

## **Does God Know Everything?**

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### **Ask the questions:**

Does God know everything? Or Does God know everything there is to know?

-If God knows certain people will go to hell, why does he create them?

-Does God foreknow the outcome of every decision we will ever make?

### **Introduction:**

Most evangelical Christians take it for granted that God knows everything that is ever going to take place. They have been taught that the future is completely settled in God's mind and has been so from all eternity. This view is sometimes called the "classical view of divine foreknowledge."

Though there are many passages of Scripture, which depict God as foreknowing and/or predestining certain things about the future. What is not so often recognized is that there are also many passages of Scripture which suggest that some of the future is open (not settled) and is known by God as such.

Though this classical view of foreknowledge has always been the majority view of the church, it is this view I will be arguing against during our time together today in five points.

### **1. God's Mind Changing:**

The Lord frequently changes his mind in the light of changing circumstances or in the light of prayer (Exod. 32:14; Num. 14:12-20; Deut. 9:13-14, 18-20, 25; 1 Sam. 2:27-36; 2 Kings 20:1-7; 1 Chron. 21:15; Jer. 26:19; Ezek. 20:5-22; Amos 7:1-6; Jon. 1:2; 3:2, 4-10).

Exodus 32:14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.

Num. 14:12-20 I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.

And Moses said unto the LORD, Then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;) And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou LORD art among this people, that thou LORD art seen

face to face, and that thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night.

Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying, Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he sware unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness.

And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. And the LORD said, I have pardoned according to thy word:

Jonah 3:9-10 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

By definition, one cannot change what is permanently fixed. Hence, every time the Bible teaches us that God changes his mind it is teaching us that God's mind is not permanently fixed. This directly contradicts the classical understanding of foreknowledge. It means that some of what God knows regarding the future consists of things that may go one way or another. He adjusts His plans--changes his mind--depending on what does or does not take place.

Other times he explicitly tells us he will change his mind if circumstances change (Jer. 18:7-11; 26:2-3; Ezek. 3 3:13 -15).

Jeremiah 18:8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

Jeremiah 26:2 Thus saith the LORD; Stand in the court of the LORD'S house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the LORD'S house, all the words that I command thee to speak unto them; diminish not a word: If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings.

This willingness to change is portrayed as one of God's attributes of greatness (Joel 2:13-14; Jon. 4:2).

Joel 2:13-14 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind

him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?

Jonah 4:2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

## **2. God's Regret and Disappointment:**

A number of times he expresses regret and disappointment over how things have turned out - even over previous decisions he has made which went array because of human free will (Gen. 6:5-6; 1 Sam 15:10-11, 35; Ezek. 22:29-31).

Genesis 6:5-6 And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

1 Samuel 15:10-11 Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night.

Ezek. 22:29-31 The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord GOD.

## **3. God's Surprise:**

Other times he tells us he's surprised at how things turned out, for he expected a different outcome (Isa. 5:3-7; Jer. 3:6-7; 19-20).

In Isaiah 5:3-7 God tells us that things turn out differently than he expected...

"...And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry."

He "expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (v. 2) He then asks, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done to it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" (v. 4)

If everything is certain to God, as the classical view of foreknowledge holds, how could the Lord twice say that he "expected" one thing to occur, only to have something different occur? How could the Lord expect, hope for, and even strive for something he knew from all eternity would never happen?

Jeremiah 3:6-7 The LORD said also unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot. And I said after she had done all these things, Turn thou unto me. But she returned not. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it.

Jeremiah 3:19-20 But I said, How shall I put thee among the children, and give thee a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations? and I said, Thou shalt call me, My father; and shalt not turn away from me. Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD.

In several passages the Lord explicitly tells us that he did not know that humans would behave the way they did (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35).

Jeremiah 7:31 And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.

Jeremiah 19:5 They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind:

Jeremiah 32:35 And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.

