the imagination, be defined as *no* duration (or timelessness). Having power to create the universe means having power, having personality to create personal beings means having personality, but Heeren expects us to conclude that a being with no time in *his* being created a universe with time in *its* being. In this he is stating that the cause is less than the effect.



## Appendix G

### A Response to *God's Lesser Glory:* *The Diminished God of Open Theism* by Bruce A. Ware

When a scholar takes the time and effort to write a book, it seems insufficient to attempt to address that book in an appendix. But due to the subject matter already handled in the body of this book, and a desire to keep it to a manageable size, an appendix is all that can be dedicated to a rebuttal of Bruce Ware's work.

Bruce Ware's book is a response to two other books—*God of the Possible* by Gregory Boyd, and *The God Who Risks* by John Sanders.<sup>1</sup> Both of these books describe God, and at least some of the future, as being open to change by the choices of God and man. These works stand in contrast to the "traditional" view of God and the future as being fixed and unchangeable. This view has been given various names, the most common of which is probably the "open" view of God, or "open theism." Bruce Ware attempts to point out the differences between the traditional and "open" positions, and the reasons why he believes the view of "open theism" is not biblically accurate.

In *God's Lesser Glory*, Ware contends that the God described by "open theists" is not the God described in the Bible, because "open theism" does not attribute enough knowledge, power, or control to God. Thus, God has lesser glory, he concludes, because he has less knowledge, power, or control than the God of "classical theism." Classical theism describes God as having infinite knowledge (including exhaustive knowledge of future events), unlimited power (including the ability to make people do his will and yet leave them "free"), and complete control of every event which occurs (or meticulous providence) without incurring any responsibility for evil. Ware argues that if God does not have these qualities, then he cannot have glory. The main question, of course, is how the Bible describes God, and Ware is faithful to this objective in his consideration of the subject.

It will be easiest to assess Bruce Ware's arguments in the same order they appear in his book.

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<sup>1</sup>Please refer to the bibliography for publishing information on these three books.

# DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

## Chapter 1 Why You Should Be Concerned

In order to lay the groundwork for his arguments against “open theism,” Ware attempts to define the position. As with many of his attempts to outline the “openness” position, he includes his reactions to the ideas as part of the definition and expects the reader to accept his hybrid description.<sup>2</sup> He laments, “What if God in fact faces the same limitations as we do in not being able to know what will happen in the next moment, or day, or year, or century?”<sup>3</sup> But I have never read any “openness” theologians who stated that God has the “same limitations” we do with respect to his knowledge of the future. In fact, most who hold this position are quite clear about the differences between God’s ability and our ability to know the future. They often contrast the finiteness of human knowledge with the knowledge of God as a reassurance that we are not trusting just another human being when we commit our lives to God. But this erection of a “straw man” to attack is common in Ware’s book, as we shall see clearly in chapter 3.

Ware goes on to ask, “What, in fact, if God even looks back with regret at many of his own decisions and thinks, ‘If only I had known?’”<sup>4</sup> Again, I know of no “openness” theologians who take this position. God never says that he regrets what has happened because *he made a bad decision*, but because *man responded improperly* to God’s choices. In Genesis 6, God was sorry that he had made man, and it grieved him to his heart. Does this mean that God thinks he made a mistake in creating man? Not at all, it only means that God is sorry and grieved because after he made man, they chose to rebel against him and participate in all kinds of evil. To attach this incorrect understanding of God’s grief to the definition of the “open” God, and then attack the false description, does not encourage an accurate assessment of the “openness” view.

Ware uses this same argument when treating the text in I Sam. 15 concerning God’s changing his mind about making Saul king. In an attempt to define the “openness” position about such texts, he

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<sup>2</sup>There is nothing wrong with Professor Ware’s reaction to a belief he believes will denigrate the glory of God. This is the appropriate reaction to such a thought. The problems enter when those reactions are imported into the definitions of “openness” beliefs, and then the beliefs are judged, not on their own merit or biblical accuracy, but on the augmented definitions incorporating Ware’s reactions.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

states, “God may repent of his own past actions, realizing that his own choices have not worked out well and may have led to unexpected hardship (e.g., I Samuel 15:11).”<sup>5</sup> Here he accuses God of making bad choices, but though God’s choices did not work out well, this was not because of the choice itself, but because of Saul’s sin. God’s choice to make him king was a wise choice, but he brought God to the place where he had to change his mind about Saul’s kingship. God was not questioning his previous choice to make Saul king of Israel, but the wisdom of allowing Saul to continue as king in his rebellious state. Thus, when Ware describes the “open” view as asserting that God makes bad decisions that do not work out well, he is describing his own reaction to the idea that God changes his mind, and not the actual view of the “open theist” who views God as changing his mind because of the bad choices of human beings.

Next, Ware explains how the “openness” view will affect our ideas of God’s wisdom, his providential oversight of history, and how the Christian lives his life.

First, he argues that if God does not know the future, then God either is not wise, or his wisdom is greatly limited. Defining wisdom as “the application of knowledge to devise good and right ends,”<sup>6</sup> he claims that without knowledge of the future, God cannot make wise choices. But because people can thwart the good will of God for their lives, why should this mean that God cannot make wise choices? If I choose to help my child go to college, but he squanders his time in parties and mischief, did I make an unwise choice in sending him?

And what if I knew the future absolutely and still sent my son to college? Would this not indicate even less wisdom on my part? This same argument would apply with even greater force against God if he knew the future. If God creates the world knowing that a great majority of the people will be in hell, is this not unwise? If God gives his Son for the salvation of the world knowing that most of humanity will reject him, is this not an unwise decision? If God makes Saul king knowing that he will later regret the decision, is this not also unwise?

To claim that God’s choices are unwise because of the outcome, when the result is based on the decisions of man, is to confuse the choices of God with the actions of men. Though God may regret something he did *in light of the subsequent choices of men*, it does not make God’s original choice unwise. God does not have to

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 20.



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know the final outcome of every situation in order to make wise choices, especially if the outcome may also be dependent on the free-will decisions of his creatures.

Another related problem is that God commands *us* to be wise. But if God cannot make wise decisions without absolute foreknowledge, then how are we, who have such limited knowledge, ever to make wise decisions? It would appear God has commanded us to do something we cannot do since we do not have absolute foreknowledge. And lest someone should argue that we need to trust in a God who has foreknowledge for our guidance, we must point out again that the Scriptures teach that things do not always work out perfectly for God.

Second, Ware insists that God must have complete control of every situation if he hopes to guarantee the final end of future history. But what is this final end God hopes to accomplish? Though we read many passages giving general desires God has for his people or his creation, and though there are texts indicating what God will accomplish through his omnipotence, there need be no conflict between God's actions and the free will of man. Jesus is coming back again no matter how people choose to live. There will be a new heaven and a new earth regardless of the decisions of God's creatures. These are events that will happen because God, in his omnipotence, will cause them to occur. Though people get to choose whether or not they will be with Jesus in the new heavens or earth, they cannot stop the new heavens and earth from being created. God does not subvert anyone's free will by creating a new earth, as long as he does not guarantee who will be there (or not) against their will.

The assumption here seems to be that "openness" theologians all insist that man must always be free and his will never thwarted. But to include the idea of *absolute* freedom in the definition of "openness" is to assign qualifications to the idea that most "open theists" do not assume. Everyone knows that man is not absolutely free, either physically or morally. To claim that "open theists" believe this, and then insist that history occur within these parameters, is to construct another straw man for use as target practice. God can fulfill his end for creation without violating the free will of his creatures, so we need not fear that man may someday frustrate the plan of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>As pointed out in Chapter 7, God does sometimes temporarily set aside the free will of man to accomplish his purposes. The reasons God can do this and still be just to man are outlined in the section "Prophecy and Free Will."

## A RESPONSE TO *GOD'S LESSER GLORY*

There is no reason to assume that “open theism” rejects public justice in order to uphold individual freedom. God can make decisions which are for the good of all mankind which may also curtail the freedom of some individuals. This does not mean that those people lose all freedom, but only in that area where their choices will detrimentally affect others in society. In his role as Governor, God has chosen at times to place the good of all his creatures over the freedom of some. Assignment of the wicked to hell is a good illustration of this principle. Are people in hell free? Yes, they are. But can they bother those who are in heaven? No, they cannot. So, is their freedom curtailed? Of course, but this is a necessary limitation to insure public justice and the common good of God’s creatures. We have freedom, but that freedom is not absolute, and God sometimes limits our individual freedom for the good of all involved.

“Open theists” do not wish to assert that man has absolute freedom. The problem they have is the logic of absolute foreknowledge with respect to freedom. If God absolutely knows what will come to pass, then the future must already exist (in some form), and since it can unfold only as God has seen it, man loses all freedom, since all these actions were determined in eternity past, long before the human being existed. It is this loss of *all* freedom, not the limitation of *some* freedom, to which the “open theist” objects.

Third, Bruce Ware asserts that to accept an “open” view of God is to relinquish any security in the ability of God to guide us accurately. God, as the argument goes, must know every event in advance if we are to feel secure in his guidance. If anything happens which God did not want, then God has no ability to direct us at all. It is as if God’s knowledge and wisdom would evaporate if someone did something contrary to the will of God. But does my contrary choice indicate that God is unwise in his guidance? Do I have to stop trusting God because I made a mistake and must now take a different course than what God originally planned? Is God incapable of working around my disobedience without my losing all confidence in his knowledge, wisdom, and power? As with the first point, this is a confusion of the choices of God and man. God does not become untrustworthy because *we* have been unfaithful, so it is unwarranted to assume that God cannot guide me correctly because I might rebel against his guidance.

The common thread in all of these arguments is the assumption of the absolute opposite. Either God knows absolutely all of the future, or he knows nothing. Either everything turns out as God desired it, or he is completely unwise. Either God controls all events

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in history, or he controls none. Setting up the opposite extreme as the view of the “open theist,” and then criticizing these extremes as if they were the real position, is a fruitless pursuit.

### **Chapter 2** **The Perceived Inadequacy of** **the Classical Arminian View of God**

Since the bulk of this chapter is an explanation of the objections of “open theists” to classical Arminianism, there is no need to repeat all of Ware’s observations. It appears he is accurate in his understanding of the objections of “open theists” to the Arminian persuasion.

