

# God and the Future

## A Brief Outline of the Open View

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In this essay I shall briefly state the Open view of God's relationship to the future with the scriptural grounds on which it is based. I shall then briefly address the most common objections raised against it.

### The Open View

It goes without saying that 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. For example,

- 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). Other times he explicitly tells us he will change his mind if circumstances change (Jer. 1 8:7-1 1; 26:2-3; Ezek. 3 3:13 -15). This willingness to change is portrayed as one of God's attributes of greatness (Joel 2:13-14; Jon. 4:2).
- 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, 3 5; Ezek. 22:29-3 1).
- 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 several passages the Lord explicitly tells us that he *did not know* that humans would behave the way they did (Jer. 7:3 1; 19:5; 3 2:3 5).
- 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).
- The Lord sometimes asks non-rhetorical questions about the future (Num. 14:1 1; 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).

Traditionally, theologians have taken all the passages that demonstrate that the future is settled in either in God's mind (foreknowledge) or in God's will (predestination) as revealing the whole truth about God's relationship to the future. They therefore interpret all passages (such as the above) which suggest that God faces a partly open future as being figurative. On exegetical and theological grounds I do not see this approach as warranted. I am therefore compelled to take both sets of passages as literal and thus to draw the conclusion that the future which God faces is partly open and partly settled.

## 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 Arminians, 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 which 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.

### *7. The Open View is Incoherent*

Some argue that it is logically impossible for God to guarantee some aspects of the future without controlling everything about the future. This objection has been raised by Calvinists against Arminians for centuries and is no more forceful against the Open view than it is against classical Arminians. Everything in life, from our own personal experience down to quantum particles, points to the truth that predictable stability does not rule out an element of unpredictability.

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