

God Knows!

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One Pastor's Reply to Open Theism

Does it ever bother you to think that God knows everything? Of course it is troubling to realize that God sees me when I am trying to hide, but at another level I'm glad that He knows everything about me, because it means He will never discover some terrible secret that will destroy our relationship. He is the only person who knows me fully and He still loves me—that is wonderful news.

But what about God's knowledge of the future? If God knows everything that I am going to do, then do I really have a choice about whether to do it? Think about this example for a moment: suppose I want to play tennis this afternoon...but if God knows I'm really going to read a news magazine while preparing dinner for my boys, then there is no chance in the world that I'm going to decide to hit the courts. But it gets worse, because if God knows that I'm going to get a phone call while I am preparing dinner to tell me that the boys are delayed and my wife is bringing home a pizza, then there is no chance I will do anything that I had planned. Life situations like these can make a guy wonder, does God's knowledge of the future make all my decisions totally irrelevant or pre-determined?

This typical reversal of plans is a trivial example, but there are other examples that are more disturbing. Let's say, for instance, that I am praying for my son to receive a scholarship to a Christian university, but in fact, God knows that he will attend another college that I have not considered. If God knows what the final result will be, does it mean that my original prayer was wasted, since there was no chance my request could be granted? Does this mean that every prayer is inherently prayed in vain, since the future is already fully determined?

Questions like these have led some theologians to develop new systems for understanding God. During the 1980's Clark Pinnock among others championed a theory called *process theology* by which they meant that God can

react to new ideas and that God continues to grow and develop. In the last ten years Gregory Boyd and others became dissatisfied with the weak god of process theology and proposed another idea called *open theism*. Rather than theorizing that God is limited and is still in process, the open theists suppose that the future is inherently unknowable, even for God. This is how one leading proponent describes it: 'We believe that God could have known every event of the future had God decided to create a fully determined universe. However, in our view God decided to create beings with indeterministic freedom which implies that God chose to create a universe in which the future is not entirely knowable, even for God. For many open theists the "future" is not a present reality--it does not exist--and God knows reality as it is.' (John Sanders, www.opentheism.info/home, March 25, 2008) The benefit of the open theory is that it tells me my decisions are not all pre-determined. Maybe I don't know for sure what I'm going to do this afternoon, but then neither does anybody else—not even God!

What the Bible says

The Bible is sympathetic to the hard work that these theologians have put themselves to in trying to understand God. In Isaiah 55:8-11 God says "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts." For me to try to understand how God can know all that He knows will always tie my brain in knots—it is no wonder that smart men like Pinnock, Boyd and Sanders become so entangled in their reasoning, since God's thinking is so much beyond their own. But the answer to this puzzle is not that we should ascend to heaven and put ourselves in God's place. The Lord has already made a way to communicate His thoughts to us while we remain at home on earth. The Word of God is like the rain: He sends it down from heaven and accomplishes growth on the earth. If we will simply receive the Scripture and study it, the Scripture will accomplish its purpose and we will understand

all God wants to communicate about how and what He knows.

What God knows about me

God knows all my thoughts and motives. I am often surprised and confused by the mixture of motives in my heart and my bent to sin against Him even on my best day of walking by faith; but God is not surprised. “When our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and **knows all things**” (1 John 3:20). He is “a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of our heart, and there is no creature hidden from His sight” (Hebrews 4:12b).

God knows all my future. Psalm 139:1-6 says that the Lord knows all my days and wrote them down in His book before I was born. He knows what I am thinking and He knows what I’m going to say long before I say it. Even before I begin to pray, God knows everything I’m going to tell Him. Ephesians 2:10 tells me that God created me specially to accomplish specific good works in Christ, works that He prepared in advance just for me. Part of His creativity is that He custom designs people for innovative goodness and He prepares their workspace in this world to set them up for success.

When the Son of God, Christ Jesus was on the earth He knew Simon Peter’s immediate future, that he would deny Him three times before morning (John 13:38), and He also knew his distant future, how Peter would become the leader of His church (Matthew 16:18), how he would suffer and how he would die (John 21:19). Jesus knew Judas Iscariot’s immediate plans (John 13:21), and He knew those plans from the very beginning (John 6:64).

Does God’s knowledge interfere with our ability to choose?

