

Probe Live: If God is Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

The problem of why God allows pain and evil has been the biggest obstacle to faith for thousands of years. Sue Bohlin, living with a lifelong disability, provides both philosophical and practical answers to this question.

[PROBE FB LIVE Sue Bohlin 2022.mp4](#) from [AGAPE MEDIA](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The Best of All Possible Worlds?

T.S. Weaver makes a case for 18th-century philosopher Leibniz's contention that this fallen world is still the best of all possible worlds.

This world is just as embedded with pain and suffering as it is with beauty and joy. Can this world possibly be the best of all possible worlds?

18th-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz contended that it is.

In his book *Theodicy* (published in 1710^[1]), he makes the very distinctive defense for the existence of God in view of the problem of evil.^[2] ("Theodicy," combining the Greek words for God and justice, is the theological term for addressing the problem of how a good and just God can allow evil in His

creation.)

One of the strengths of Leibniz's theodicy is how straightforward and precise it is. It is also traditionally recognized as one of his highly essential contributions to philosophy of religion. The place to start is God's omniscience (not evil). This allows God to understand all possibilities. {3} If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. God is likewise completely good and so constantly aspires the best and continuously performs in the best way. Leibniz writes, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: *God wants to choose the most perfect.*" {4} The power of the best-of-all possible-worlds theodicy is to show God's decision to generate this world out of every world that he could have produced, *for this creation is good.*{5}

Leibniz ties in several principles to the theodicy. The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes God understands the value of every world possible prior to deciding which one to produce. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason." {6} Leibniz purports,

Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a great good; and there would be something to correct in the actions (so, the omnipotence) of God if it were possible to do better. {7}

To believe God can intercede in what He has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be akin to a soldier who abandons his post during a war to stop a colleague from perpetrating a slight violation. {8} In other words, when we sometimes think God should have restricted a

certain evil, the argument is that He could actually be guarding against a greater evil we are unaware of instead.

Leibniz does not leave the principle of sufficient reason to fend for itself. Instead, he reinforces the best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy with the principle of “pre-established harmony.” He describes it this way: “For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we *should* see, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best.” {9} In other words, God performs corresponding to divine perfection and liberty, decides to produce, commands creation corresponding to this nature, and then can choose a world that includes evil. Living in the best of all possible worlds entails the world comprising the best goods out of any, with the greatest harmony. Jill Graper Hernandez states, “The mere existence of humans in creation requires that humans may choose certain evil acts, and this is harmonious with God’s perfection of intellect and will.”{10}

This hints at the one last, ethical, principle of Leibniz’s best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy: God’s creation includes human free will. For Leibniz, human freedom is vital to grasp how God’s permission of evil is coherent with divine flawlessness and to grasp how God avoids ethical condemnation for letting evil into the best possible world.

Free or intelligent substances possess something greater and more marvelous, in a kind of imitation of God. For they are not bound by any certain subordinate laws of the universe, but act by a private miracle as it were, on the sole initiative of their own power.{11}

A better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly. While free will can ensue in evil (the risk), for humans to have the capability to be ethically good, or to build virtues, or to

develop spiritually, free will is necessary. Human ethical integrity hangs on our capability to freely choose the good. His generosity makes freedom conceivable and makes it possible for His creation to pursue Him. By wanting the best, God gives the prospect some creatures will decide to behave corruptly.

Yet, since its publication over three hundred years ago, Leibniz's theodicy has had enduring condemnation. Two of the most troubling are about the existence of "natural evil" (suffering from catastrophes in nature) and whether God could have formed a world with less powerful evils and less free will. The first is insidious because in most cases, seemingly only God could avoid natural catastrophes and the suffering that comes from them. Yet I think Leibniz would argue, given the understanding of his theodicy, we must trust that God has given us the best despite natural evils.

