

## What Does God Know, and When Did He Know It?

### I. Introduction

- A. Many passages in Scripture proclaim God's complete knowledge, otherwise known as the attribute of *omniscience*, which simply means *all knowledge*. This means: He knows everything **actual** and everything **possible**. God never has to learn anything, and He never forgets anything; **He knows everything all at once in their totality**, that includes past, present, **and future**. His knowledge also includes complete and perfect knowledge of Himself. God literally knows everything there is to know! I Sam. 2:3: *...for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed*. Ps 147:5: *...his understanding is beyond measure*.
- B. Theologians say God knows everything, even what is yet to occur because He has ordained it to be. **The Westminster Confession of Faith** says: *God from all eternity did, by the most wise and Holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass*. Eph. 1:11 *...who works all things according to the counsel of his will*
- C. For God, everything is present; there is no distinction between the past and future. Imagine a parade: The onlookers on the ground level see one float at a time as it passes by. God, having the view on top of a high building, sees the entire parade at once (Illustration from Charles Ryrie). (God's name, *Yahweh*, means *is, or, I am* )
- D. The doctrine of Creation presupposes Divine omniscience. Since He created all things He must have perfect knowledge of everything He created. (Ps. 104:24).
- E. The doctrine of God's omniscience must always be seen in the light of His other attributes, e.g., His eternity, immutability, omnipotence, and omnipresence. (If God is everywhere in His creation, it presupposes that He knows everything about it). If His knowledge is not eternal it must mean that at some point He had to learn.
- F. The doctrine of providence, how God governs his creation, presupposes that God knows all the particulars of life; how else could He exercise control? This even extends to our thoughts. Matt. 6:32 *Your heavenly Father knows your needs!* (See also: Jn. 21:17; I Cor. 4:5)

### II. The Problem

- A. The perennial problem with this attribute of God, is how it affects man's alleged free will. Man's freedom to act seems to be in direct conflict with the absolute sovereignty of God. Ron Nash describes the problem: *Since God foreknows what Jeff will do at 8:00 PM tomorrow, it appears as though Jeff **must** do what God foreknows he will do. But if Jeff **must** do whatever God knows he will do, in what sense is Jeff's action free? If God foreknows what Jeff will do in the future, does Jeff have the ability not to do what God foreknows?* (P. 52)
- B. A second problem that arises: if God foreordained everything how does God escape being

responsible for the origin of sin and evil?

### III. Proposed Solutions

A. Historically there have been two major proposed solutions:

1. **Compatibilism:** For a major part of church history theologians have affirmed that God is in absolute sovereign control, but man, though divinely controlled, is a responsible moral agent even though his behavior is determined. Two major Christian Classics addressed this issue written by two of Christianity's greatest theologians: Martin Luther (*The Bondage of the Will*), and Jonathan Edwards (*The Freedom of the Will*). Other notable theologians who affirmed this position are Augustine, Aquinas, and of course, Calvin for which this view is most often attributed. In more contemporary times, theologian, J.I. Packer, concludes Scripture teaches both, but reconciling the two ideas of God's Sovereign control and omniscience, and man as responsible for his choices may never be fully understood in this life and must remain an antimony. An antimony is not a real contradiction but only appears to be without complete knowledge. (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, P.22ff)
2. **Incompatibilism:** This view came along somewhat later in church history and is largely attributed to Jacobus Arminius (16<sup>th</sup> Century). Hence the view is also known as Arminianism. Incompatibilism teaches that God's complete control, i.e., sovereignty, is incompatible with man's moral freedom. In order to make this view plausible they downplay God's complete sovereign control. *God is in charge but not in total control.* Thus two things come into play: God is not absolutely sovereign and man has libertarian freedom. God may not know in advance what a man or woman might choose in a given situation, but God is also powerful and can still work to make things come out according to His plan

B. More recent proposals

1. **The openness of God theory** (became popular in the '80s) is also known as: finite Godism, neotheism, free-will theism, relational theism, and evangelical process theism. While there is a great variation in how this view is expressed, the basic tenet is that *God only knows what can be known.* That is, He cannot know ahead of time what free creatures will choose. It is fairly easy to see, if you are a biblicist, that this view is not very persuasive. There are scores of prophecies in the OT fulfilled to the letter in the NT. Openness Theory is basically a philosophical theory and not primarily based on exegesis of Scripture. For more detailed information, see Briefing Outline #64.
2. **Molinism, or Middle Knowledge Theory** was initially formulated by a Jesuit Scholar, Louis de Molina, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but has more recently been revived by philosophers, Alvin Plantinga, William Craig, etc. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between Calvinism and Arminianism (Incompatibilism and compatibilism). It is somewhat difficult to understand since it is also a philosophical attempt to harmonize

