

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life. Like It or Not.

Aug. 2, 2011

Recently I have been engaging in an email conversation with a lady who is deeply burdened by the sinful choices and ungodly thinking of a young man dear to her. As we have talked about what she can do, our conversation turned to prayer. Yesterday she asked, "How does intercessory prayer make/change/mediate the young man's own will? How does the person we pray for 'get the message'? How can we pray for God's will to be done when it is against the will of the person we're praying for? How does our prayer help the person to *want* God's will for themselves? How does my intercessory prayer help the person I'm praying for yield their own will and turn it over to God's will?"

I answered, "You're asking about the mechanics of how something spiritual works, and I don't know that the Word gives us that kind of information. But think about how *you* have changed *your* thinking about anything. How did you go from being dead in your trespasses and sins, to being alive in Christ? How did you go from caring more about yourself than anyone else (because sinful humanity is inherently selfish) to having a desire to pray selflessly for others?"

"I would suggest that God gave you enlightenment, showing you more and more truth, at the same time drawing you into His own heart. You started gravitating toward what was true, and Jesus said, 'I am the truth.'

"At the same time, God never violated your will, allowing you to freely choose to turn to Him in faith and in choices that matured you. How those work together, I don't think anyone understands."

Ah. Mystery. We keep running into it, don't we? And that makes sense, since God is so other, so immense, so brilliant—do we really expect that we would be able to figure out how the spiritual realm works, much less figuring out God Himself? But with our modernist, Western, scientific mindset, we are set up to disdain mystery (and all things supernatural). The progression of scientific knowledge and understanding has stripped the apparently mystical and miraculous from things like how babies are conceived and how illness spreads. Our culture's misplaced confidence in science to solve all problems extends to mystery; we tend to think, "Oh, we just haven't figured it out yet. . .but we will."

We want to know *how things work*, and there's nothing wrong with that. I think that wrestling with that question is one way we can love God with our minds (Matt. 22:37). But there are also going to be times to choose to be content with mystery, and let it serve its role of pointing us to the One who delights to weave mystery into life like a divine tapestry.

This blog post originally appeared at

[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/ah_sweet_mystery_of_life_like_it_or_not.](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/ah_sweet_mystery_of_life_like_it_or_not)

“What's the Difference Between God's Will and Man's Will in Salvation?”

What is the difference between God's will and man's will in salvation? When someone chooses to believe in the Lord, do

they believe by their own will or by God's will? The Bible says, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight..." (Ephesians 1:4).

I think that (in a sense) both wills are involved when someone trusts Christ for salvation. God's will is primary and the human will is secondary. God desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and He provides sufficient grace for each person to be saved. Hence, when someone trusts Christ for salvation, they are not doing this on their own initiative or in their own will-power. Rather, they simply quit resisting God's grace and allow Him to save them. Those who persist in resisting God's grace will ultimately perish.

Thus, as one Christian theologian has observed, the difference between believers and unbelievers is NOT to be found in the believers; it is to be found in the unbelievers. The believer is one who simply allows God to save him (which is God's will and desire); the unbeliever is one who continues to resist God's grace.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

© 2011 Probe Ministries

"If Those Who Can't Choose God Go to Heaven, Why Give Us a Choice?"

I read at Probe.org some of the answers to the question of [whether babies are in heaven](#), and they still did not answer my

question—IF the mentally retarded and infants are in heaven because of God's grace (before I go on, please don't think I am being disrespectful, because I love the Lord), then why did He create US with choice? Will the babies be grown up in Heaven and the formerly mentally retarded be complete? If so, how can God have a perfect relationship with them, if they have never been given a choice to choose against Him, like we were? Why didn't He just make us all that way?

Thanks for the question. Sorry to hear that the other articles didn't cover it for you, but your question is one that has no easy "one-size-fits-all" answer.