One point which is mentioned in passing here, but which will become more important later, is the idea that God “learns.” Ware states, “... open theists claim ... that God learns from and changes his mind due to the unfolding of historical events.”<sup>8</sup> While this is technically true, we must look at the definition of the word “learn.” If by “learn” we mean “come to new knowledge,” it is possible that not all “open theists” would agree with this definition. God does not have to be pictured as learning absolutely new knowledge, that is, he came to know something which was absolutely new to him. Rather, statements like “Abraham, *now* I know” can be viewed as God’s knowledge of which choice Abraham *would* make out of the possible choices Abraham *could* make. Abraham could obey or disobey the command of God. When God claims that he now knows that Abraham will obey, he is not learning that humans can obey (as if that were something he did not know before), but that this human has chosen to obey rather than disobey, both of which God knew as possibilities beforehand. In this way, God can be viewed as gaining knowledge of which choice a person will make, without literally adding new information to the body of knowledge he has eternally possessed (Isaiah 40:14).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*God’s Lesser Glory*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup>But with either definition of “learn,” there need be no change in the omniscience of God. See Chapter 5, section “Time, Change and the Attributes of God,” subheading “Knowledge.”

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Perceived Benefits of Open Theism**

Ware lists the “five central commitments of open theism” as:

1. Real Relationship Between God and His People
2. Risk in the Creation Project
3. Repentance of God in Light of New Information
4. Reassessment by God in Light of New and Unforeseen Developments
5. Responding to Suffering in Open Theism

Under point one, Ware introduces three events “open theists” might use as illustrations of real relationship between God and man: the testing of Abraham, the fall of man, and the cross.

While the first event is acknowledged by many as revealing the reciprocal relationship between God and man, not all “open theists” would agree with Ware’s use of Sanders’ arguments as typical of “open theism” in general. Ware’s point is well taken that it is unlikely that God was completely taken aback by the fall of man, or that God had to “learn” that Adam and Eve had sinned. Since Jesus was the “Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world,” and since that event did not actually take place before the creation of man, the death of Jesus must have been a possibility in the mind of God before the creation. This would also imply that God knew the possibility that if he created man with a free will, man could rebel against him. Thus, Sanders’ use of the word “implausible” is unfortunate, and Ware’s reaction to it is understandable.

As for the crucifixion of Jesus, Ware’s hesitancy seems reasonable when he rejects the idea that God the Father and the Lord Jesus decided in the garden that Jesus would allow himself to be crucified. Again, if God knew that man could sin, and Jesus was the “Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world,” then God must have known before he created man, that if man sinned, the death of Jesus would be the only remedy. Bruce Ware rejects Sanders’ speculation at this point, and it is likely that many “open theists” would side with Ware on this issue.

Under point two, Ware responds to Sanders’ ideas that even in classical Arminianism, God takes risks in the creation of man, since man maintains “libertarian freedom” even if God knows what he will choose. Note that this is Sanders’ assessment of Arminianism, and that many “open theists” would probably disagree with Sanders on this point. Most “open theists” argue that absolute foreknowledge of future choices precludes freedom of choice, and though Sanders may be generous with Arminianism here, many others would not support his position.

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Ware then goes on to address Gregory Boyd's ideas concerning God's risk-taking. His objection is that, "... not even God *knows* whether his purposes will be fulfilled." While "open theists" may hold this to be true, one has to ask, "What purposes?" Since Ware espouses the doctrine that the will of God is always done, and that *every event* which happens in history is somehow the will of God, he approaches the idea of God's purposes from this presuppositional perspective. To him, the purposes of God are always accomplished because everything that happens *is* the will of God. Thus, no matter what happens, the purpose of God is always fulfilled.

But what does God's Word say about the purposes of God? Does God say that everything God wanted to happen has happened in the history of mankind? Obviously, it has not.<sup>10</sup> Has anything happened that God explicitly declared should not happen? Obviously, it has. Any sin is a direct denial of the clearly stated purposes of God for man. And any arguments that evil is somehow part of the plan of God for us will have to be supported from the Scriptures, and not from some presupposed, extra-biblical idea about a "secret will of God."

So, what are the purposes of God? If God purposed to have free-will creatures who could choose to love or hate him, he accomplished his purpose. If God desired to show his love to mankind, he accomplished his purpose. If God wants to have a new heaven and earth, he can accomplish that purpose without coercing anybody's free will. The only reason Ware has problems with the idea that the purposes of God might not be fulfilled is that he presupposes that everything is the will of God, and of course, everything must happen! Thus, the idea that the purposes of God might not be fulfilled is both shocking and illogical to Ware because of his presupposition. It is this "everything is the will of God" presupposition that "open theists" cannot find in their study of the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See footnote 7 of Chapter 9 for a list of references on how the will of God is not always done.

<sup>11</sup>It is usually at this point that those of the opposing view bring out a set of texts which prove that whatever God sets out to accomplish, he accomplishes. (Ware gives some of these texts on pages 203-205 of his book.) These verses are somehow supposed to prove that since God accomplishes all he chooses to do, that the logic can be turned around to state that everything that happens was purposed by God. This logical fallacy of "affirming the consequent" (see chapter 5) cannot be used to support the idea that everything which happens is the will of God.

You can say:

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For point three, Ware only gives the “openness” position, quoting both Boyd and Sanders to illustrate the point. He gives no argument against this position at this time. His problems with the idea of God’s changing his mind will be handled under Chapter 4.

In point four, Ware is addressing Sanders’ argument that God reassessed his destruction of the earth with a flood, and decided that perhaps he had not taken the best course of action and would try different methods in the future. I have to admit that though I agree with Sanders that God reassesses his choices and chooses different courses of action, I would have to side with Ware that this is a peculiar interpretation of God’s decision never to flood the earth again. While God changed his mind about having created man, it is not at all obvious that God thought he had somehow made a mistake in causing the flood. The declaration that God will never flood the earth again does not give us any clue as to what God thought about his own motives or choices. Besides, God will destroy the earth

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Whatever God wills to do, will happen.  
God wills to do this.  
Therefore, it will happen.

But you cannot reason:

Whatever God wills to do, will happen.  
This happened.  
Therefore, God willed this to happen.

This is the same as arguing:

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.  
This animal has four legs.  
Therefore, this animal is a cow.

Just as animals other than cows can have four legs, so there can be reasons events occur other than that God willed them. This is the will of God, that you abstain from sexual immorality. Do Christians ever commit sexual immorality? Yes, and whenever that happens, the will of God is not done. As long as there are other causes for events than the direct causation of God, then the will of God may not always be done.

We might note that Ware, in typical fashion, asserts that whenever evil happens, God is willing that to happen so he can accomplish some kind of good (see p. 206). But God’s Word teaches that if we “do evil that good may come” then our condemnation is just. Would God be involved in activities for which he condemns others? Of course not. Then God does not do evil so good may result. This means that we can believe the Bible when it says that evil is not the will of God.

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again, but this time it will be by fire. While I can understand Sanders' attempt to sense what kind of grief may have been in the heart of God, I think there is simply not enough information in the text to conclude that God thought he had made a mistake. So in this, I must agree with Ware.

In his assessment of Jeremiah 3:7 ("I thought they would return to me, but they did not") Ware accurately depicts the "openness" position as one claiming that God had thought one thing, but another actually came to pass. Thus, God had to reassess his former thoughts. However, Ware goes on to say that this means that God thought his former actions were "inappropriate" (in the case of Gen. 6), and that he did "not get things quite right"<sup>12</sup> (as in Jeremiah 3:7). Here again we see Ware's reaction to "open theism" impinging on his description of the beliefs themselves. That God had to reassess his actions or past thoughts in light of the intervening choices made by man, does not necessarily lead one to conclude that God thought his original actions were inappropriate. As for God's having an incorrect thought about the future choices of his people, what can we say except that this is what God's Word teaches.

Ware's fifth point deals with the response of "open theism" to the problem of suffering. After giving three examples of suffering, one from Boyd and two from Sanders, and their respective "open theism" explanations, Ware goes on to outline ten "facets of open theism's approach" to suffering.<sup>13</sup> Though some of these descriptions are faithful to the "open" position, some have just enough of Ware's conclusions included in the definition to make them inaccurate. I will only comment on the "facets" with which "open theists" might disagree:

"1. God does not know in advance the future free actions of his moral creatures." Though this is generally correct, the Scriptures contain instances where God did correctly predict the future free choices of his people. In Deuteronomy 31:16-21, God predicts that the people will rebel against him and turn to idols. And God explains exactly how he knows this when he says, "for I know their intent which they are developing today." So, to indicate that God never knows what we will freely do is not completely accurate to the "openness" position. There are ways God can know what we will do without having absolute foreknowledge.

"2. God cannot control the future free actions of his moral creatures." Taken by itself, this statement would seem to reflect what "open theism" teaches. Control and true freedom are

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<sup>12</sup>*God's Lesser Glory*, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

contradictory notions. The problem is where Ware goes with this in the rest of his book. He later claims that if all free actions of moral creatures are significant and unknown by God, then God has no control over history. Most "open theists" would not go that far in their understanding of man's freedom or God's involvement in history.

Ware states, "Simply put, *all* morally significant human choices and actions are free and hence uncontrolled by God, and *none* of those free choices and actions may be known in advance by God."<sup>14</sup> And again, "Given the nature of libertarian freedom ... I see no ground for optimism that God's project will succeed."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Ware supposes that if man is free, and God respects that freedom, then God controls nothing. While it may be true that God does not control the free actions of his creatures, one cannot conclude from this that God therefore has no control whatsoever.

"3. Tragic events occur over which God has no control." Without qualification this statement is only partially true.

First, while God cannot *justly* stop some events which occur, this does not mean that he has no control over any tragic event. The Bible and history are replete with examples of God's intervention in man's situation to control tragic events.

Second, because "control" is not adequately defined, the statement could leave one with the impression that God cannot *physically* control any event. This is a common confusion among those who insist that God has complete (meticulous) control over every event in history. They often make no distinction between God's metaphysics (in this case, physical power), and his morals (his choices). Consequently, they confuse metaphysical inability with moral inability, and incorrectly conclude that since God has the power to do all things, that he is therefore morally free to do all things.

Third, to say that God cannot morally stop a tragic event is not the same as saying God cannot do *anything* about tragic events. We do have the assurance that no matter what happens, if we respond to God properly, God can bring something good out of any event, no matter how tragic (Romans 8:28). Thus, claiming God has "no control" over tragic events is only partially true.