The second critique is obvious on its face to nearly everyone. One cannot help but wonder if this world is the best there could be, and if this is the best God could do. It appears there might be cases in which God should intercede to avoid suffering from atrocious evil, for example the Holocaust. As difficult as it is to accept, this critique interferes with the coherence of the principle of free will. This thinking does not declare we cannot *imagine* a world in which there is no Holocaust, or no evil at all. Even Leibniz concedes that point, but he argues, "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness."[\[12\]](#)

In summary, our world is the consequence of the merging of God's flawlessness and liberty, though the world includes flaws. Although this established world is not flawless, it is the best possible, and so it would be unfeasible for God to build a better world or to intercede in the world to avoid or restrict pain. A great God would produce only the best. Because this is the world God formed, this is the best. This

theodicy has stayed philosophically persuasive for several reasons, starting with its genuine logical and practical influence. The theodicy protects theistic flawlessness despite evil in the world because the problem of evil does not prove the theist keeps conflicting ideas that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent and makes a world where his creatures morally fall. Additionally, Leibniz's theodicy protects free will, which is crucial for theists who think love and worship are needed to have freedom. This too is important for Leibniz to show God cannot be ethically responsible when people choose what is evil. Also, we understand the best of all possible worlds involves the ultimate extermination of sin and suffering (achieved through Christ's earthly work in the past and in His return and rule in the future).

Leibniz's theodicy proves the steadiness of God forever selecting the best with this world really being the best of all possible worlds, whilst meeting the atheist's challenge that a great God must be kept ethically accountable for the existence of evil. I argue the theodicy is helpful to inspire individuals to love God, to take solace from His divine providence and to urge them to use their free will to choose to pursue God. Leibniz magnifies this point:

Whether one succeeds or not in this task, one is content with what comes to pass, being resigned to the will of God and knowing what he wills is best. When we are in this benevolent state of mind, we are not disheartened by failure, we regret only our faults, and the ungrateful way of men causes no relaxation in the exercise of our kindly disposition.[{13}](#)

Taking all this into account, we can trust God is giving us His very best with this world, and in our individual existential lives, even when we can imagine better circumstances or outcomes. This ought to give us a sense of peace and gratitude knowing our Heavenly Father is not giving

us the short end of the stick in any way. He loves us and cares for us. And that free will He gave us—if we are not using it to worship Him, we need to reconsider what we're using it for.

Notes

1. This was the first book-length philosophical consideration of this problem.
2. Jill Graper Hernandez, *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. Chad Meister, James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 95.
3. Each possibility is a new sphere, or world, of possibility that varies from the world we presently occupy. A possible world comprises an extensive idea of God's intelligence that completely explains what could have happened if that world was generated (Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence," *Leibniz Review* [2007], 33).
4. G.W. Leibniz, "On Freedom and Spontaneity," Academy ed., VI 4-b, 1454 in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, ed. Lloyd Strickland (New York: Continuum, 2006)
5. God describes everything He created as "good." See Genesis 1.
6. Hernandez, 100.
7. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), II. 8.
8. Causa Dei, in *Leibniz: Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
9. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), I. 44.
10. Hernandez, 101.
11. *On Necessity and Contingency*, in *Samtliche schriften und breife*, ser. VI, vol. 4 (Halle, Germany: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923), pp. 1449-50; "Philosophical Writings"), ed. G.H.R. Parkinson, trans. M. Morris (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 100.
12. Leibniz, preface.

13. Ibid.

Bibliography

Causa Dei, in *Leibniz: Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*. Edited and translated by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.

Hernandez, Jill Graper. *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*. Edited by Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

Jolley, Nicholas. *Leibniz*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Leibniz, G.W. *Theodicy*. Edited by Austin Farrer. Translated by E.M. Huggard. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952.

Leibniz, G.W. "On Freedom and Spontaneity." Academy Edition VI 4-b. 1454 in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*. Edited by Lloyd Strickland. New York: Continuum, 2006.

McDonough, Jeffrey K. "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence." *Leibniz Review*. 2007.

On Necessity and Contingency. In *Samtliche schriften und breife*. Series VI, Volume 4. Halle, Germany: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923. Pages 1449-50. "Philosophical Writings." Edited by G.H.R. Parkinson. Translated by M. Morris. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991.

The Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.