As earlier established, it is by God's grace that babies, and those too mentally handicapped to make a choice for or against Christ, go to heaven. One of the rationales for that belief is Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used illustrations of children to highlight the kind of character that would be present in heaven. In Matthew 18:1-4, Jesus tells about the humility found in children that serves as a guiding principle for all who wish to enter eternal paradise of God. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus described the sincere faith and genuine trust necessary for those who are in heaven. He asserted that children have a recognized place in the kingdom (Matthew 18:10) for they (and by extension, the mentally challenged who cannot progress beyond a child-like mentality) illustrate the kind of spirit an adult must have to experience a place in God's kingdom^[1].

Granted, deceased children and the mentally challenged do not have the option of belief; their development ended before the age of accountability where they could make a mature decision of trust^[2]. However, Christ died for all (Romans 6:10); the debt of sin was paid in full once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). Unless someone deliberately rejects that offer of grace, the offer still stands. Children and the mentally challenged cannot believe nor disbelieve, therefore they have not rejected Christ's atonement. The cancelled debt of sin is

still valid on their account.

But, I think I understand the core of your question. It seems that you are asking this: why do babies, children, and the mentally challenged get a “free pass” to heaven without having to go through the angst and struggle that comes from the life of faith? Why do they get to go to heaven scot-free while adults have to struggle with the issue of choice and the resulting dilemma of eternal damnation?

Every human being is born with the potential of choice. It's in our DNA. It's a part of being human. Babies, children, the mentally challenged—all of us were born with the capacity for choice and free will. When those who cannot believe die, the full potentiality of their choice is cut short and they cannot fully exercise that capacity. They do not have any accountable works to speak against their character, therefore God ushers them into His presence. It may seem that it would be preferable to simply die as a child to assure one's place in heaven. But we must remember two things: First, as humans in the image of God, we were created for more than just heaven. If we were created simply for heaven, we would not have physical bodies, nor would we be resurrected in bodily form. Our created purpose was to be a physical representation of God's presence on the earth. Second, there is a trade-off in the premature death of a baby versus the full life of an adult. Babies and the mentally challenged do not have to experience the angst of choice and the struggles of faith but they also miss out on earthly life itself. A full earthly life can include the joy of a family and the shared happiness that comes from strong lifelong friendships. Adults have the opportunity to find and experience love on many different levels: platonic, fraternal, casual, romantic, and spiritual. Those who are Christians share in the fellowship of their spiritual family and are indwelled with the filling of the Holy Spirit.

People past the age of accountability do have the eternally

crucial decision of choosing rightly of whether to follow Christ or not. They have supernatural assistance from God in the power of the Holy Spirit. In deliberation with our free will, God is there to assist us in our choice and interacts with our spirits to help us make an informed decision (John 16:8-11). Though the choice can be difficult for some, God illuminates the truth and testifies to our spirit that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

Finally, we simply cannot argue with how God decides to give his grace. The classic example is the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), where some of the workers were angry with the justice of the landowner . A landowner decided to hire workers to work in his vineyard, so he hired help throughout the day. The workers who were hired at the end of the day did not work that long, yet they were paid a denarius (a full day's salary). The workers hired in the early morning sweated and toiled in the heat, yet they too were paid a denarius. Those who bore the brunt of the labor grumbled against the landowner and asked why those who performed less labor received the same payment as those who worked all day.

The analogy holds for babies and the mentally challenged. Babies and the mentally challenged have not made a profession of faith or lived a life of struggle against sin and temptation. Nor have they had to face the real possibility of hell, yet they are ushered through the gates of heaven. Adult believers have the task of coming to trust in Jesus and obeying the will of the Father, or face the possibility of eternal condemnation.

The landowner's response to the hired men is the same response that our Father gives us. This is not an occasion for anger or jealousy but an opportunity for grace. God wants to extend his mercy to all and we should be happy with the reward set before us. We should not be envious that those who cannot believe get to experience the same honor as those who have borne the scars of struggles and difficulties. We should celebrate because we

know that those individuals – the babies, the children, and the mentally challenged- are in a better place and are safe in the arms of our Lord when they die.

You asked why God created us with choice. You may find this answer to email helpful: "[Why Did God Create a Flawed World Where Eve Could Eat the Forbidden Fruit?](#)"

I hope that answers your question.