"4. ... he was not able to prevent them from occurring ..." Again, if this were carefully defined as moral inability, the statement would be true. But as it is, this phrase implies that God lacks *any* ability, physical or moral, to stop tragic events.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 156.



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“...he did not will or cause them to occur.” This too, seems correct until you read how Ware applies this idea. He later says, “At times this may include God’s recognition that the good he intended resulted in unanticipated pain.” He also refers to “hardships ... to which God inadvertently contributed.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, God does not directly cause tragic events to occur, but God’s choices can result in “pain” and “hardships” for his creatures. One is left with the question, “Which is it then, did something else cause the event, or did God’s choice ‘inadvertently’ result in ‘unanticipated pain’?”

6. God’s guidance is “... intended to serve the well being of others.” If Ware left this statement as it is, it would be true. But Ware qualifies this definition many times in the rest of the book. God means well, Ware claims, but he sometimes makes bad decisions because he does not know what humans will do in the future. Thus, though he intends the well being of others, he inadvertently produces hardship and suffering. The subtle implication is that though God means well, his guidance cannot really be trusted, because things may turn out badly anyway. Again, Ware confuses God’s guidance with the sinful choices of human beings.

“7. At times God realizes that the guidance he gave may have inadvertently and unexpectedly led to unwanted hardship and suffering.” This is, of course, completely inaccurate. When God gives guidance, it is always the best course of action to take. Because humans choose to ignore God’s guidance, go their own way, and make a mess of their lives, it does not mean that the guidance God gave is the cause of the problems. It is their own bad response to God that produces their hardship and suffering, not God’s guidance. This is clearly a case of Ware’s responses to “open theism” coloring his descriptions of their position.

Or could this be an intrusion of Ware’s presuppositions into the definition? If Ware would say that God controlled every event in Saul’s life, then God was ultimately responsible for his failure as king. This would mean, then, that God had “inadvertently” caused the suffering in Saul’s life by appointing him king, knowing all the while that he would eventually control Saul to rebel against him.

Is this being too harsh? Ware defines this control himself when he writes, “... God is referred to as having control of all facets of life, the bad as well as the good. These ‘spectrum’ references obviously indicate that he controls both extremes and all that is in between.”<sup>17</sup> And again he states, “The very deity of the true and

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 203-204.

## A RESPONSE TO GOD'S LESSER GLORY

living God is asserted by virtue of his control over and performance of absolutely everything that occurs in life.”<sup>18</sup> Note that Ware does not attribute to God just control over, but *performance of* absolutely everything that occurs in life. God not only controls evil, *he performs it!* Yet again he claims, “God, as God, maintains providential governance over every facet in the full spectrum of life, for to fail to do so would mean that God, in fact, is not God.”<sup>19</sup> Somehow, the performance of evil is supposed to make God God. But no matter how glorious God is supposed to appear because he “performs” both good and evil, it is doubtful that many thinking Christians will want to trust in a God who does evil so that good may come.

Ware nonetheless asserts that though God performs everything that occurs in life, people are still responsible for their own actions.<sup>20</sup> The problem with this kind of reasoning is that the word “perform” means “To carry out in action; to execute; to do.” Claiming that God carries out, executes, or does everything that occurs in life, but that someone else is responsible for those actions, is blatantly illogical. It would appear as if Ware wishes to uphold the power and control of God at the expense of God’s justice and goodness.

Perhaps it is Ware’s presupposition that God performs “everything that occurs in life” which makes it difficult for him to distinguish between God’s guidance and the tragedy that can occur when people refuse to follow that guidance. Perhaps he reasons that since God causes all things, then God must “inadvertently” be the cause of the tragedy also, and then projects his conclusion onto the tenets of “open theism.”

“8. At times, God may repent of his own past actions, realizing that his own choices have not worked out well and may have led to unexpected hardship (e.g., I Samuel 15:11).” Again we see a confusion of God’s choices and man’s. God did change his mind many times in the Bible, but it was always because of the responses of humans and not because God thought *his* original decision was a bad one.

“9. ... not even God is able to bring any good from (some suffering).” This amounts to a claim that “open theists” do not understand or believe Romans 8:28. Yet this verse is often employed by proponents of “openness” to reassure people that though circumstances may not always turn out well, God can still

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 206-207.

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move to bring good out of a bad situation. It seems a bit of a jump for Ware to go from “God does not intend evil” to “God cannot do anything about evil,” but that is exactly what he claims “openness” proponents teach.

“10. ... God may have contributed inadvertently to our suffering.” The same arguments against point number seven apply here.

Ware’s construction of so many “straw men” in these points makes it difficult to respond to his objections to the “openness” view of suffering. His additions, extrapolations, and possible projections of his own theology onto the descriptions, make them only partially accurate, thus rendering reasonable responses difficult.

Perhaps an example may help illustrate Ware’s misunderstanding of the “openness” position. Supposing God calls me to be a missionary in China, and while I am in training I am struck by a drunk driver and hospitalized. Ware seems to think the “open theist” must conclude that God “inadvertently” caused my “suffering and hardship” because he did not know that I would be injured. Is it so difficult to understand that my injuries are the fault of the drunk driver, and not God? Yet Ware wants to attribute this suffering to God’s calling rather than the free-will of the drunk driver. When Ware confuses the choices of God with those of human beings, he makes it very difficult to respond to his objections.

### **Chapter 4** **Assessing Open Theism’s Denial of** **Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge**

This chapter is laid out generally according to the broad categories of texts “open theists” use to support the idea of God’s limited foreknowledge. The categories Ware covers include texts concerning: divine growth in knowledge, “entering God’s mind,” divine remembrance, conditional future, questions about the future, and divine repentance. Some of these have been addressed in the body of this book, so rebuttal to only some of the major arguments will be listed here.

Under the “divine growth in knowledge” heading, Ware tackles three texts—Genesis 22:12 “Abraham now I know,” Genesis 3:8-13 “Where are you?” and “Have you eaten ...,” and Genesis 18:9-21 “I will go down and find out.”

Ware’s first objection to a literal interpretation of Genesis 22:12 is outlined in three parts. In his first and second parts he asks if

“Now I know that you fear God” can literally mean that God found out that Abraham fears God, whereas God did not know the condition of Abraham’s heart before the test. The third part questions whether God could know through the test that Abraham would fear God in the future.

Regarding the question of God’s finding out that Abraham fears God, it is not necessary to say that Abraham did not fear God or have faith before the test. The other major scriptures depicting God as “finding out” what was in someone’s heart have to do with the people’s response to a specific test and not to the general state of their heart (either present or future). God took the people through the wilderness to know what was in their hearts. God then goes on to define what “what was in their hearts” means—whether they would keep his commandments or not. God may have seen their intent to keep the commandments, but until they actually did so, he would not know “what was in their hearts” because “what was in their hearts” is defined as, and revealed by, specific acts of obedience to his commandments.

Another example is the case of Hezekiah, where God “left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart,” which is again defined specifically in the text as how he would respond in the matter of the envoys sent from Babylon. See also Deut. 13:3, where God uses a “prophet or dreamer of dreams” to test the people to find out if they love God, and Judges 3:4, where God left some of the nations in the land to find out if the people would keep his commandments.

Look carefully at the words: “... now I know that you fear God, *since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.*” The test was very specific, that is, whether or not Abraham would offer up his son. God now knew that Abraham would fear God even in this manner. So, even though God knew generally that Abraham was God-fearing and had faith, he did not know until after the test whether or not Abraham would actually go through with sacrificing his son. God “finds out” how people respond to specific tests, not just their general state of heart.

The third part of Ware’s objection centers on the idea that God could not be sure if Abraham would be faithful in the future, even though he had just been willing to sacrifice his son. I would have to agree, God could not know. Unfortunately, when Ware addresses this point, he is attacking something John Sanders said in his book, and not what the Bible actually says. God’s word does not use the future tense, the Bible emphatically says “*Now I know that you fear God*” and associates this fear of God with the test just performed, as God explains “you have not withheld your son, your only son, from

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Me.” Not in this text, nor in the immediate context, does God say anything approaching, “I know you will be faithful in the future.”

Ware’s explanation of the divine growth in knowledge texts is that they are statements of God’s present experience of the event as opposed to his eternal knowledge that the event would happen. But this interpretation is only valid if one presupposes 1) that God lives both in and out of time, which cannot be substantiated biblically, 2) that God’s knowledge of the future happens without experiencing the event (“I have known from all eternity that I would experience this, but now I am actually feeling this”), and 3) that it is permissible for God to communicate misleading information to people in his role as Governor. If “Put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I will do with you,” really means, “Put off your ornaments so I may experience now what I have known from all eternity I would do with you,” then God is saying something which must be misunderstood by the people, and must be considered misleading.

Ware’s second objection to a literal interpretation of divine growth in knowledge texts centers on the questions God asked Adam in the garden (Genesis 3:8-13). If the questions are literal, Ware contends, then God not only does not have knowledge of the future, but he also does not have complete knowledge of the present (“Where are you?”), is not omnipresent (“Where are you?”),<sup>21</sup> and does not have complete knowledge of the past (“Have you eaten ...?”).

The problem with Ware’s interpretation of Genesis 3:1-8 is he does not allow the use of more than one kind of literal question. As there are different kinds of poetic expressions, so there are also different kinds of literal speech. One such kind of speech is the rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions are literal, but they assume that the questioner and the questioned already know the answer.

If my son comes to me with a broken vase in his hand, I might ask, “What happened?” We both know what has happened—a vase has been broken. I am not asking in order to find out what has happened, but to start a dialog with him about the event. The question is literal, not poetic, but it is a special kind of literal question—it is rhetorical.

God uses rhetorical questions in some of his dealings with his people. “Is there any God besides me?” God queries (Isaiah 44:8). But do we think that God does not know the answer to this question and is asking his people to find out? Of course not! The people know the answer too, and that is exactly why God asks the

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<sup>21</sup>Ware makes both of these points from the same question.

question. The point is so obvious that it is emphasized by its not needing an answer.