#### **4. God's Testing:**

The Lord frequently tests his people to find out whether or not they'll remain faithful to him (Gen. 22:12; Exod. 16:4; Deut. 8:2; 13:1-3; Judg. 2:20-3:5; 2 Chron. 32:3-1).

Genesis 22:12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

Exodus 16:4 Then said the LORD unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.

Deut. 8:2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

Deut. 13:1-3 If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Judges 2:20-3:5 And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and he said, Because that this people hath transgressed my covenant which I commanded their fathers, and have not hearkened unto my voice; I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations which Joshua left when he died: That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not. Therefore the LORD left those nations, without driving them out hastily; neither delivered he them into the hand of Joshua. Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to prove Israel by them, even as many of Israel as had not known all the wars of Canaan; Only that the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war, at the least such as before knew nothing thereof; Namely, five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites that dwelt in mount Lebanon, from mount Baalhermon unto the entering in of Hamath. And they were to prove Israel by them, to know whether they would hearken unto the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. And the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, Hittites, and Amorites, and Perizzites, and Hivites, and Jebusites:

God's frustration with Israel regarding their hardness toward Him "on the day of testing" (Heb.3: 8) raises the question as to why God strove with Israel for forty years and then for centuries afterwards after they entered the promised land if He was certain from the outset that they would grieve him (see Eph. 4:30). Why test someone you know will flunk--and then experience grief over the flunking---when you were certain ahead of time what would happen?

The fact that God tested people "to know" their behavior suggests that He didn't know what they'd choose ahead of time, and that it was, from God's vantage point, genuinely possible for these people to pass (or fail) the test.

God made us self-determining agents, and prior to our determining ourselves in one direction or another, the only reality that exists for God to know concerning our future

action is the possible directions we may take.

## 5. God's Questions:

The Lord sometimes asks non-rhetorical questions about the future (Num. 14:11; Hos. 8:5) and speaks to people in terms of what may or may not happen (Exod. 3:18-4:9 - 13:17; Jer. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23; Ezek. 12:1-3).

Numbers 14:11 And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me?

and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

Hosea 8:5 Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off, mine anger is kindled against them: how long will it be ere they attain to innocency?

If God wonders about future issues, does this not imply that the future is to some extent unsettled? The duration of the Israelites' stubbornness was truly an open issue.

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If everything was settled in God's mind from all eternity as the classical view holds, you would expect God to speak of the future in absolute terms. There would be no "maybes" for God. Remarkably, however, the Bible records numerous examples of God speaking in terms of what might or might not happen.

One example of this is when God tries to convince Moses to be his representative to the elders of Israel who are in bondage to Pharaoh in Exodus 3 and 4...He first demonstrates a miracle "so that they may believe that the LORD...has appeared to you" (4:5). Moses remains unconvinced, so the Lord performs a second miracle and comments, "If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign" (4:8). How can the Lord say, "they may believe"? Isn't the future behavior of the elders a matter of certainty for the Lord? Apparently not. Indeed, the Lord continues in verse 9...

"...if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land".

If the future is exhaustively settled, God would of course have known exactly how many miracles, if any, it would take to get the elders to believe Moses. In that case, the meaning of the words he chose ("may," "if") could not be sincere. If we believe that God speaks straightforwardly, however, it seems he did not foreknow with certainty exactly how many miracles it would take to get the elders of Israel to believe Moses. This is a picture of a God who is creative and resourceful as He is wise and powerful.

Another example of the same thing...

Jeremiah 38:17-18 Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house: But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.

"So what?" you may asking. "What difference does it really make whether I believe that the future is exhaustively settled or only partially settled? This seems to be a minor point in the total scheme of things."

**Brainstorm. Ask the audience. What do you think?**

**Five reasons:**

**1. Rational Mind and Transformed Hearts.** It enables our heart and our mind to work in 'sync' with one another. It is consistent, rationally, with ourselves as decision-making beings. It doesn't require accepting the paradox that our decisions are settled an eternity before we create them.