Nathan Townsie

Notes

1. Lightner, Robert P. *Safe in the Arms of Jesus: God's Provision for Death for Those Who Cannot Believe*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000.

2. The age of accountability was the age that God considered a person to be morally responsible for his/her own behavior. In Jewish culture, age thirteen was the age that a person was considered to be a full member of the community and thus responsible for his/her sins. In Christendom, there is no definitive age; it is left to the discretion of the Lord.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“Which Is It: Man’s Free Will or God’s Omniscience?”

A friend of mine posed this question to me. I would like to pass it along for your reflection:

When we say that God “knows the future”, are we saying that

He possesses knowledge of all future events? My premise is that in order for free will for Man to exist, then it is impossible for God to know all future events. In other words, these concepts are mutually exclusive. If that is true, then which one exists – free will in humans, or knowledge by God of all future events? (Or is my premise wrong?) My opinion is that free will exists, and therefore God cannot know all future events. Furthermore, Christians should not be troubled by the concept of a God that does not possess knowledge of all future events. They should rest assured that – one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises.

Thanks for any insights that I could pass along to him.

This is a big issue in theological circles today—sort of the “God version” of the “what did he know and when did he know it?” question. The debate over the extent of God’s foreknowledge is called “open theism.” (Check out Rick Wade’s article called [“God and the Future”](#)).

But I can tell you what we believe. God does, indeed, know every single detail of the future, which is why the Bible contains accurate prophecy of future events—because not only did God know they would (and will) happen, but because He is sovereign, He superintends them.

I think many people misunderstand the concept of “free will,” which is not a biblical term. The reality is that while we have the ability to make truly significant choices, we don’t have truly “free” will. You cannot, for example, choose to wake up tomorrow morning in China when you go to bed in Chicago. Or wake up speaking Chinese when all you know is English. You cannot choose to be a different gender than what God made you. (Yes, I’m aware of sex-change operations and know people who’ve had them—we’re not even going there! <smile>) But we can make choices that make a difference: for

example, in our attitudes, in who we marry and most importantly, which God we serve. We have limited freedom in our choices, and God does not force us to choose things His way; He respects our choices. But we do not have totally free will.

I think your friend misunderstands the concept of God's sovereignty ("one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises") if he thinks that God can have a plan and execute it if He doesn't know everything that's going to happen. You can't have it both ways. A God who is not omniscient cannot be sovereign. A sovereign God MUST be omniscient.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“Who Controls the World—God or Satan?”

A friend and I were discussing whose rule the world was under, God's or Satan's. Of course we disagreed because I said God ruled the world and allows Satan to take us through suffering to make us strong and to test our faith. My friend feels that the world belongs to Satan because Eve succumbed to Satan in the Garden of Eden. Please clarify who controls the world today.

Thanks for your letter. Satan has been temporarily granted a tremendous amount of power over this world, as can be seen from the following passages:

John 12:31 – Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.

2 Cor 4:4 – ...in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

1 John 5:19 – We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

But God is the One who ultimately rules and reigns over all things. He is the Creator of all that exists (other than Himself of course) and all things are ultimately subject to His will and power. Many passages of Scripture bear this out – e.g. Psalms 9:7; 22:28; 47:8; 59:13; 66:7; 97:1; 99:1; 103:19; 146:10, as well as passages such as Gen. 1-2; Job 1-2; John 1; Eph. 1; Col. 1; Rom. 9-11; Rev. 19-22; etc.

Satan is a creature; God is his Creator. Satan cannot do anything that the Lord does not permit him to do (see Job 1-2) and God will one day cast Satan into the lake of fire for all eternity (Rev. 20:10).

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

Probe Ministries

“Which Is It: Man’s Free Will

or God's Omniscience?"

A friend of mine posed this question to me. I would like to pass it along for your reflection:

When we say that God "knows the future", are we saying that He possesses knowledge of all future events? My premise is that in order for free will for Man to exist, then it is impossible for God to know all future events. In other words, these concepts are mutually exclusive. If that is true, then which one exists – free will in humans, or knowledge by God of all future events? (Or is my premise wrong?) My opinion is that free will exists, and therefore God cannot know all future events. Furthermore, Christians should not be troubled by the concept of a God that does not possess knowledge of all future events. They should rest assured that – one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises.