Could not the questions God asks Adam and Eve be rhetorical? When he asks Adam, "Where are you?" God is not necessarily asking in order to find out where he is, but knows where he is, and is acknowledging by the question that he knows Adam is hiding. When God asks, "What have you done?" God is looking at a fallen man who is different—he has come out of hiding (he is feeling guilty), his spirit is different (it is dead), his appearance is different (he is wearing fig leaves), and he now has the knowledge of good and evil (his "eyes" have been opened). Adam's changed nature and appearance make it obvious to God what has happened—the man has eaten of the tree. So, why ask? For the same reason all rhetorical questions are asked—to drive home a point which is already obvious. It emphasizes the point by being so obvious that the question needs no answer.

If I know that a vase has been broken, I might be mistaken about how this happened. God, on the other hand, will not be mistaken about what has happened to Adam. Adam is suffering the consequences of only one possible event—eating from the tree.

So then, rhetorical questions will solve the problems of Gen. 3 without having to question God's current knowledge or omnipresence.<sup>22</sup> While Ware does not address the possibility of

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<sup>22</sup>I may be unique in my view on this subject, but I do not have a problem with a limitation to some of God's current knowledge as long as it was God himself who chose that limitation. I also do not have a problem with saying that God is not absolutely everywhere as long as it is God himself who is choosing to not be in a particular place.

If we define God's omniscience as the *ability* to know all that is knowable, and his omnipresence as the *ability* to be everywhere, then if God makes choices which limit his own knowledge or presence, then there is no change in his omniscience or omnipresence.

Take, for instance, the three times when God specifically reveals that he was not in a particular place. There is the garden (he came walking in the garden *after* the fall had taken place), there was God's response to the "outcry" of Sodom and Gomorrah (he would go down there to find out what they had done), and there was the removal of his presence from Hezekiah to see what he would do. Consider also the interesting statement in II Thessalonians 1:9 that eternal destruction will happen "away from the presence of the Lord." How would this be possible unless God can control his presence?

So, if God limited himself from the garden in order to see what Adam and Eve would do, and withdrew from Sodom and Gomorrah because of its evil, and withdrew from Hezekiah to find out if he would keep God's commandments, then perhaps we need to reconsider the definition of God's omniscience and omnipresence.

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rhetorical language in Gen. 3 at this point in his book, he does address it later,<sup>23</sup> but rejects the possibility. He does so only because he wishes to interpret all such language anthropomorphically. Ware has two reasons for this approach: 1) his presupposition of absolute foreknowledge, and 2) his insistence that if such language is interpreted literally, one must deny the “traditional view” of the omniscience or omnipresence of God.

Concerning Genesis 18:9-21, where God says, “I will go down and find out,” about the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah, Ware objects that if we take these verses literally, we will have to say God did not know something in the present, and that God was not present everywhere. This is not necessarily a problem, depending on how you define omniscience and omnipresence (see footnote 22 of this chapter).

But as for a rebuttal of the “openness” interpretation, Ware promises on page 77 that he will “return to this question below.” He does return to the text on pages 85-86, but only to tell us what he said before, that a literal interpretation of this text contradicts the “traditional” view, and that, “this hermeneutical question will be addressed further.” There appears to be no further discussion of this text in the rest of the book. Ware’s Scripture Index also confirms that pages 76-77 and 85-86 are the only references to this text.

Ware argues against a literal interpretation of the “entering-God’s-mind” texts (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35) by insisting that God had to know that the people could offer their children to idols. God had already seen people do this and had warned his people against this abomination. But the point is not whether God knew the people *could* do this, but whether they *would* do this thing. The possibility was always there, but whether or not the people would actualize that possibility by committing this sin was the real question. When the people did burn their children, God states that it, “never entered his mind.” God knows the kinds of sins we *can* commit. The question is whether or not he knows if we *will* commit

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It is interesting to note that these specific references to a limitation of God’s present knowledge are all directly tied to his presence, or more accurately, to the withdrawal of his presence. So, is it possible that God can control his presence, and withdraw from a particular place, such that he then must “find out” what has happened in his absence? This will obviously require much more research about God’s presence to establish a definitive answer.

As I said above, I am probably unique in my views here, so I do not claim to be representative of anyone else’s theology. I am also not finished researching and thinking about God’s omniscience and omnipresence, so my views could (and probably will) change with time.

<sup>23</sup>See the section “Questions-about-the-Future Texts” on pages 82-84.

those sins. From these verses, it appears as if the sin of his people was a surprise to him.

It is not necessary to address the “divine remembrance” texts since to be reminded is not the same as to remember. To be reminded does not imply that one has forgotten.

“Conditional future” texts are those passages in which God uses words such as “if,” “perhaps,” or “maybe” to express uncertainty about the future actions of his people. Ware gives three alternate explanations of these texts.

His first response to “conditional future” texts is to say that since God can predict *some* choices people will make in the future, then *all* choices must be foreknown. As a result, we must reinterpret “if” or “perhaps” or “maybe” to mean something else, since God already knows what the people will do. But why should we have to suppose that it is either one or the other? Why not affirm, as the Scriptures do, that God knows some choices and not others? The only reason Ware would want to do this is that he presupposes God knows the future, and then 1) all statements that God knows future choices mean that he knows on the basis of absolute foreknowledge, and 2) all statements that God might *not* know the future must be reinterpreted to agree with point 1. But if God can predict some of the choices of humans by methods other than absolute foreknowledge, then he could know some choices while not knowing others.

It is interesting that Ware uses a verse to prove absolute foreknowledge that most “open theists” use to prove that God can know future choices *without* foreknowledge. Deuteronomy 31 states that God knows what his people will do in the future because he knows their “intent which they are developing today.” Somehow, Ware takes this to mean God knows a *future* intent and he knows it today. But God is giving the reason why he knows they will rebel in the future. He says “*for* I know,” that is, I know they will rebel in the future *because* I know the present intent of their hearts. The rebellion will be in the future, and God knows that on the basis of their present intentions. This passage teaches how God can know future choices *without* having absolute foreknowledge.

Ware’s second point is a common one for the “traditional” view. He claims that God only speaks in a conditional sense for our sake. God does not really mean what he says, but he says it so he can elicit a particular response from the hearers. “Open theists” rightly claim that this is deception on God’s part and it will make it difficult to believe *all* God says if we cannot believe *some* of what he tells us. Jesus said the end would come after the Gospel is preached to



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every nation. Maybe he did not really mean this. Maybe he only said this so we would go preach the Gospel. Perhaps God is planning to send Jesus back whenever he wishes and our preaching to all nations has nothing to do with it. But if this is the case, what can we trust of all God has told us? Claiming that God does not mean what he says makes it impossible to trust him.

Ware's third point confuses conditional statements with propositional statements. While all propositional statements are conditional, not all conditional statements are propositional. "If you repent, then I will forgive you," is a propositional statement, whereas "Maybe the people will repent," is conditional but not propositional. Ware's comparison is invalid, and his explanation that propositional statements are real from our standpoint does not answer the question as to what God means when he uses conditional words. God says "if" and "perhaps" and "maybe" and Ware has not given any good reasons why these words should not be interpreted to mean exactly what they say.

Ware's next section attempts to explain the "questions about the future" texts. These include verses where God asks, "How long...?" (Numbers 14:11; Hosea 8:5).

Ware's first three points concern Boyd's interpreting Genesis 3:8 rhetorically, whereas he interprets the "questions" texts literally. Ware rightly asks what basis Boyd can have for this distinction. Unfortunately, Boyd does not really have a good answer here, because he holds to the omniscience of every present fact and the traditional view of omnipresence. But is it true, as Ware asserts, that Boyd has no basis to claim that there is nothing in the text or context that warrants the rhetorical interpretation of the text? Certainly there is. The Genesis 3 text concerns the *present*, whereas the "questions about the future" texts are just that, questions about the *future*. As Adam stood before God, God had good reason to speak rhetorically, because he could readily see what Adam had done. But if God questions how long people will rebel against him, and if he does not have absolute foreknowledge, then he has a good basis for speaking literally about not knowing the future.

Ware's fourth point questions how Boyd can claim that the duration of the Israelites rebellion was an "open" issue to God. He argues that since God declares people under the new covenant will be so changed that they will continue in obedience, then God cannot question how long the Israelites will disobey him. But as pointed out already, God's guarantee that *some* people will obey him does not mean that this is the general way he governs *all* his creatures. Ware's presuppositions are showing at this point, since he believes that God controls and performs all that happens, he believes that

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everything we do is actually *performed* by God. Thus it is perfectly reasonable for him to question why God would not know how long the Israelites would rebel. God *must* know this, because he is “performing” their disobedience now and he will “perform” their obedience in the future. Ware has a theology of power and control, so the possibility that God could *influence* people to an extent that they will obey him is probably outside the boundaries of his theological conclusions.

Ware’s contention that the “new covenant” passages in Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 teach that God will make people obey him, is impossible to support without the application of Ware’s presuppositions to the texts.

First, Jeremiah 31:31-34 never claims that the people cannot disobey the covenant. Let us re-examine the text carefully:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The covenant promises three things: 1) the law will be written on their hearts, 2) each person in the covenant will know the Lord directly rather than through the instruction of others, and 3) this will all happen because their sins will be forgiven. There is no statement here that God will force the people to obey. There is also no indication that obedience is not necessary on the part of the people. Jeremiah’s point is that the new covenant will be different in nature from the old covenant, not that God will somehow resort to forcing people to do his will.

Ezekiel introduces the idea of a new heart and spirit in more than one way. In Ezekiel 11:19, God declares “And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the

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heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.” Thus, God declares that he will give the people a new heart and spirit. Again, in Ezekiel 36:26, God states, “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” But along with these two statements he also commands them, “Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed, and *make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!* For why will you die, O house of Israel?” So which is it? Does God give people a new heart, or do they do it themselves? The answer is, “Yes!” There is no inconsistency here. If the people choose to repent and have a new heart, God will work by his Spirit to give them new hearts—hearts which will follow his law.

This same cooperation between God and man can be seen in the passages related to the circumcision of the heart. God commands the people to circumcise their own hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4), but also says he will circumcise their hearts (Deuteronomy 30:6). Paul puts these both together when he says, “But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” Paul contrasts the obedience of the “heart circumcised” Gentile with the disobedience of the “flesh circumcised” Jew, concluding that the former is real circumcision. But who is responsible for this state of heart? Both the person and the Spirit of God! It is not a case of either-or, but of both-and.

The cooperation of God and man in the “perseverance of the saints” can also be clearly seen in I Peter 1:5, “who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Christians are protected *by the power of God*, but this protection happens *through faith*. Again we see the cooperation of God and man in the process of salvation.