©2022 Probe Ministries

Why Didn't God Prevent the Boston Bombings?

The problem of why a good God would allow evil and suffering is probably the biggest problem people have with Christianity. It certainly rises—or perhaps roars—to the surface after horrific events such as last week's bombings in Boston.

Many people resonate with philosopher David Hume's syllogism:

- If God is all good, he *would* defeat evil.
- If God is all powerful, he *could* defeat evil.
- But evil is not defeated.
- Therefore, there is no such God.
- God is either impotent or malevolent.

But when we read through the entire Bible and see the larger picture, there is a good response to Hume's argument:

- If God is all good, he would defeat evil.
- If God is all powerful, he could defeat evil.
- But evil is not yet defeated.
- Therefore, God *will* defeat evil.
- God is all good, all powerful, and merciful.

Many people have pointed out that the reason people do horrible things is that we are free to do them, just as we are free to do good, loving and wonderful things. That freedom is a gift from God. He had to make us free to say "no" to Him in order that we would be free to say "yes" to Him. When my friend presses a button on her iPhone to ask the artificially intelligent agent a question, Siri responds with pre-programmed answers.

"I love you, Siri."

"Oh. Stop."

"No really! I love you, Siri!"

"I bet you say that to all your Apple products."

"Will you marry me?"

"You should know that you're not the only one who's asked."

There's no love there. Just a robotic answer. Robots are not what God wanted; He wanted to lavish love on us and invite us into the circle of divine mutual love and delight and affection and grace that the Father, Son and Spirit have enjoyed for all eternity.

So why didn't God prevent the Boston Bombings? Because He has given people the right to make significant choices, even hurtfully horrible choices. But He is still more powerful than the evil in our hearts. He is even now redeeming the pain and suffering of what happened in Boston in ways we cannot see. He is able to make all things work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)

The fact that He didn't prevent the bombings doesn't mean He wasn't actively preventing even more pain and suffering. For example, the bombing suspects were stopped before they could cause more death and pain. Millions of people in Boston (including my own son and his wife) were protected from the mayhem. And just like the 9/11 accounts, there are stories circulating of God's protection in action. One man crossed the finished line of the Boston Marathon seconds before the bombs exploded. Joe Berti escaped the explosion, but his wife and friends were ten yards from the bomb; they were hit by shrapnel but were relatively unhurt, while a woman next to them had a leg torn off from the knee down. When they returned home, Joe was driving near West, Texas when he heard and felt the detonation from the nearby fertilizer plant explosion. (bit.ly/15qbDVp)

Frank Turek has a helpful video that explores some of these ideas:

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/why_didnt_god_prevent_the_boston_bombings on April 23, 2013.

“How Could a Compassionate God Order the Genocide of the Canaanites?”

My eldest daughter and I have been discussing portions of the Bible with which she is struggling. One of the problem passages she asked about is “Why does God order the genocide of the Canaanites?” Now of course I can give her the answer in the Bible, i.e., that God gave them 400 years to repent and that their sins were horrible, etc.; but her real question is ethical. How can God who has such compassion for the innocents in Ninevah order the wholesale killing of innocent children in Palestine? Is the God of the OT and the God of the NT the same Person? How can I reconcile these, in modern terms, “unthinkable” crimes against humanity with the God of compassion revealed by Jesus?

We’re also looking for good articles regarding “why I can trust the Bible” and the “relevance of the Bible” for today.

Thanks for your help.

Great questions!

We need to revisit the assessment of the Canaanites as

“innocent.” From God’s perspective, there is no such thing as an innocent human being (apart from Jesus Christ). Every human heart is evil and bent on sin and rebellion. I see a strong parallel between God’s actions against the Canaanites and the actions of an oncology surgeon. He has to cut out what may appear to be healthy tissue but which is actually infected with cancer cells. The Canaanites were infected with sin. I don’t understand about the children, but I do know that a compassionate God ordered it. Something to consider, then, is the question of “Do children go to hell?” Probe’s founder, Jimmy Williams, addresses this issue [here](#).