Thanks for any insights that I could pass along to him.

This is a big issue in theological circles today—sort of the "God version" of the "what did he know and when did he know it?" question. The debate over the extent of God's foreknowledge is called "open theism." (Check out Rick Wade's article called ["God and the Future"](#)).

But I can tell you what we believe. God does, indeed, know every single detail of the future, which is why the Bible contains accurate prophecy of future events—because not only did God know they would (and will) happen, but because He is sovereign, He superintends them.

I think many people misunderstand the concept of "free will," which is not a biblical term. The reality is that while we

have the ability to make truly significant choices, we don't have truly "free" will. You cannot, for example, choose to wake up tomorrow morning in China when you go to bed in Chicago. Or wake up speaking Chinese when all you know is English. You cannot choose to be a different gender than what God made you. (Yes, I'm aware of sex-change operations and know people who've had them—we're not even going there! <smile>) But we can make choices that make a difference: for example, in our attitudes, in who we marry and most importantly, which God we serve. We have limited freedom in our choices, and God does not force us to choose things His way; He respects our choices. But we do not have totally free will.

I think your friend misunderstands the concept of God's sovereignty ("one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises") if he thinks that God can have a plan and execute it if He doesn't know everything that's going to happen. You can't have it both ways. A God who is not omniscient cannot be sovereign. A sovereign God MUST be omniscient.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

The Sovereignty of God

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



Rick Wade helps us understand the full meaning of the sovereignty of God highlighting its immense practical importance. If God is truly sovereign, then what He says He

will do, He can and will bring to pass. It is the choice of our sovereign God to endow us with free will and as sovereign He can make it so without limiting His sovereign power. God has promised us a glorious future and He has the power and the resolve to make it happen.

What's the Issue?

In whom or in what do people place their trust these days? Money? Their social group? Themselves? Some use exercise to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and maybe even add years to their lives. Some look to spiritual practices, or work for a safer environment. Such things have their proper place, but should they be our source or sources of confidence? We all live with a basic insecurity that causes us to look for something stable to hold onto. It is obvious that there are forces in this world stronger than we are, some of which have no concern for our welfare. So we latch on to something that will see us through whatever problems might come our way.

Although Christians are to attend to their financial, physical, and social welfare (among other things), they are look to God ultimately for their security. We're derided by some for seeking a "crutch" or a "security blanket," but everyone looks for support in one place or another. The question is, Which crutch or security blanket is true and sufficient for our needs? Christians look to the true God Who has promised to be our "help in times of trouble."

Because of our different personalities and situations in life, we look for different things in God. What do you want in a God? What do you need in a God? Love? Justice? Mercy? No matter what we might need in a God, if that God lacks one particular thing, the others will do little good. That is the power to "pull it off," to exercise His love, justice, and mercy, and to do all the things He says He will do without opposition powerful enough to deter Him. We need our God to be

sovereign; to be, as Arthur Pink said, “the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will.”[\[1\]](#)

Often when the subject of God’s sovereignty comes up among Christians, it’s in the context of the sovereignty/free will debate. Although I will address that matter at a later point, my desire is that we will see the sovereignty of God as a foundation for confidence rather than simply a topic for debate.

God’s sovereignty has immense practical importance. For one thing, it makes Him our proper object of worship. He is the almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all that exists. There is none higher, none more worthy of worship and honor.

For another thing, that God is sovereign means He can be counted on, for nothing can stand against Him. He can be counted on for our salvation. He can be counted on to carry us through times of difficulty such that nothing touches us that is not in keeping with His desires for us. And He can be counted on to keep all the promises He has made to us.