So, what about the verse which says, “I will put My Spirit within you and *cause* you to walk in My statutes” (Ezekiel 36:27)? The idea of causing someone else to do something is not unusual in the Scriptures. God “caused” Abraham to wander from his father’s house (Genesis 20:13), the people “caused” their sons and daughters to commit idolatry (Exodus 34:16), Balak and Baalam “caused” the Israelites to sin against God (Numbers 31:16), various kings “caused” the Israelites to participate in idolatry (I Kings 22:52; II Chronicles 21:11), Solomon’s wives “caused” him to sin against God (Nehemiah 13:26), and God has “caused” us to be born again through the resurrection of Jesus (I Peter 1:3). From these examples it is easy to see that “causing” someone else to do something is not coercion, but presenting an opportunity. If God puts his Spirit

within someone, this is the opportunity to obey his commands. This is how God “causes” his people to walk in his statutes. The Spirit of God is a cause, but a resistible cause (Acts 7:51). Thus, causation constitutes opportunity, but not coercion.

The last section in Ware’s treatment of the passages supporting limited foreknowledge is the “repentance” texts. God is said, some 36 times in Scripture, to “repent” or change his mind. Ware seems to have four major arguments with regard to these texts:

1) 34 passages stating God *did* change his mind should be interpreted anthropomorphically in light of two which say he *will not* change his mind (I Samuel 15 and Numbers 23).

2) The reference to lying and repenting in these two texts should be taken as a strict parallel.

3) God’s experiences change, while his knowledge does not.

4) God tells people they will be judged only to elicit a response. There is a broad sense of “change”—meaning that God does not really change, it only looks that way to us, and a “narrow” sense of change—meaning that God experiences what he knew he would all along, and in that sense “changes.”

Ware’s reason for taking 34 passages stating God can change his mind as anthropomorphic is based on his interpretation of the two places in I Sam. 15 and Num. 23 where God declares that he will not change his mind. Ware objects to “open theists” limiting the meaning of these two texts to the immediate context. But this is an important hermeneutical principle and must be considered in the interpretation of any text, not just these two.

The context of the I Samuel reference is the rejection of Saul as king of Israel. Samuel informs Saul that though God originally chose him as king, he has now changed his mind and has taken the kingship from him. Saul requests that Samuel return with him to worship the Lord. When Samuel refuses, Saul grabs Samuel’s robe. This prompts Samuel to reply, “God will not lie and he will not change his mind” Now what could Samuel possibly mean? Could he mean that God never changes his mind? This would be a strange interpretation indeed, since Samuel himself states both before *and* after this pronouncement that *God has changed his mind about Saul!*

The context forces us to look for a different understanding than that God never changes his mind. Samuel must be speaking about the first statement he made. God has taken the kingdom away from Saul, and no matter what Saul does, God is not going to change his mind and give the kingdom back. In light of the two other statements before and after that God changed his mind, this must be Samuel’s meaning.

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Note carefully the order of the dialog:

Samuel - "God has changed his mind about your being king."

Saul - "Please let me continue to be king."

Samuel - "God will not change his mind."

Saul - "Please worship with me."

Narrator - "The Lord had changed his mind about Saul's being king."

What can the second reference to God's not changing his mind possibly mean but that God would not change his mind about having taken away the kingdom from Saul? Ignoring the context is not proper in this instance, for such interpretation will not explain the other two references to God's changing his mind in this same passage.

One interesting thing not often considered is the "man" to whom Samuel may be referring when he says, "He is not a man that he should change his mind." Perhaps the reference to God's not being like a man is a subtle reference to Saul's having changed *his* mind. Samuel earlier said, "You have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you." So when Samuel says God is not a man, he may be intimating, "God is not like you, Saul. He will be faithful to his word, whereas you have not been faithful to yours." Thus, the reference to not being like a man may not be a general reference at all, but a specific reference to Saul's change of mind. But either way, the context demands that the statement God will not change his mind be interpreted as a specific reference to his rejection of Saul as king.

Dealing with the Numbers 23 passage, Ware insists that if "open theists" want to say that God generally can repent, but in this case will not, then they must also say that God generally can lie, but in this case he will not. This is a parallel statement, he says, and so must be followed to its logical conclusion by "open theists."

This passage is parallel, for sure, but it is not parallel in the manner Ware asserts. Since this is Baalam's response to Balak's request to change what he has prophesied about the blessing of Israel, the parallel must be made to the speaking, and not between the lying and repenting.

Let's look at the four phrases of the text:

"God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;  
Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

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God has spoken, Baalam responds, and he will surely do it. In this he will not lie. God has promised a blessing, and about this he will not change his mind. The not lying and not repenting concern God's fulfillment of his words, so the first phrase is parallel to the third, and the second phrase is parallel to the fourth. Not doing what he said would be lying, and not making it good would be changing his mind. This God does not do, so, no Balak, God is not going to change his mind about the blessing. God is not like human beings, he does not say something and not do it (i.e., lie), and he does not speak and then not make it good (i.e., repent). So, God can change his mind, but he never changes his mind the way man does, that is, by not fulfilling his promises.

The idea that God has changing experiences but unchanging knowledge cannot be supported apart from the presupposition that God has absolute foreknowledge. Since it is this idea we are trying to prove, Ware's presupposition that God has absolute foreknowledge is inadmissible as part of his argument. This amounts to circular reasoning. His conclusion has to include foreknowledge because he presupposes it is true before he does his reasoning. If we look at the Scriptures about God's repentance without this presupposition, allowing them to mean exactly what they say, the conclusion that God literally changes his mind flows naturally and logically from the texts.

Ware's fourth argument states that God makes pronouncements for our benefit, all the while knowing exactly what the outcome will be, even if the outcome is completely different from the pronouncement. To support this, he gives two scriptural examples—Nineveh and Hezekiah.

Ware questions why God would not simply overthrow Nineveh, but instead gives them 40 days warning about the destruction. Ware answers this by affirming that God already knew he would not destroy Nineveh, and he only had Jonah say he was going to destroy them, so they would respond the way God already knew they would. Thus, the statement, "Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," is not a true propositional statement, but only intended to elicit a particular (absolutely foreknown and certain) response from the inhabitants. But the question we might ask Bruce Ware is, "Why tell them at all, if God knew they would repent and he would eventually not destroy them? Why bother telling them something that was not going to happen anyway?"

Ware responds by saying that God elicited their repentance through the threat of destruction, but we have to ask if there was ever a possibility they would *really* be destroyed. If God absolutely foreknew that they would repent and would be spared, could it turn

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out any other way? If Jonah had said nothing, the Ninevites would still have been spared. So God's pronouncement of destruction is irrelevant to the outcome.

This results in a "play acting" view of the relationship between God and his creatures that can only result in mistrust of God. If God says, "If you believe, you will have eternal life," does he really mean this? If he speaks this to an individual, knowing that the person will not repent, can God possibly be viewed as sincere in his offer?<sup>24</sup>

Ware speculates that Jonah fled to Tarshish because he felt that God was declaring destruction on Nineveh, but that God secretly intended something else. But this is not what Jonah himself states as his reason. Jonah says, "for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity." Jonah fled because he knew God was gracious and compassionate. So even though God said he would destroy Nineveh, the possibility of their being destroyed or spared was real, and since God was gracious and compassionate, Jonah felt God might relent (change his mind) concerning the calamity. We do not see Jonah as distrusting the statement of God, suspecting some secret agenda on God's part, but rather trusting God's revealed character and ability to change his mind.

Concerning the case of Hezekiah, Ware contends that God only told Hezekiah he would die to elicit Hezekiah's prayer. Evidently God knew Hezekiah so well that he knew if he revealed his imminent death to him, Hezekiah would respond with "earnest, heartfelt dependence on God in prayer?"<sup>25</sup> Look now who is saying that God predicts future behavior based on a person's character (rather than absolute foreknowledge). Would it not be more consistent for Ware to claim that God said Hezekiah would die, knowing full well he would not, because the event was completely foreknown and certain to happen? The subtle assumption in Ware's argument is that *something else might have happened* if God did not speak to Hezekiah. But from the standpoint of absolute foreknowledge, nothing was able to happen any other way than it did—not God's announcement, not Hezekiah's prayer, and not

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<sup>24</sup>Of course, there are those who believe that God makes the offer of salvation to an individual, knowing full well that the person will not repent because God has already determined that the person will not be saved. God will guarantee that the person will not come to Christ, and then we are supposed to worship God for his wisdom. We hope these people will understand if we opt out of this theology.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

God's response. So the idea that God was somehow doing a wonderful thing for Hezekiah by warning him is really just so much fluff, since the events had to turn out exactly as God saw them anyway. Somehow, those who hold to absolute foreknowledge subtly view God's actions as real and open, while they attempt to maintain the certainty of the history of the created order. In this view, God's offer to Hezekiah did not have any greater meaning than Hezekiah's foreknown and certain response.

Ware questions how "open theists" can assert both that God does not know the future and that Hezekiah would live *exactly* fifteen years and then die. This may be a reflection of Ware's supposition that all "open theists" believe in absolute freedom. But there is more than one way to explain how this could be.

First, we know Hezekiah became "mortally ill," but we do not know why. Could it not possibly be that God told Hezekiah he would die because his illness was the judgment of God on Hezekiah? Ware gives no other reason God could have told Hezekiah he would die other than to elicit a particular response from the king. Is it not possible that if this was a judgment of God, that God was telling Hezekiah to give him a chance to repent and change the situation? And if this were the case, could it not also follow that God's extension of Hezekiah's life was a putting off of the judgment to another time? If so, God could determine when Hezekiah would die because his death was a judgment that was under God's control.

Another possibility is that if Hezekiah could have died at any time from the time of his prayer, God could have granted him fifteen years by actively, progressively keeping him alive. Then, when God lifted his protection from him, Hezekiah would succumb to his illness.

Granted, some of these possibilities are merely speculations, but the reason Ware is not open to other possibilities for this text is his presupposition of absolute foreknowledge. Once God absolutely knows what will happen, any statements contrary to this fixed and certain future, especially those that appear to be propositional, must only be statements intended to bring about the pre-determined history.