God's omniscience and man's freedom to choose. Some of the major tenets of the theory are:

- a. Probably the simplest definition of Molinism is from Grudem: *According to the middle knowledge view, the future choices of people are not directly determined by God, but God knows them anyway, because he knows how each free creature would respond in any set of circumstances that might occur, and then he creates a world in which these circumstances will occur* (p.457).
- b. While this is a valiant attempt it does not alleviate the problem. If God foreknows what a man will choose, that means that it must happen, and the man's choice is not then free as the Arminian hopes. Grudem says: *If our future choices are known, then they are fixed. And if they are fixed, then they are not "free"...* (p.456)
- c. Feinberg: *But if God knows what I will do on a given occasion, it appears that it is not within my power to do otherwise. God's knowledge does not cause my action, but if he really knows it, it will occur. But if it is certain to happen, then how am I free to do other than what God knows?*

*This a problem not only for human freedom but also divine freedom. God has free will, even absolute freedom (self-determination), as we saw when discussing divine sovereignty. If God knows all future acts and events, he must know everything that he will do. But, if he knows what he will do before he does it, it appears that he is not free to change his mind and do other than what he "knows "he will do. (p.305)*

#### IV. The Nature of Human Freedom

I believe the major problem in trying to resolve this issue is a failure to actually understand the nature of human freedom. Our desire to be autonomous, and our inward sense that we are free and responsible creatures, makes us revolt to any idea of causal determinism. We are not automatons! There several things to consider:

- A. While we are free in our decision-making, the question is how free? We know that we are limited by our physique, our genetics, by the laws of nature, and most of all our sin nature.
- B. In Edwards classic work he concluded from Scripture that a man always makes decisions based on his strongest desire. I may have a strong desire to lose weight but my desire for ice cream is stronger. What I believe Edwards is saying, is our behavior (or choices) are causal and not libertarian. We are limited by who we are. As noted above, even God cannot do contrary to his nature. Luther said: Both good men and bad men do what they want: What they lack is the ability to change their desires.
- C. The Bible strongly teaches that God knows our actions before we make them. He knew Judas would betray him. Yet Judas, when he made that decision, did what he wanted to do! He didn't feel coerced. The Bible says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, yet Pharaoh did what he wanted to do. In the same way God knows what we will decide.

#### D. The state of Free Agency in heaven.

We will certainly make decisions in heaven, but will it be any different? We will now, in our redeemed state, make decisions according our new nature; decisions will still be causal.

#### V. The Problem of the Existence of Sin and Evil

God knows everything intuitively and he knows it from all eternity. There never was a time when he did not know everything. Here's the problem: God knew evil from all eternity! And, if God has ordained whatever comes to pass as the Bible teaches, how do we explain the origin of evil without God himself being responsible? The problem of the origin of evil in God's universe is definitely one of main problems in defending the Christian worldview.

We also know that God, by definition, is good; he is the standard. The Bible tells us within him there is no darkness (I Jn. 1:5). Evil obviously has some purpose in God's creation. Perhaps it was necessary in displaying grace to fallen humans. Critics charge: **if God is all powerful why can't he just eliminate evil.** He is, and will do just that! There will be no evil or sin in the new heavens and the new earth.

Another way to look at the subject of evil is that **it is not a thing that was created. Evil is not a thing**; it's the absence of good. Cold is also a state; it is the absence of heat. The state of Evil somehow arose first from Lucifer then in Adam and Eve. While we may not comprehend how beings who were created good can sin, we know they did, and God had a plan to eliminate it. For a more complete discussion on evil see Briefing Outline #39.

#### VI. Conclusion

Without a doubt the doctrine of the omniscience of God should drives us to our knees in worship. He knows the end from the beginning. He will never be surprised or caught unaware. He literally knows the number of hairs on our head. Indeed *His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me!*

#### For Further Study:

Bavinck, Herman. *The Doctrine of God*.  
 Beilby, James K. and Eddy, Paul R. eds. *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*.  
 Carson, D.A. *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility*.  
 Clark, Gordon H. *Biblical Predestination*.  
 Erickson, Millard J. *God the Father Almighty*. (Chapter 9)  
 Grudem, Wayne *Systematic Theology*.  
 Frame, John M. *Systematic Theology* (Chapter 35)  
 Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. (Chapters 14,16)  
 Morris, Thomas V. *Our Idea of God*.  
 Nash, Ronald H. *The Concept of God*.  
 Pink, A. W. *Gleanings in the Godhead*. (Chapters 3,4)  
 Schreiner, Thomas R. and Ware, Bruce A. eds. *Still Sovereign*.  
 Sproul, R.C. *Willing to Believe*.  
 Storms, C. Samuel. *The Grandeur of God*.