Characteristics of Sovereignty

What does the Bible say about God that causes us to believe He is sovereign? For one thing, God is called by names that convey the meaning of sovereignty. In the Old Testament, He is called *Adonay*. Second Samuel 7:22 in the NIV reads: “How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears.” In the New Testament, God is called *despotēs*, from which we get our word “despot.” This word “denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life.” The term is usually used over against the word *doulos* or “slave.”[\[2\]](#) In Rev. 6:10

we read where those slain for their testimony “called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’”

Another thing we see in Scripture is that God has characteristics that call for ascribing sovereignty to Him.

First, God exercises rightful *authority*. He has the right to do with the creation what He desires because it is His creation. He also is active in His creation, contrary to the deistic understanding which is that God created the universe but then left it to run according to natural laws with little or no intervention on His part.

Second, God has the *power* to do what He desires with His universe. “All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing,” Daniel wrote. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?’” (4:35).

Third, God has the *knowledge* required to rule over all. He knows what’s going on, and exactly what needs to be done. He knows the past, present, and future perfectly.

Fourth, God has the *will* to do what He desires. He does what He says He will do. (Is. 46:9, 10; 55:11)

Biblical Examples

These attributes are seen in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, for example, God showed His sovereignty in the experience of Moses and the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt. He showed His *authority* when He simply stepped in and told Moses what He would do for His people and later when He overrode Pharaoh’s ruling and showed who was really in charge. He demonstrated His *power* by turning Moses’ staff into a serpent; by making Moses’ hand leprous and then healing it; through sending the plagues upon the Egyptians; and then by

parting the sea before the fleeing Israelites. "By this you shall know that I am the LORD," He said (Ex. 7:17). God had perfect *knowledge* of the plight of the Israelites (3:7, 9), and He knew what He would do with and for them (3:12, 19, 20, 22). Finally, He was faithful to His promises; His *will* was not thwarted.

God showed His sovereign rule in the New Testament as well in the experience of Mary. He showed His *authority* over this young woman when He simply stepped into her life and told her what He was going to do (Lk. 1:26ff). He claimed to have the *power* to do what He desired: "For nothing will be impossible with God," said the angel (v. 37). God *knew* Mary (v. 30), and He knew what her future held because He had plans for Her (vv. 31, 35). And He faithfully fulfilled His promises, according to His *will*, as Mary knew He would (1:42; 2:6, 7; see also her exclamation of praise in 1:49-55).

These are only two of numerous illustrations of the sovereign authority of God in Scripture. We can read about similar demonstrations in the lives of other people such as Job (Job 38-41; 42:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:31, 32, 34-35), Joseph (Gen. 50:20), and Jesus (Acts 2:23, 24). And that's just a small sampling.

But God's sovereign rule didn't end with the writing of the Bible. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is still sovereignly active in His creation. God is "the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords" who will draw history as we know it to a close with the coming of Christ "at the proper time" (1 Tim. 6:15). He determines the times and boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26). Not only did He create all things, Paul writes that "in Him all things hold together" (Col. 2:17). Notice the present tense in Eph. 1:11 which says that God is the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will."

Sovereignty and Free Will

The problem of the tension between God's sovereign control and man's free will is a perennial one among Christians, especially theology students! While this is an interesting debate (to some), it easily overshadows any discussion of the benefits of God's sovereignty. Battle lines are drawn and the debate commences, with the result that sovereignty becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Nonetheless, it seems inappropriate to ignore the issue in a discussion of sovereignty. So I'll offer just a few comments, not to attempt to settle the issue, but to bring a few points to light for you the reader to consider.

From our previous discussion, we already have a basic understanding of what sovereignty is. What about free will? Note that here we aren't talking about the freedom that comes when we are released from the power of sin through faith in Christ. According to Scripture, we are enslaved to whichever master we choose to follow. But to be "enslaved" to Christ is to be free to be and do what we were made to be and do.