One last question: How could God say he was *adding* fifteen years to Hezekiah's life, if his life would always have been that long anyway? Does this not imply that Hezekiah really would have died if he had not prayed? If God *really* added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life, then Hezekiah was *really* going to die, and God's warning to him could not have been simply to elicit a particular response—it must have been a valid propositional statement.



**Chapter 5**  
**Scriptural Affirmation of**  
**Exhaustive Divine Foreknowledge**

Though this chapter is one of the longer chapters in Bruce Ware's book, it is one of the easiest to which to respond. First, most of the passages of Scripture have already been addressed in chapter 9 of this book. Second, the remaining texts are from the prophecies of Isaiah, and these are easily explained without the use of absolute foreknowledge.

It is interesting to note that in all of the texts Ware quotes from Isaiah, none states that God actually knows the future apart from what he has declared will happen. Ware's process of "exegesis" is to quote from Isaiah, who says God "declares" and then "brings to pass" and then explains the text by saying, "You see, this means God has absolute foreknowledge." This amounts to eisegesis unless Ware can offer clear passages stating that God knows the future on the basis of foreknowledge, and not by declaring an event and then causing it to happen.

Ware charges "open theists" with folly, since he says they do not believe in a God who can "declare and announce the future."<sup>26</sup> But this is not so! "Open theists" have no problem with God's declaring and announcing the future. They simply do not presuppose, as does Ware, that this is accomplished through absolute foreknowledge. God has all the wisdom, knowledge, and power necessary to declare what will happen and then to bring it to pass. One of the texts Ware quotes, Isaiah 48:3, even states that this is how God performs this feat of prophecy.

"I declared the former things long ago  
And they went forth from My mouth,  
and I proclaimed them. *Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.*"

God brought about the prophesied events by *acting suddenly*. God prophesies future events, and then acts suddenly in history to cause them to come to pass.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>27</sup>Consider also Ezekiel 17:24, which states, "And all the trees of the field will know that I am the Lord; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will perform it." The "trees" spoken of here are nations with whom God was dealing.

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Immediately after quoting this verse for the second time, Ware says, "Again, what this passage asserts is nothing short of *massive foreknowledge* and *absolute accuracy*, neither one of which can be accounted for in open theism."<sup>28</sup>

Ware's charge of folly is unfounded for two reasons. First, he directly contradicts God's own explanation as to how the amazing prophecies were performed. God said, "Suddenly I acted," but Ware, because of his presuppositions, takes this to mean God had "massive foreknowledge." Ware's eisegesis does not disprove the claim of the "open theists" that God performs prophecy by acting in history. Second, "open theists" do not deny that God can have absolute accuracy in fulfilling the events he prophesies. They simply explain God's accuracy as a result of his ability to cause the events to happen, which is how God himself explains it.

If the Isaiah texts are allowed to speak for themselves, free from the interjection of foreign notions such as absolute foreknowledge, they clearly explain how God, as God, is different from the idols. It is precisely because he can "declare" and he can "bring to pass" and not because he "sees" all that will happen in some pre-existent, certain future. "Open theists" do not deny God's ability to prophesy future events, they simply believe it is not necessary to presuppose absolute foreknowledge in order to explain this phenomenon.

### **Chapter 6** **The God Who Risks and the** **Assault on God's Wisdom**

Ware gives his outline of this chapter as consisting of three problems with the "open" view: 1) the emphasis of God's immanence over his transcendence, 2) the nature of God's sovereignty, and 3) the diminished view of God's wisdom due to the failure of his purposes.

On point one, Ware is justified in his concern that we not emphasize God's immanence to the exclusion of his transcendence. Of course, the difficulties start when "open theists" attempt to define "transcendence" because the "traditional" view is not always accepted by "openness" advocates as a biblical view. To "open theists," the traditional definition of transcendence appears to be riddled with ideas constructed by the minds of men, rather than being derived from the self-revelation of God in the Scriptures. The

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

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theological effort of defining both words without violating biblical teaching will be an ongoing difficulty for both sides.

But Ware does not appear content to allow “open theists” such flexibility in biblical research. Note the depth of his commitment to “classical theism” revealed in the following quote:

“Boyd can complain if he chooses that others charge open theism with denying omniscience, but the fact remains that the definition of omniscience that he invokes is fundamentally contrary to the definition of omniscience in classical theism. If, in the classical view God’s *comprehensive knowledge of the future is a necessary condition for the divine omniscience*, then a denial of the divine exhaustive foreknowledge is unavoidably a denial of the classical doctrine of omniscience. ... the *doctrine* affirmed in open theism is a denial of the doctrine classically held throughout the history of the church. All protestations aside, this is what matters.”<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, what really matters to Ware is the “classical” definition of omniscience, the one “classically held throughout the history of the church.” But what of the Bible? What does God’s Word say? Why does Ware assume that the classical or historical definition of omniscience is automatically the correct definition? In light of other statements in his book, we assume this was a “slip of the keyboard,” but he does make the assertion without declaring that God’s Word should take precedence over the traditions of men.

If a “classical” theist and an “open” theist both say that Jesus is God, we will say they are both correct. But how do we know they are correct? Because we take their statements and compare them to the Scriptures to establish the truth or falsity of their claims. But Ware reveals his bias here when he claims that what really matters is whether or not the “open” view contradicts the “classical” definition of omniscience.

While it is wise to listen to what other Christians believe, we have the right to challenge any doctrine when we feel that teaching is in opposition to the truth revealed in the Scriptures. Many in history have challenged the “classical” or “traditional” view as unbiblical, and they were always opposed by those who held the “traditional” view. But we must decide for ourselves if our first allegiance will be to God and his Word, or to the traditions of men, in our efforts to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord.” If we are afraid

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-148.

to challenge the “traditional” view when we believe it is unbiblical, we have placed men’s ideas above the authority of God’s Word in our lives.

In his second point, Ware uses some “spectrum texts” (his term) in his attempt to define the absolute sovereignty of God. This variety of texts is reviewed and Ware’s logical fallacies are discussed in the section “Chapter 9” of this appendix.

Generally speaking, though, Ware tries to defend the definition of sovereignty as absolute control by pointing out texts which assert God can perform certain acts (put to death, give life, whatever he pleases, etc.), and then he concludes from these abilities that God maintains complete and exhaustive control of every event in history. And by “control” he does not mean simply “is the ruler over” or “can intervene in,” but rather that God “performs” or “does” all of these things. Please see the section “Chapter 9” for further comment on Ware’s use of a logical fallacy to support his definition of sovereignty.

Ware’s objections to the “open” view as it affects the wisdom of God seems to hinge on whether or not God can accomplish his purposes if man has a free will. He states, “To emphasize the significance of risk is to diminish the confidence we may rightly have that God will get what he desires.”

As we have already discussed before, the question is, “What does God desire?” Since Ware assumes that “what God desires” is all that happens in history (his will is always done, so everything which happens is his will), then if anything God declares he desires does not come to pass, then to that degree God apparently lacked the wisdom to fulfill his purposes. But if what God desires is not everything that happens, but rather general ends which can be accomplished without every event’s being under his direct control, then the wisdom of God is not denigrated when not every event is exactly as he desired.

One example would be conformity to the image of Jesus. This is one of God’s purposes for all Christians. Is it possible for God to conform someone to the image of Jesus without every choice the person makes being exactly what God wants? Of course it is. Christians sometimes sin, but God’s general purpose of conformity to the image of Jesus can still be accomplished in spite of some setbacks.

Is it wise for God to conform us to the image of his Son? Of course it is, and his wisdom is in no way diminished because some Christians make that purpose more difficult to accomplish because of their sin.

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Another example illustrates the problem of supposition. When God created the world, did he want a world of free creatures who could choose to love him or reject him, or did he want a world where only sinless beings existed? If we suppose the former, then God accomplished his purpose and his wisdom is magnified, regardless of the present state of the world. If we suppose the latter (sinless beings), then God failed in his purpose, and his wisdom is maligned. But who says that this was God's original purpose? The only place we will find God's purposes revealed is in his Word, and it will be wise for us if we limit our speculations about God's purposes to what he says in the Bible.

Ware presumes to know what God's purposes are—they are everything that happens. But he only defines God's purposes this way because he has already presupposed that everything which happens is the will of God. This he believes because he presupposes God controls and “performs” every event in history, whether good or evil. Thus, for Ware, God cannot fail in accomplishing his purposes due to the choices of men, because whatever men choose is what God wanted to happen anyway. This is most convenient for Ware, but it still amounts to circular reasoning, beginning and ending with his own presuppositions.

### Chapter 7 Harm to the Christian's Life of Prayer

Ware lists four problems as “some difficulties attending to the nature of prayer as construed in open theism.”<sup>30</sup> These are the problems of divine omniscience, wisdom, love, and power.

The problem of omniscience, Ware says, is that we can never inform God of anything he did not already know. This may be a reaction to some statements of “open theists” that God waits to listen to our prayers and to know our thoughts. It is unfortunate that some “open theists” have not represented their case more clearly. Or it could be that some actually believe this to be the case, not fully understanding the “workings” of prayer.

Is the purpose of prayer to inform God of something he did not already know? Obviously it is not. He knows before we ask what we need (but then so do we, and that is why we are asking.) Rather, the purpose of prayer is *agency*. The functional part of prayer has to do with *choices*, not with *knowledge*. We have not, because we *ask* not. James does not say that we do not have, because we do not

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

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know what we want (or need). He says we have not, because we *ask* not. It is the *asking* (as choice) and not the *knowing* which makes prayer work. God may know what we need, and we may know what we need, but God waits for us to ask, because he has committed himself to the freedom of man's will in the accomplishment of his purposes. God made this commitment to man's will when he gave him dominion of the earth.

God gave us dominion of the earth, and as stewards of the earth, he cooperates with us in fulfilling his will for us. This cooperation automatically implies that our wills, as agents of God, are important to the accomplishment of his goals. So, it is not knowledge, but dominion and agency that are crucial when trying to answer the question of exactly how prayer works. No matter how much God knows, it does not make prayer unnecessary, because it is what we choose to do, and not what God knows, that makes prayer function. Please refer to the section "Why is Prayer Necessary?" in chapter 12 of this book for a more detailed explanation of dominion and agency as the basis of prayer.

The problem of divine wisdom, Ware asserts, is two-fold. First, if God depends on our knowledge for his answers to our prayers, then he might get things wrong because of our lack of knowledge or wisdom. Second, if events do not turn out well after God answers our prayers, then God made a mistake in how he answered.