Does it seem unreasonable to you that Jesus knew Judas Iscariot’s character, but still put him in position to betray Him? In Mark 14:21 Jesus said that it was necessary for Him to be betrayed as the Scripture foretold,

but He also said, “Woe to that man who betrays [Me]— better if he had not been born!” The Son of God created Judas and knew him thoroughly and knew his plans before they entered his mind, but still He holds Judas accountable for his choices. This is hard for us to fathom, but it is a truth that the apostles discovered early on when they recognized that Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders conspired against Jesus “to do whatever Your hand and purpose predestined to occur” (Acts 4:28). From the earliest days of the church, we have had to recognize two truths that don’t sit comfortably together: on the one hand God purposed that Christ would be betrayed and murdered, but on the other He is very angry with the murderers who killed His Son. God knows the future evil choices of evil people, but He still holds them responsible.

Judas and Herod are evil examples, but there are just as many good examples of men God knew before they were born. John the Baptist was foreknown of God 400 years before his birth (Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 11:14). God determined his name (Luke 1:13). God filled him with His Spirit while he was still in the womb and directed his actions before he was born or even made any conscious choice (Luke 1:15, 44). God foreknew John’s future character and actions so perfectly that He staked His prophetic reputation on him (1:17) because if John had rejected God’s assignment, the Messiah would have been left without a forerunner (Isaiah 40:3; Luke 1:76, 3:4; Mark 1:1-8). Before his birth God chose him to be a prophet (Luke 1:76) and that his parents would be members of the priestly tribe (1:5-7) so that he himself would be both prophet and priest. Clearly, all of John’s publicly recorded actions were foreknown by God, but we can hardly think of him as an automaton, when Jesus calls him “the greatest man born of women (Matt. 11:11).” What is true of John the Baptist is also true of you and me: God knows the future good choices of His children, but He still honors and rewards their obedience.

What God knows about future events

God knows everything about the future, and many future events He revealed to the prophets hundreds of years before they occurred. So far from the theories of open theism, God sees the future with perfect clarity. He told Jeremiah the name of the king who would conquer Jerusalem, the place where they would be exiled and the duration of their exile (Jeremiah 25:9-11). He told Isaiah 200 years in advance what would be the name of the king who would restore Jerusalem after the seventy-year exile was complete and several remarkable details concerning the way Cyrus would gain access and victory over Babylon (44:27-45:1).

Most of the things that God knows about the future are not good for us to know, but even so there are hundreds of details that He has told us. We know that when the Lord Jesus returns, the dead will rise bodily from their graves and then we who are still living will also be transformed so that we can join them in the clouds (I Thess. 4:13-18). We know that the Lord will bring back the Israelis to their land (Ezekiel 39:27, a prophecy that has begun to be fulfilled in our generation) and that two-thirds of those who return will be killed (Zechariah 13:8) but the remaining one-third will repent when they see the Lord Jesus whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10) and so all Israel will be saved. God has also chosen to give us a careful description of the next temple to be built along with its exact dimensions (Ezekiel 40-42).

In fact there is an entire book in the New Testament that God gave as a gift so that the Lord Jesus could show His servants what God would do in the future (Revelation 1:1).

Hezekiah's Lengthened Life

Open theism was developed to answer theoretical questions; it did not arise naturally from study of the Bible. The only biblical evidence that the open theists have been able to find are the passages where God says He changed

His mind. These theologians contend that if God can change His mind then He must not know the future perfectly. The most often-quoted case that they bring forward is Hezekiah's prayer for healing in 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38. But in this case (as in all the others) it is possible to show that God not only changed His mind, but He knew far in advance that He was going to change His mind.

God said Hezekiah was going to die and not recover, but then He changed His mind and granted Hezekiah's prayer for healing and told him he would live fifteen more years. If we read 2 Kings 20 to the end and then continue on to 21:1, we discover that Hezekiah did live fifteen years and his successor, his son Manasseh, was twelve years old at the time of his death. A bit of arithmetic proves that Manasseh had not been conceived at the time of Hezekiah's prayer. This fact is important because it is conclusive evidence that God knew He would change His mind and give Hezekiah more years of life. Because Manasseh is in the line of Christ (Matt. 1:10), he had to be born to Hezekiah after his miraculous recovery, or else Christ's lineage would have died with him. God knew that He would change His mind and heal Hezekiah and give him an heir to his throne even as He was informing him of his impending death.

If there is any doubt that God foreknew the entire line of the Messiah, let us recall that Hezekiah's great-grandson through Manasseh was Josiah (also in the line of Christ, Matt. 1:11). In 1 Kings 13:2, God mentions Josiah by name as the descendant of David who would make an end of the false priests. So God foreknew Josiah the grandson of Manasseh (the last of the Davidic kings before the deportation to Babylon) from the very beginning of the divided kingdom more than 300 years before he was born. And if we accept that God knew Manasseh's grandson by name, we cannot escape the conclusion that God knew He would heal Hezekiah even as Isaiah was telling him to prepare to die.