We're talking here about freedom of the will, the ability to choose or determine one's actions without coercion. Because one's actions are so strongly influenced by one's upbringing, religious beliefs, circumstances of life, etc., our situation can never be one of complete indeterminacy. [\[3\]](#) Thus, the issue at hand doesn't pit completely free will against God's control. It really is over our ability to make uncoerced, significant choices for which we can be held responsible: it is about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Just as we read of a God in control of the history of His creation throughout Scripture, we also observe people making choices for which they are either rewarded or punished. It seems clear enough in Scripture that we are able to make uncoerced choices. Jesus bewailed the condition of Jerusalem in His day: "How often I wanted to gather your children

together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," He said, "and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). The Jews are blamed for their choice—or lack of it. We're even commanded to make choices: "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua commanded (24:15). Jesus told us to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15) as if we could choose to do so. Abraham received what God had promised because he chose to obey God (Gen. 22:15-18).

But if we have this freedom to choose, how can God be truly sovereign over the course of history? What a conundrum!

One principle that absolutely must remain paramount is that Scripture is our final authority, not reason. This isn't to say the scriptural position is against reason; it's merely an affirmation that our reason is not up to fully grasping God and His ways. We have to make do with what He tells us; all speculation beyond that is merely—well, speculation.

What do we read in the Bible? We read that both God is in control and that we can be legitimately held responsible for our choices. And we don't have to find one verse in support of one and another verse in support of the other! In Gen. 50: 20, Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Peter rebuked the Jews at Pentecost: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," he said (Acts 2:23). That the executioners bore at least some of the guilt is clear from the fact that Jesus asked for their forgiveness on the cross (Lk. 23:34). In Isaiah we read that it was God who sent the Assyrians to punish Judah, but then punished them for doing it with the wrong attitude (10:5-15)!

This issue typically arises in discussions of the matter of election to salvation. Jesus and the apostles made the offer as though listeners (or readers) could accept it or reject it.

God doesn't play games; it would make the whole call to repentance and salvation a farce if our choice had nothing to do with it. We're told to "repent and believe in the Gospel," (Mk. 1:15). But we're also told that it is God who chooses (cf. Jn. 15:16; Rom. 9:14-22).

This duality is also seen in our prayer life. We're taught that all things come to pass according to God's will, but also that our prayers make a difference. Paul said that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). But through Ezekiel God said, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (22:30, 31). Someone might say that it is God who inclines us to pray, but that doesn't diminish the fact that we can be scolded for not praying as though the responsibility were ours to do so (James 4:2).

People who spend much time thinking about this matter tend to lean more heavily to one side than to the other. It's important to note, however, that we do not lose a bit of tension by emphasizing one over the other—either God's sovereignty or man's free will. If we overemphasize God's sovereignty, there is the difficulty of understanding the judgment of God of those who weren't elected.[{4}](#) How does this mesh with the scriptural teaching that God doesn't show favoritism, or to the command to love all people, even our enemies? On the other hand, if we overemphasize man's free will, how can a man ever be saved? "An excessively narrow Arminianism," says Mark Hanna, "lapses into synergism (the union of human effort or will with divine grace)." It diminishes the enslaving power of sin, and it gives us the power to limit God. [{5}](#)

Because of these tensions, I'm inclined to agree with Donald Carson who says that "the sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be

explored.”{6} It is an issue that I personally have had to let stand without any real hopes for final resolution. Some might consider this an “easy out,” but I’m content to see this as one of the “secret things” spoken of in Dt. 29:29.

However, that doesn’t mean the matter of God’s sovereignty isn’t important. As I see it, the important question is, How shall I live with both biblical truths in view: that God is sovereign over all, and that I will be held responsible for my choices? I think the old hymn “Trust and Obey” sums it up. I have been given the responsibility to obey God. But I’m thankful that the final burden of accomplishing His will doesn’t rest on me! For that, I am to trust Him. This is the crux of the sovereignty-responsibility issue as far as I’m concerned. While we have the ability and responsibility to choose, we can have confidence that God’s plan will be accomplished, that His promises will be fulfilled, and that in the end, everything is going to turn out just right.

The Significance of Sovereignty for Our Lives

Let’s wind up this brief overview with a look at some applications of God’s sovereignty in our lives.