This first problem is easily answered. Which "open theist" has ever claimed that God will do whatever we ask? Sometimes we ask, and do not have, because we ask with selfish motives.<sup>31</sup> God, in his wisdom, sorts out what is good for us and what is not, and answers according to his wisdom. We do not always get what we desire, because that is not always what is best for us. So God does not depend on our knowledge to answer our prayers, and he will not "get things wrong" because of *our* lack of wisdom.

Ware's second objection is a reaction to the idea that if things do not turn out well after prayer, then God "got it wrong" and so cannot be trusted to be absolutely wise. As discussed in the section on chapter 1, this is a confusion of the wisdom of God's choices and the possible subsequent failure of man. If God answers a prayer, he does so in complete wisdom for the circumstances that exist at that time. If someone goes on to disobey the commands of God and makes a mess of the situation, it does not follow that God's choice in answering the prayer was therefore unwise. It may mean that God will have to amend his actions to deal with the

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<sup>31</sup>This is, of course, only one of a number of conditions which must be met before God will answer our prayers.

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rebellious person, but God still made a wise choice in answering the prayer.

Or consider another example. If a person prays that God will give him a child, and God answers his prayer, is that unwise? What if the child is killed in a car accident by a drunk driver? Do we then assume that God was unwise in his choice to give the person a child because someone else was irresponsible? Ware might argue that if God did not know the child would be killed, then God “got it wrong” and should not have answered the person’s prayers. Now, he may not actually teach this, but this is the logic he is using against “open theism.” If events go badly after God answers prayer, then God “got it wrong.” Of course, since Ware believes God never gets it wrong, then if God gives the person a child, God wanted the person to have a child. But he also believes that if the child is killed, then God wanted the child to die. This is part of his divine plan and God never makes a mistake. Would this comfort a bereaved parent? This is actually a confusion of God’s and man’s choices, and it is easy to see why Ware would combine them, since in his theology, God “performs” all of man’s choices anyway.

Ware’s basic argument concerning God’s love goes something like this: if God loves us, and is committed to respecting our free wills, God can fail to give us (or others) what we (or they) truly need because we do not meet the conditions. Does God truly love us equally, if one benefits from prayer while another does not? This argument is based on the false assumption that “open theists” believe God cannot do anything unless someone asks him to. Though proponents of an “open” view regard highly the role of the will of man in history, it does not therefore follow that they believe God can do nothing without the permission of man.

Basically, God can do anything he pleases, as long as the end product amounts to influence on the will of man rather than coercion.<sup>32</sup> This is a limitation God placed on himself when he created man with a free will. Paul saw a bright light, fell to the ground, and was blinded, but was still able to tell Agrippa, “I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision.”<sup>33</sup> God greatly influenced Paul, but not to the extent that Paul lost his freedom. Now it is likely that Paul experienced this dramatic influence because persecuted Christians were praying fervently for him. But even if someone had not prayed for Paul, could God have

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<sup>32</sup>And as we have seen in chapter 7, given certain conditions, God sometimes temporarily suspends the free will of man to accomplish his purposes.

<sup>33</sup>Acts 26:19.

influenced him without anyone's permission? Of course he could. The problem is not influence, but coercion.

But, Ware might counter, what if God cannot help someone as he wishes because someone else does not meet a necessary condition? This is not easy to answer, but it hints at the heart of the entire issue of man's free will. We might ask the question another way, "Is there anything which is *absolutely essential* for our welfare that God might withhold because of someone else's failure to pray?" Well, what is *absolutely essential*? It may come as a shock to our Western, materialistic sensibilities, but there is only one thing that is absolutely essential—eternal life. Even food, water, and life itself are not absolutely essential, because we can go on living with God even if we die physically. And can anyone keep someone else from knowing God if the person really wants to? No, they cannot. Jesus is the true light who enlightens every man.<sup>34</sup> Every person has truth from God. Every person is influenced by God. So every person decides for himself whether or not he will follow the truth he has, while God can influence every person, and no human being can stop him.

There may be many less important material things that we may do without because we or someone else does not pray. We have not, because we ask not. But this is the risk God takes (we know Ware does not like this idea) when he gives man a free will. And if God's activity is limited by the will of man, does that make God less loving? Not at all, it only means that there are rules in life, rules designed for our welfare, rules that preserve our freedom, rules which God himself established, and which God himself will not break.

As for Ware's last point, divine power, he claims that "open theism" "faces the horns of a dilemma in relation to God's power."<sup>35</sup> On the one hand (or horn), if God can guarantee the result of our prayers in a person's life, then libertarian freedom is sacrificed. On the other hand, if all God can do is to persuade people, he argues, then God cannot guarantee the outcome in the person's life, and prayer is useless.

The real issue here is what God justly can and cannot do. This is not a matter of power, but of morality. If God cannot coerce the free will of a human being without doing violence to the person, then we should not ask God to do so. If we ask for the physical needs of a person to be provided, perhaps food, and God provides the food, then the goodness of God expressed in this provision becomes an

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<sup>34</sup>John 1:9.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 174.



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influence on the person, but it does not coerce the person to do anything. If, however, we ask God to make the person love him, we are asking God to do something he simply cannot (morally) do.

So how should we pray for the unbeliever? We pray for influence. We pray for God to arrange circumstances to influence the person. Or we can pray that God will bring some of his children to speak to the person. God could send angels, dreams or visions. Again, we can pray that God will remove the blindfold from his mind that the enemy is using to keep him from seeing the light of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup> All of these would be influences, but they are not coercion. The person still must respond to the influences if he wants to have eternal life. It is a mistake to pray, “Lord, save this person,” because God already wants to save the person and is doing all he can (justly) to see the person saved. If we want to see our prayers answered, we will have to ask God to do something he is morally free to do, namely influence the person, and God will bring greater influence to bear on the person’s heart and mind. Though influence will not guarantee that the person will respond correctly, it at least gives the person more of an opportunity to respond than he had before. The greater the truth in the person’s heart and mind, the easier it will be for him to resist the deception under which he has been living, turn from his rebellion, and come to God.

The whole issue of the justice and morality of God in prayer is very complicated, and there are many things about it we do not understand. But there is every reason to pray as long as God can influence people towards the truth. God cannot make them respond a certain way, but our prayers can make a difference towards their opportunity to make the right decision.

### **Chapter 8** **Weakening of Our Confidence in God’s Guidance**

Ware lists six reasons why the “openness” view cannot adequately handle the matter of divine guidance:

1. If God does not know the future, his guidance may be unreliable.
2. If God cannot control the choices of his creatures, then he cannot guarantee that his guidance will be accomplished “indubitably.”
3. If circumstances change because of future free-will choices, then perhaps God’s guidance was flawed.

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<sup>36</sup>II Corinthians 4:4.

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4. God's love for us and his guidance is only intended to lead us into well-being. Thus, if we suffer or experience hardships, God's guidance is either questionable or wrong.

5. God's guidance is only based on his exhaustive knowledge of the past and present, and so may be questionable. (This is similar to point number 1).

6. God's guidance can only generally be accepted as reliable, since he cannot control the future free choices of his creatures. (This is similar to point number 3).

When a person asks God for guidance, he wants to know what to do *now*. The person does not usually expect God is going to give guidance which will cover the distant future, since that would assume that an ongoing relationship with God is unnecessary. The whole idea of guidance is a series of communications from God through the course of life, not one instance which comprehensively settles the future. Consequently, it is not necessary for God to absolutely know or determine the future in order to give a person proper guidance in the present.

Why would Ware assume that lack of knowledge of all future events will make guidance unreliable? If God tells me it is his will to go to Europe as a missionary, can anything happen in the future which, in hindsight, makes God's desire to see me in Europe an unwise, ill-advised decision? If I do something contrary to the will of God in the future, why would this mean that God's guidance in the past was somehow invalid?

Ware's idea that all guidance must result in 1) complete future obedience from all moral creatures, and 2) only pleasant circumstances, is a strange definition of guidance indeed. This appears to be a reflection of his presupposition that God "performs" every event in history. Thus, if something does not turn out well, it is God's fault. It seems far more reasonable to assume that no matter what God guides us to do, our future choices, or the choices of others, cannot make the past guidance of God invalid or unreliable.

Take the choices of God in the life of King Saul as an example. God made Saul king and then later withdrew his kingship. If we view this from the "openness" perspective, God made Saul King—a wise choice for God at the time. Then Saul rebelled, and God took away his kingship—another wise decision in light of the changed circumstances. So was God's first choice unwise? We can only conclude this if we first assume that all events following God's guidance must be in accordance with his will and never include any tragedies or hardships.

What if we view this from the "absolute foreknowledge" perspective? God chooses Saul as king, knowing full well that he

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will rebel and God will eventually have to remove the kingship from him. Did God make a wise decision in making Saul king? You can only conclude this if you assume that Saul's rebellion was the will of God, and that tragedies and hardships are all part of what God wants for our lives.

Which view of guidance will instill in us a desire to follow God? If we know God has our best interest at heart and his guidance cannot be called invalid or unreliable because of the bad choices of others, this will not hinder us from following him. But if we assume God might knowingly lead us into tragedies and hardships, will we be eager to follow his guidance in the future? And in this case, it is not necessary to assume that God "performed" the tragedies or hardships, but only that he knew beforehand that his guidance would lead us to that end. Can we fully trust someone who knowingly leads us into suffering? In light of this, the "openness" view appears preferable.

Next, does God need to guarantee his guidance will be accomplished "indubitably" for his guidance to be considered valid and reliable? This is the same question as whether or not God needs to guarantee that no one ever sins, in order to determine if his command not to sin was wise. God commands us not to sin. But sin is committed by many people, including Christians. Do we conclude, therefore, that God's command (guidance?) not to sin was unwise because it could not be accomplished "indubitably." And yet guidance is a command from God to make certain choices. If we fail to follow those commands, the wisdom of God is not therefore invalid or unreliable, it simply means that we chose not to follow his wise instructions.

But what if God's guidance in one person's life is derailed by the choices of another person? This sometimes happens. This is really the same as the first case, though, since the choices of humans are interfering with the guidance of God. While it is unfortunate, and sometimes tragic, that one person's life can be disturbed by the choices of another, this in no way indicates that the original guidance of God was unwise or unreliable. At least the person can say, "This other person has caused me suffering, so I will now have to find out from God what he wants me to do next."