Yes, the God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament, a God of love and grace. Evidence of His love and grace are rampant throughout both testaments. I think we need to cultivate a spirit of humility before an infinite God we cannot fully understand because “all the available facts are not all the facts.” God never committed any crimes against humanity, much less unthinkable ones, because we cannot see ourselves, or Him, accurately. We have to depend on God’s revelation of human nature—which is that, apart from God, we are wicked and rebellious and evil, even at the same time that we are His image-bearers. And on His revelation of His own nature—which is that He is holy and just, and He would have been completely within His rights to allow every single human being to go to hell because that is what we deserve. But He didn’t.

I’m afraid there is no “silver bullet” answer to these questions, _____, because we don’t have all the facts and just have to trust that God is good all the time, and He knows things we don’t. Along these lines, may I also suggest you read the article [“I Can’t Forgive God for Taking All Those People in the WTC!”](#).

My colleague Rick Wade goes into great detail on this question in these two articles:

[God and the Canaanites](#)

[Yahweh War and the Conquest of Canaan](#)

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, explores the question here:

["How Can a Just God Order the Slaughter of Men, Women and Children?"](#)

Concerning your question about apologetics articles, we have:

[Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](#)

[Authority of the Bible](#)

[The Christian Canon](#)

[Archaeology and the Old Testament](#)

[Archaeology and the New Testament](#)

[The Relevance of Christianity: An Apologetic](#)

You might also find it helpful to browse our [Theology/Apologetics](#) Topics pages.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem of Evil

Dr. Ray Bohlin explores the problem of evil in light of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

Why Didn't God Prevent the Terrible

Attacks?

The events of September 11th are indelibly etched in our hearts and minds. The horrible memories of personal tragedy and suffering will never really go away. As well they shouldn't. As Christians we were all gratified to see so many of our national, state, and local leaders openly participate in prayer services and calling upon people of faith to pray for victims' families and injured survivors.

What was lost underneath the appearance of a religious revival was the clear cry of many that wondered if our prayers were justified. After all, if we pray to God in the aftermath and expect God to answer, where was He as countless individuals cried out to Him from the planes, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? The skeptical voices were drowned out because of the fervent religious outcry seeking comfort and relief. But make no mistake; the question was there all the time. Where was God on September 11th? Surely He could have diverted those planes from their appointed destinations. Why couldn't the hijackers have been intercepted at the airports or their plots discovered long before their designed execution?

Why so many innocent people? Why should so many suffer so much? It all seems so senseless. How could a loving God allow it?

It is important to realize also that the suffering of those initial weeks is only the tip of the iceberg. There will be military deaths and casualties. The war on terrorism will be a long one with mounting personal and economic costs. The clean up will also continue to take its ever-mounting toll in dollars, lives, and emotional breakdowns.

Former pastor Gordon MacDonald spent time with the Salvation Army in caring for people and removing debris and bodies from the rubble of the World Trade Center. He relates this encounter from his journal of September 21 in *Christianity*

Today: [{1}](#)

“Later in the night, I wandered over to the first-line medical tent, which is staffed by military personnel who are schooled in battlefield casualties. The head of the team, a physician, and I got into a conversation.

“He was scared for the men in the pit, he said, because he knew what was coming ‘downstream.’ He predicted an unusual spike in the suicide rate and a serious outbreak of manic depression. . . . Many of the men will be unable to live with these losses at the WTC. It’s going to take an unspeakable toll on them.”

So why would God allow so much suffering? This is an ancient question. The problem of reconciling an all-powerful, all-loving God with evil is the number one reason that people reject God. I will try to clarify the question, provide some understanding, and make some comparisons of other explanations.

Psalm 73 and Asaph’s Answer

The Bible answers the question of where God was on September 11 in many passages, but I would like to begin with the answer from Asaph in Psalm 73. My discussion will flow from the excellent discussion of the problem of evil found in Dr Robert Pyne’s 1999 book, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity*. [{2}](#)

In Psalm 73, Asaph begins by declaring that God is good. Without that assumption, nothing more need be said. He goes on in verses 2-12 to lament the excess and success of the wicked. In verses six and seven he says, “Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.” (Psalm 73:6-7). From this point Asaph lets his feelings be known by crying out that this isn’t fair

when he says in verse 13, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."