**2. Clarity of God's Word.** The teachings regarding God's settled foreknowledge and God's openness to future possibilities are brought together into a coherent framework increasing our ability to understand God more clearly, relate to Him more sincerely, and be transformed by Him more profoundly.

**3. Revolt verses Resignation.** It will cause us to revolt against things rather than simply accepting them, thinking they have been planned since all eternity.

Example: renting or buying? Satisfied or going for my inheritance?

We will be more inclined to take a proactive stance in the world knowing that what transpires in the future is not a foregone conclusion but is significantly up to us to decide. We will be more inclined to assume responsibility for our future. The open view of God creates a people who do not wait for an eternally settled future to happen, they help create the future.

**4. Urgency of Prayer.** Prayer becomes more passionate and urgent. The open view is able to declare, without qualification or inconsistency, that some of the future genuinely depends on prayer. It's amazing how God displays his beautiful sovereignty by deciding not to always unilaterally decide matters. He enlists our input to activate that dynamic relationship as real, empowered persons. We get some 'say-so' too.

Scripture Example: "If my people ...humble themselves (and) pray...then will I hear

from heaven...and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14)

**5. Resolving the Problem of Evil.** The open view of God resolves our questions about the problem of evil. By in large, the potential for evil lies in the nature of free will. Once God gave people this freedom, the purpose for their actions lies in them, not God. Since it was not settled ahead of time how people would use the freedom God gave them, God cannot be blamed for how they use it.

Example: Adolph Hitler. Some would ask, "Why would God allow Hitler to be born if He foreknew that this man would massacre millions of Jews?" The answer: ...this was not foreknown as a certainty at the time God created Hitler. God had different expectations and hope for Hitler just as He does us. Things changed through the faculty of Hitler's free will.

If we then agree that the ultimate source for all evil is found in the will of free agents rather than in God. It motivates us to rise up aggressively against all evil with the mighty kingdom power of God's Spirit that He has placed in us.

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### **Some Objections:**

#### **1. The Open view undermines God's omniscience.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that God is absolutely all knowing. There is no difference in my understanding of God's omniscience and any other orthodox theologian. But I hold that part of the reality, which God perfectly knows, consists of possibilities. The difference is in our understanding of creation, not in our understanding of God's omniscience.

#### **2. The Open view undermines God's omnipotence.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that God is omnipotent. He is the Creator of all things and thus all power comes from him. But with all Armenians, I also hold that God limits the exercise of his own power by giving free will to creatures (humans and angels).

#### **3. The Open view undermines our confidence in God's ability to accomplish his purposes.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that God can and has guaranteed whatever he wants to about the future, for he is omnipotent. But I also affirm (because I believe Scripture teaches) that part of God's purpose in creation is to have free agents who decide some matters for themselves (e.g. their own eternal destiny). Within the parameters set by the Creator, parameters that guarantee whatever God wants to guarantee about the future,

humans have some degree of self-determination. This means that concerning the fate of particular individuals things may not turn out, as God desires. If we deny this, we must accept that God actually desires some people to go to hell. But Scripture unequivocally denies this. (I Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9)

#### **4. The Open view undermines God's perfection.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) the absolute perfection of God. But I do not see that Scripture teaches that the future must be exhaustively settled either in God's mind or in God's will for God to be perfect. Rather, I believe that God's perfection is more exalted when we understand him to be so self-confident in his power that he genuinely gives free will to creatures.

#### **5. This Open view undermines the power of prayer.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that petitionary prayer is our most powerful tool in bringing about the Father's will "on earth as it is in heaven." Indeed, because my view allows for the future to be somewhat open, I believe it makes the best sense out of the urgency and efficaciousness, which Scripture attaches to prayer.

#### **6. The Open view cannot account for biblical prophecy.**

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that God can and does determine and predict the future whenever it suits his sovereign purposes to do so. But I deny that this logically entails, or that Scripture teaches, that all of the future is determined and predictable. God is wise enough to be able to achieve his purposes while allowing his creatures a significant element of freedom.