First, that God is sovereign makes clear who is to be the focus of our worship. All glory goes to Him. To Jesus “be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen,” John said (Rev. 1:6). “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (5:12) the angels sang. When we worship individually and corporately, our eyes should be on the sovereign God rather than on ourselves. Although we will share in the glories of Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), God will not give His glory away to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11). He is the One who should get all the credit.

That God is sovereign means that God's redemptive purposes will not be thwarted. He will build His church (Matt. 16:18), and we can know we are part of it. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

It also means that all God has foretold will surely come to pass. He is working out His plans (Is. 42:5-9), and nothing will take away what God has for us. No one can hold back His hand (Dan. 4:35). He is able to keep His promises, and because He is true to His word, He can be counted on to keep them (Is. 55:11; 2 Tim. 2:13; cf. Rev. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6).

In addition to that, because the sovereign God is also the God of love, He can be trusted in the fullest sense. The awesome power of God is a fearful thing to His enemies (Matt. 10:28; Heb. 10:31). But to those who love Him, the combination of His sovereignty and love makes it possible for us to truly rest, to live without fear. This is in stark contrast to gods of other religions who constantly have to be appeased to avert their anger, or even to the gods of our secular society, such as money, power, health, and prestige, all of which can let us down.

Finally, that God is sovereign means He will ultimately triumph over evil. We're told that in the end the great enemy death will be done away with (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes," John writes. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4).

Earlier I noted that the topic of God's sovereignty easily becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Just as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should serve to bring comfort to those who sometimes doubt their ability to hold on to God, the doctrine of sovereignty should serve to comfort those who fear, to encourage those who understand clearly their own limitations, and to provide a counter to the pessimism of our day. While being fully aware

of the futility of the course of this world, we should still be optimistic people, because God has promised us a glorious future, and He has the power and resolve to make it happen.

Notes

1. A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 19.
2. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Lord, Master," by H. Bietenhard.
3. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "free will." See also Dagobert D. Runes, ed. *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Free-will," by Ledger Wood.
4. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 60.
5. Hanna, 59.
6. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 2.

© 2004 Probe Ministries

"Do Angels Have Free Will?"

Do angels have Free Will like humans, or are they just automatons?

Yes, angels have free will like us. When Satan chose to stop obeying and worshipping God, and vaunted his own pride, that was a free choice, with the consequences that followed. One third of the angels chose to follow him. (See Rev. 12:4)

What sets apart angels from us is that we can be forgiven and restored, and they can't. To follow God or not was a one-shot deal for angels, as far as we can tell. 1 Peter 1:12 says that angels "long to look into these things" (salvation and grace), which are not available to them.

Hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

Introducing Open Theism

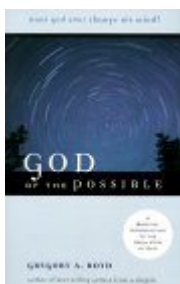
What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a

God who “flexes” with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.[\[1\]](#)

Boyd asks the question: “Does God ever change His mind?” He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. “The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it,” says Boyd.[\[2\]](#)

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For

traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we'll consider Boyd's ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we'll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

The Classical View of God's Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.^{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it

has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.[{4}](#)

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "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, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's

knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.[{5}](#) Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.[{6}](#) Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.[{7}](#) So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.[{8}](#)

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets*

something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."[{9}](#) Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."[{10}](#) If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.[{11}](#)

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."[{12}](#)

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds

with something real. “But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to.”[{13}](#) Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can’t make a square circle. It’s an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold, unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God’s character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd’s open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we’re talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of “predestined events with non-predestined players.”[{14}](#) If God doesn’t know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter’s character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials

before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that. [\[15\]](#)

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge can go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences Himself. [\[16\]](#) Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance. [\[17\]](#)

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

Notes

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

2. Ibid., 31.
3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. *Emergence*, 52-55.
4. Boyd, 32.
5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.
6. Boyd, 127.
7. Ibid., 35.
8. Ibid., 36.
9. Ibid., 120.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Ibid., 126.
12. Ibid., 125.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 44.
15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.
16. Erickson, 206-209.
17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane

Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

©2000 Probe Ministries.