Moses' Intercession for Israel

There are many examples in the Bible where God determined to destroy the Israelites but changed His mind when Moses interceded for them (Exodus 32, Numbers 11, 14 and 16, etc.) and the open theists infer from this that God simply did not know that Moses was going to convincingly intercede for the people. But a more reasonable inference is what Moses himself says, that God could not destroy and dispossess the people without going back upon His own promises and prophecies. In other words, since God already knew and declared that He would rescue the people, He could not change now. Since God had already granted the kingship of the nation to Judah (Gen. 49:8-10) He could not go back on that promise to make a new nation of Moses, a Levite (Num. 14:12).

How could God fulfill His promise to bless as well as His determination to judge? God solved the dilemma by pardoning the people so that their children could receive His promised inheritance but He condemned the parents to death in the wilderness so that His righteousness might be satisfied (14:20-35). God did not lie when He said He would destroy the people, but rather He knew all along how He was intending to judge them. God also knew that Christ would descend from Judah and never intended to break His promise that the scepter would belong to Judah until Christ's birth.

Notice also how God raises up intercessors to stand in the gap between Him and His wrath against sin. The account of God's calling of Moses in Exodus 3-4 clearly demonstrates God's foreknowledge of Israel's choices. The elders would agree to follow Moses (Exodus 3:18), but Pharaoh would refuse (3:19); after God struck Egypt with powerful signs Pharaoh would relent (3:20), and the Egyptian people themselves would send the Israelites away with parting gifts (3:21-22). God raised Moses up to be His spokesman, not because he was a good politician, but because he would be an effective advocate with Him. Other

examples include God's conversation with Abraham in Genesis 18 where He informed Abraham of His intended judgment so that Abraham would be able to intercede. Another remarkable instance is when God called upon Job to intercede for his "friends" in Job 42:7-8; God already knew He would be gracious to the friends, but because of His anger against their sin, He required Job to be the go-between. The book of Jonah is the account of another time God proclaimed judgment on a nation, but also raised up a preacher so that He could be gracious to Nineveh and put off the prophesied judgment for a few more generations. Jesus Christ, of course, is the ultimate Advocate whom He raised up to stand between us and His wrath against our sin, but Moses and the others are indicators of the way God can fully know the future while giving His servants a way to participate in His plan by intercessory prayer.

The Judgment of Ahab

Gregory Boyd in his book *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000, pp. 83-4, 161-2) cites God's decision to delay the judgment against Ahab as an instance where God changed His mind, but Boyd is mistaken. The Bible does not say that God changed His mind in this case and the historical facts point very clearly to God's complete foreknowledge of the timing of Ahab's judgment.

In 1 Kings 21:20-24 Elijah responds to Ahab's murder of Naboth with this fourfold prophecy: a) The dogs will lick up Ahab's blood in the same place they licked up Naboth's; b) every male descendent of his would be cut off and swept away; c) Jezebel would die and be eaten by dogs in the district of Jezreel; d) Ahab's male descendents would be eaten by animals before they could be buried.

Boyd makes much of Ahab's repentance and God's decision to delay judgment on Ahab (21:29), but he ignores the fact that God went to great lengths to fulfill every word of His judgment "because the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you (22:23)". Boyd says that God literally changed His mind because He did not foresee Ahab's re-

pentance except as a mere possibility. But in fact, God did not change His mind regarding any detail, and He fulfilled all of the promised judgment precisely as He said He would.

Jeremiah 18

Open theists often use the first eleven verses of Jeremiah 18 as their proof text to show how God waits on human decisions to see how He will react. In these verses, God gives Jeremiah a living illustration by sending him to watch the potter forming pots on his wheel. Just as the potter keeps his eye on the pot he is forming and may decide to approve of it or smash it and start over, so the Lord is keeping His eye on the nations to see how they will behave. The Lord is willing to change His decision to judge or to bless each nation depending on how its people respond to Him.

Of course, you don't have to read much of Jeremiah to know that the whole book is written to tell Judah that God knows exactly how they are going to respond and that He has already decided what their judgment will be. This one paragraph in Jeremiah 18 is given so that none of them will say, "It's hopeless; we have stubborn hearts and we are going to follow our hearts" (18:12). God's offer is genuine and the people of Judah have a genuine choice to make, but the rest of the chapter makes it clear that God already knows what they will decide.

God foresaw all of this more than 700 years in advance. After the promise of blessing and cursing in Deuteronomy 28 the Lord declares that He does not intend the blessings and cursings as mere potentialities. He foreknew that both the promised blessing and the curse will be fulfilled (30:1), that the people will eventually break the covenant (31:16-20) and be banished and that they will return to Him (30:2) and that He will restore them again to their land (30:3-6). He foreknew even in Hezekiah's day the place to which the people would be banished (Isa. 39:7). He foreknew the king who would capture them (Jer. 25:9) and the duration of their captivity (25:11). He foreknew by at least

200 years the name of the king who would deliver them at the conclusion of their captivity (Isa 44:28-45:7).