The wicked seem to snub their noses at God with no apparent judgment, while Asaph strives to follow the Lord to no benefit. We have all experienced this in one form or another. Some things in this world simply aren't fair. In the last ten verses of the psalm, Asaph recognizes that the wicked will indeed realize their punishment in the future. God's judgment will come. He also realizes that God is always with him and that is sufficient.

18th century philosopher David Hume stated the classical problem of evil by saying that if God were indeed all powerful He would do something about evil, and that if He were all-loving He would want to do something about evil. Since evil exists, God must either not be able or not want to do anything about it. This makes God either malevolent or impotent or both. But Hume chooses to leave out the option, as Asaph resolves, that God is patient. Hume, like many before him and after him, grows weary with a God who is patient towards evil.

We long for immediate justice. But before we pray too earnestly for immediate justice, we'd better reflect on what that would be like. What would instant justice look like? Immediate justice would have to be applied across the board. That means that every sin would be proportionately and immediately punished. We soon realize that immediate justice is fine if applied to everybody else. Dr. Pyne quotes D. A. Carson as saying, "The world would become a searing pain; the world would become hell. Do you really want nothing but totally effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell."[\[3\]](#) I think we're all quite comfortable with a God that does not apply immediate justice.

Evil and the Sovereignty of God

Next, I want to focus on God's sovereignty. We understand that

God knew what He was doing in creating people with the ability to choose to love Him or hate Him. In order for our love for Him to be real, our choice needed to be real and that means creating creatures that could turn from Him as well as love Him. In order to have creatures with moral freedom, God risked evil choices.

Some would go so far as to say that God couldn't intervene in our evil choices. But in Psalm 155:3, Psalm 135:6, and in Nebuchadnezzar's words of praise in Daniel 4:34-37 we're told it is God who does whatever He pleases. However, God does perform acts of deliverance and sometimes He chooses not to. We are still left with the question "Why?" In the book of Job, Job basically proclaims his innocence and essentially asks why? God doesn't really give Job an answer, but simply reminds him who is in charge. (Job 38:2-4) "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" the Lord asks Job.

The parameters are clearly set. God in His power is always capable of intervening in human affairs, but sometimes He doesn't and we aren't always given a reason why. There is tension here that we must learn to accept, because the alternative is to blaspheme by assigning to God evil or malevolent actions. As Asaph declared, God is good!

This brings us to the hidden purposes of God. For although we can't always see God's purpose, we believe He has one in everything that occurs, even seemingly senseless acts of cruelty and evil. Here is where Jesus' sufferings serve as a model. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. (Hebrews 12:1-3) So then, we should bear our cross for the eternal joy set before us. (Hebrews 12:11, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) But knowing this doesn't always make us feel better.

When Jesus was dying on the cross all His disciples but John deserted Him. From their perspective, all that they had learned and prepared for over the last three years was over,

finished. How could Jesus let them crucify Him? It didn't make any sense at all. Yet as we well know now, the most important work in history was being accomplished and the disciples thought God was absent. How shortsighted our perspective can be.

The Danger of a Nice Explanation

But with this truth comes the danger of a nice explanation. Even though we know and trust that there is a purpose to God's discipline and His patience towards ultimate judgment, that doesn't mean we should somehow regard evil as an expression of God's goodness. In addition, we can be tempted to think that if God has a purpose to evil and suffering, then my own sin can be assigned not to me but to someone else, namely God Himself because He had a purpose in it.

Dr. Robert Pyne puts it this way.

We may not be able to fully resolve the problem of evil, and we may not be able to explain the origin of sin, but we can see the boundaries that must be maintained when addressing these issues. We share in Adam's guilt, but we cannot blame Him for our sin. God is sovereign, and He exercises His providential control over all things, but we cannot blame Him either. God permits injustice to continue, but He neither causes it nor delights in it.[\[4\]](#)

Another danger lies in becoming too comfortable with evil. When we trust in God's ultimate purpose and patience with evil we shouldn't think that we have somehow solved the problem and therefore grow comfortable in its presence. We should never be at peace with sin, suffering, and evil.