How much better this view is than that of absolute foreknowledge which requires the person to say, "God led me this way and must have wanted me to suffer (for some good reason known only to him), so I will now find out which way I should go next (though God may be leading me into more suffering for my good)." Most people would probably not jump at the idea of being

guided by God if they thought he deliberately planned the suffering and tragedies they would experience along the way.

Lastly, Ware assumes that hardship, suffering, or tragedies are indications that God's guidance must have been flawed. This is a most amazing assumption, especially when God himself tells us even the *desire* to live a godly life will result in persecution.<sup>37</sup> God knows the world is fallen. He knows how unbelievers will react when they are confronted with the Gospel. Thus, he must know his guidance will not guarantee everything will be peaceful and unproblematic from that time forward.

Ten years of missionary work in Europe—complete with hardship, suffering, and tragedy—did not cause me to doubt that my original guidance from God was unwise, unreliable, or flawed. But if I thought, for one moment, that God had taken me to Europe, knowing that I would go through all those trials, and he still chose to guide me there, I would have difficulty trusting him thereafter that he had my highest well-being at heart. God and I both knew the *possibility* that I could experience hardship, but it does not logically follow from this that God's guiding me to Europe was a mistake on his part.

It would appear as if Ware's objections to the "openness" view of divine guidance is based on some faulty presuppositions concerning what constitutes reliable guidance. The only thing necessary to conclude that God can give us wise guidance is that God has enough knowledge, wisdom, and love, to direct us into the best path *at this very moment*. We can work together with God to handle the problems in the future when they happen.

## Chapter 9 Despair amid Suffering and Pain

Ware's treatment of the "open" view of suffering and pain is divided into two parts—the first biblical and the second philosophical. The first part is presented in five sections centered around Romans 8, II Corinthians 12, Joseph, Job, and the "spectrum texts." The second part is presented in two sections relating God's *uncaring ability* and God's *caring inability* to prevent suffering.

Ware presents the typical traditional interpretation of "God works all things for good," that is, God *controls all events* and *causes all events* in the Christian's life. No matter how bad these

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<sup>37</sup>II Timothy 3:12.

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events look from the outside, however, there is a good and profitable reason God brings them into the believer's life.

The assumption here is that it is the "all things" which work for the believer's good, rather than that God works for the believer's good in the midst of all things. These verses are a wonderful promise to God's children that no matter what happens, God can work for our good. It casts doubt on God's character, though, if we interpret this text to mean that God actually causes the things that are supposed to bring about our good. Please see chapter 9 of this book for a more detailed explanation of this passage.

As for the II Corinthians 12 text, where Paul is given a "thorn in the flesh," a "messenger of Satan" to buffet him, it is interesting to note why God did this. Twice in rapid succession Paul gives us God's reason for this treatment—Paul's possible self-exaltation. Paul had seen and experienced so much it became a temptation to pride. Whether this was a deterrent, a judgment, or an answer to Paul's prayers (facts not in evidence on any of these), that God sends something into his life to keep him from pride cannot be construed to mean that all events in every person's life are caused by God. This is an argument from a specific case to a general principle, and it violates clear teachings from other parts of the Scriptures that not everything that happens is caused by God (even in light of the "spectrum texts," as we shall see later).

Ware also tries to use "God's working all things for good" in Joseph's life as an indication that everything that happens is the will of God. This all depends on the meaning of the phrase "God meant it for good" in Genesis 50:20. This does not have to be interpreted to mean that God created an evil event to produce a good result. Joseph is addressing the evil intentions of his brothers here, and is contrasting that with the good intentions God had for him. Thus, this text could be taken to mean that God, because of his good intentions, brought good out of an event which was generated from evil intentions. This verse, then, has roughly the same meaning as Romans 8:28.

Though Joseph says that God, not his brothers, sent him to Egypt, there are at least two good reasons to see this as God's responding to the evil, rather than that God did "evil so that good may come" (Romans 3:8).

First, Joseph was probably wanting to reassure his brothers that he was not, as a ruler of Egypt, going to kill them for their theft. Thus, his "God sent me here" could have been his way of saying "God has taken care of everything, even though you were evil to me, so do not worry yourselves about what I am going to do."

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Second, in the Hebrew understanding, God is sometimes given “credit” for, or spoken of as performing actions that he did not directly do. Were the ten commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai by God, or by an angel? It depends on the passage you read.<sup>38</sup> Some passages claim God did it, while others say the law was ordained through angels. Again, God is spoken of as sending a lying spirit into the mouths of some false prophets, but the “behind the scenes” version informs us that the spirit was ready and willing to go.<sup>39</sup> Thus, God can get the “credit” for an event, even though it may not have been God who directly acted to bring it about. So, when Joseph says that God sent him, this could be a reference to God’s working behind the scenes for good, though the evil event itself was wholly his brothers’ fault.

Though the suffering in the life of Job deserves a whole book on it own, it is sufficient here to point out who was at fault for Job’s suffering. When Satan comes before God for the second time (Job 2:3), God puts the fault for Job’s suffering squarely on Satan’s shoulders. God says, “you incited Me against him, to ruin him without cause.” Note the infinitive in “to ruin him without cause.” The use of the infinitive here leaves it open as to who is doing the ruining in this sentence. God does not say that he ruined Job, but that Satan incited (moved) God so he (Satan) could ruin him without cause. In this case, we must take the infinitive to be a reference to Satan, since it is Satan who is described as killing Job’s children, destroying his property, and striking him with boils. Though God morally could not withhold permission from Satan to attack Job,<sup>40</sup> it was not God who brought the actual suffering into Job’s life.

The last section Ware uses to support the idea that God causes all events that happen in history is what he calls the “spectrum texts.” By spectrum, he means that God causes the two extremes, good and evil, and everything in between.

To support this idea, Ware quotes many verses with phrases stating that God can do such things as kill, give life, wound, heal, bring down to Sheol, raise up, make poor, make rich, bring low, exalt, form light, create darkness, cause well-being, create calamity, etc. There is no problem with Ware’s assertion that God can do all of these things. The problem is with Ware’s logic when he attempts to apply these abilities to all events in history.

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<sup>38</sup>See Exodus 31:18; 32:16; Deuteronomy 9:10; Acts 7:38; 7:53, Galatians 3:19.

<sup>39</sup>II Chronicles 18:21, 22.

<sup>40</sup>This one thought in itself would require a book-length explanation.

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Ware's logical fallacy is a common one, but one easily missed if we are not thinking diligently. This is the fallacy of asserting the consequent. It goes like this:

If an animal is a cow, then that animal has four legs.  
This animal has four legs.  
Therefore, this animal is a cow.

When Ware uses scripture texts to say that God can put someone to death, that does not mean that it logically follows that everyone who is killed has been killed by God. Ware argues, in effect:

If God does something, it will happen.  
This thing happened.  
Therefore, God did it.

This logical fallacy is often used in theological arguments to support unwarranted conclusions. See chapter 5 of this book for some examples of logical fallacies used to support the idea that God is timeless.

Ware can quote all the verses he wants that say God can do many things, but he is not following good logic when he turns them around to say that anything that happens is therefore "performed" by God.

Ware's philosophical arguments in the last part of this chapter have already been addressed in the previous section on "Chapter 3."

### **Chapter 10** **God's Greater Glory and Our Everlasting Good**

In the last chapter of his book, Ware makes a basic argument concerning the glory of God. The "open" God, Ware claims, "is *worthy of glory to the degree to which he succeeds*, and *unworthy of glory to the degree to which he fails*."<sup>41</sup> Ware then defines success and failure for the "open theist" as the obedience or disobedience of his creatures. If the creatures are obedient, then God has succeeded and is glorified, but whenever anyone sins, God has failed, and his glory is diminished. Thus, by defining success as dependent on the choices of humans, Ware can claim that what humans do determines God's success rate and level of glory. This is very handy, since Ware knows that people have already sinned, and

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

if he determines God's glory on that basis, he cannot fail to find God wanting.

The big question here is, "What are the purposes of God?" If the purpose of God was to have free-will agents who never sin, then he has not accomplished his purpose. But what if the purpose of God was to have a world of free agents who could love him or reject him? Has he accomplished his purpose? By that definition, he has. Ware's definition is not accurate to the claim of most "open theists" who assert that the glory of God consists in his ability to accomplish his purposes *in spite of the contrary choices of many of his creatures*.<sup>42</sup> Human choices are related to the purposes of God, but they are not the basic definition of the purposes of God, and their success or failure is not equivalent to the success or failure of the purposes of God.

Thus, by claiming that "open theists" define the glory of God in a way that can never be accomplished, Ware neatly sews up the conclusion before he even begins his argument. The conclusion is foregone—God will not have glory, because God's purposes are defined as something God cannot control, and which has already failed to happen.

But what is Ware's definition of God's accomplishment of his purposes? To Ware, it seems, God has accomplished his purpose if he has control of all events. Since Ware defines all events as events which God controls, then it does not matter what people do. If they sin, God "performs" that. If they are righteous, God controls that too.

Finally, we have to ask what Ware considers the "glory of God" to be. Ware defines this by stating, "... he is *fully glorious*, because his works *always succeed*." But the only way Ware can claim God always succeeds is to assume that every event in the history of the universe, both good and evil, are actually God's doing. So, by definition, God cannot fail, and cannot be diminished in glory, because everything that happens is what he wanted to happen.

Ware tries to lessen the impact of this claim by stating that God only works *through* evil, but actually works in people all the good that they do,<sup>43</sup> but since he also states that God "performs" all events in history, then he must also be "performing" the evil through which he is working. Besides which, Ware defines sovereignty as absolute control of every event in history. If he then tries to say God only works *through* evil, is he then admitting *the evil act itself* is

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<sup>42</sup>This is evident even in the passages Ware quotes from Boyd's book (pp. 220-21).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.



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actually something he *did not* control? If so, what happens to the sovereignty (and consequent glory) of God?

Thus, by defining success and glory as God's accomplishment of his will, and then asserting that everything that happens is the will of God, Ware has defined glory in such a way that God cannot fail to have glory.

For the "open theist," however, he defines glory in such a way that God *cannot* have glory, because he must guarantee that people have not sinned and will never sin in the future. This circular reasoning does not seem to contribute much understanding to the subject of God's glory.

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