What this means for the believer in need of guidance

When we come to God for direction about the future, we are coming to Someone who truly knows all possible consequences and ramifications and also Someone who knows what is really going to happen. David proved this a dozen times during his life, and he almost never undertook a military operation without first inquiring of the Lord. In I Samuel 23 he inquired twice to ask the Lord whether he should attack the Philistines at Keilah where he would be terribly outnumbered, and the Lord told him that he should attack because He would give David the victory. A few days later Saul came to try to besiege David at Keilah, and David needed to know whether the people of Keilah would be grateful for his bravery in delivering them from the Philistines or whether they would betray him and hand him over to Saul. When he asked the Lord about this, the Lord told him very plainly, "Saul is going to come against you, and the people of Keilah will betray you and hand you over to him." This was just what David needed to hear and enabled him to escape long before Saul arrived with his army. The Lord not only knew what was going to happen after David escaped, He also knew what would have happened had David stayed in town. He knows literally everything: what would be, what could be and what will be.

When believers need direction regarding the future, they are not coming to a god who has several possibilities and is just waiting to see what we will choose. God knows all the possibilities and He loves to guide us toward the one that will be best for us and for His kingdom. He promises to everyone who lacks wisdom, that they can ask Him and He will give them all the direction they need (James 1:5).

What this means for the praying man

One of the reasons that Christian theologians developed open theism is to emphasize the importance of prayer and to encourage people that the prayers of His children truly do move the heart of God. Open theists are concerned that if God knows what I am going to pray before I pray it and if He already knows how He is going to answer the prayer, then prayer loses much of its genuineness and its importance. I understand and sympathize with this desire to promote the power of prayer, but unfortunately it is an attempt to characterize God so that we feel comfortable with Him; open theism is not an accurate description of who God really is or how He really relates to us.

We can see more clearly how God relates to us if we listen to the Lord Jesus while He prays. On the one hand, He teaches not to “use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do (for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words); don’t be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:7-8). But on the other hand He Himself on the evening of Judas’ betrayal spent at least an hour in prayer (Matthew 26:40) and prayed the same request three times (26:44). From Jesus’ words and example we can learn that God does know what we need and does not need to be reminded, but we also learn that God wants to hear what is on our heart. This instruction is directly opposed to the practice of reciting a rosary-style prayer multiple times in order to earn the right to God’s consideration, but it should encourage us to come to God with our grief and anxiety because we know He hears us.

God knows what we are going to pray and He knows how He is going to answer, but this does not make prayer unnecessary or unimportant. Jesus demonstrated this in John 11 when He told the disciples in advance that Lazarus had died, and that He was going to go and raise Lazarus from the dead. Even though God knew and His Son knew that they would raise Lazarus, God does His powerful work in answer to prayer. So when Jesus arrived and found that He was dead four days already He prayed, “Father, I thank

You that You heard Me...it is because of the crowd of bystanders that I said it, that they may believe that You sent Me" (John 11:41-2). Even though Jesus knew that His Father knew what He was going to pray and even though He knew how His Father was going to answer, the prayer was an important act because it reinforced their relationship of hearing and sending and allowed other people to witness the answer to prayer.

Seen from a proper perspective, the fact that God knows what I will ask and what He will do is a great incentive to prayer because it takes away any fear of failure or rejection. Jesus used this truth to motivate His disciples just after the Last Supper in John 15:16, "You did not choose Me but I chose you and appointed you...that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you." Jesus' primary message in His last meeting with His disciples before the cross was that they should abide in Him and ask whatever they desired, because God would give it to them (John 14:13, 14; 15:7, 16; 16:23, 24). He knows me; He chose me; He wants to hear what is on my heart, and He has appointed His Son and His Spirit to be my full-time advocates, so that He can answer my prayers for my good (Romans 8:26-28).

More even than this, prayer is the means God has ordained for you and me to participate with Him in His business. Jesus was moved with compassion for the people who had not yet received the gospel and He told His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few; therefore, beg the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). The Lord obviously knows the state of His own harvest and He has a plan for bringing it in, but Jesus invites us to pray. When we pray we are not telling God what needs to be done, but we are entering in to what needs to be done as adult children in the Father's family business. We can save no one; we can convince no one; we can heal no one, because God does it all. But the one thing we can do, we are called to do: we

are called to pray.

I urge you to do your part without worrying too much how God does His. Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened to you. God knows how!