The prophet Habakkuk sparred with God in the first few verses of chapter 1 of the book bearing his name by recounting all the evil in Israel. The Lord responds in verses 6-11 that indeed the Babylonians are coming and sin will be judged.

Habakkuk further complains about God's choice of the godless Babylonians, to which God reminds him that they too will receive judgment. Yet the coming judgment still left Habakkuk with fear and dread. "I heard and my inward parts trembled: at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. . . . Yet, I will exult in the Lord." (Habakkuk 3:16-19.) Habakkuk believes that God knows what He is doing. That does not bring a smile to his face. But he can face the day.

"We are not supposed to live at peace with evil and sin, but we are supposed to live at peace with God. We continue to trust in His goodness, His sovereignty, His mercy, and we continue to confess our own responsibility for sin." [\[5\]](#)

He Was There!

Though we have come to a better understanding of the problem of evil, we are still left with our original question. Where was God on September 11th?

While the Christian answer may not seem a perfect answer, it is the only one which offers truth, hope, and comfort. Naturalism or deism offers no real answers. Things just happen. There is no good and no evil. Make the best of it! Pantheism says the physical world is irrelevant or an illusion. It doesn't really matter. Good and evil are the same.

To answer the question we need to understand that God does, in fact, notice when every sparrow falls and grieve over every evil and every suffering. Jesus is with us in all of our suffering, feeling all of our pain. That's what compassion means, to suffer with another. So the suffering that Christ endured on the cross is literally unimaginable.

"The answer is, how could you not love this being who went the extra mile, who practiced more than He preached, who

entered into our world, who suffered our pains, who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows?"[\[6\]](#)

We must remember that Jesus' entire time on earth was a time of sacrifice and suffering, not just His trial and crucifixion. Jesus was tempted in the manner of all men and He bore upon Himself all our sin and suffering. So the answer is quite simple. He was there!

He was on the 110th floor as one called home. He was at the other end of the line as his wife realized her husband was not coming home. He was on the planes, at the Pentagon, in the stairwells answering those who called out to Him and calling to those who didn't.

He saw every face, knew every name, even though some did not know Him. Some met Him for the first time, some ignored Him for the last time. He is there now.

Let me share with you one more story from Gordon MacDonald's experience with the Salvation Army during the initial clean up at the World Trade Center.

"There is a man whose job it is to record the trucks as they leave the pit with their load of rubble. He is from Jamaica, and he has one of the most radiant smiles I've ever seen. He brings a kind of spiritual sunshine to the entire intersection. "I watch him—with his red, white, and blue hard hat—talking to each truck driver as they wait their turn to go in and get a load. He brightens men up. In the midst of those smells, the dust, the clashing sounds, he brings a civilizing influence to the moment.

"Occasionally I go out to where he stands and bring him some water. At other times, he comes over and chats with us. We always laugh when we engage. "I said to him last night, 'You're a follower of the Lord, aren't you?' He gave me an enthusiastic 'Yes! Jesus is with me all the time!' "Somehow this guy represents to me the quintessential picture of the

ideal follower of Christ: out in the middle of the chaos, doing his job, pressing a bit of joy into a wild situation.”

[{7}](#)

Notes

1. “Blood Sweat and Prayers,” *Christianity Today*, Nov. 12, 2001, p. 76.
2. Robert Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity*, pp. 193-209.
3. Pyne, p. 197.
4. Pyne, p. 204.
5. Pyne, p. 206.
6. Peter Kreeft, quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, 2000, p. 45-46.
7. “Blood Sweat and Prayers,” *Christianity Today*, p. 76.

© 2002 Probe Ministries

God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

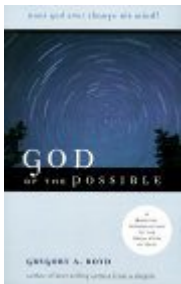
Introducing Open Theism

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.