

“How Do We Know God’s Will About Infertility?”

I have a few questions. First, does God cause everything to happen or does He just allow most things to happen? I know that He can make good results out of things that seem bad to us, but did He make the thing happen because it was what was best for us, or did it just happen as a result of free/human will? I know that God certainly CAN make things happen, but I just wonder how often He does. It seems that we thank God for the good things that happen in our life. And we should! But is it then right to “blame” Him for the bad in our life? Or maybe not so much blame, but just thank Him for the bad too because we know it’s ultimately for the best? Or maybe we shouldn’t thank Him or blame Him for every little thing, because maybe some things just happen. But typing that out – it just doesn’t sound right.

Many things make me wonder this, but on a personal level, it’s in regards to my and my husband’s infertility. Did God cause this to happen because we must learn something from it, or did it just happen because we live in a fallen world where things like disease, infertility, and bad things as a result of sin and our free will are just going to happen?

Also, in regards to our infertility problem, how do we know what God’s will is for us? We have been trying for 2 years now. We’ve had advanced and expensive treatments that have failed. Sometimes people tell us to “just trust God.” But what do they mean, that we should stop pursuing treatments and just let it happen naturally? I mean, we have medical diagnosis that need treating... one would do the same for a cold, or flu, or cancer right? They would seek help. I feel the same way about infertility. Do you have an opinion on that? Now, maybe by saying “Just trust God,” they mean not to worry so much. And that I can understand. I know that God has a plan and that

it will be perfect for us. So I do need to not worry so much. It's just a very emotional issue!

But as far as knowing God's will.... I mean, I just wish I knew if His will for us was to never be parents, or to adopt, or to keep trying for a biological child. We pray for guidance, but it's hard to tell if we're "hearing" God or just doing what we want to do. If I ask God to "speak" to me, will He always? How will I know it is God rather than just myself telling myself, "it's a sign?" Does that makes sense?

Oh, and I don't know what your thoughts are on fertility treatments. We have done in vitro fertilization but we do not believe in destroying any embryos. We also only put in as many as we'd be willing to carry and froze the rest to use in another cycle. We would never do selective reduction or kill an embryo. So I hope if you have time to reply, that you don't automatically say that we should stop fertility treatments because they are immoral... unless you think they are for another reason that I have not mentioned and that you might enlighten me with.

Thanks for your trust in us to help you think through these important issues.

I have a few questions. First, does God cause everything to happen or does He just allow most things to happen?

Ultimately, I think it's really a matter of semantics because of the biblical teaching that God is sovereign. Bottom line is, nothing happens to us without His permission, so whether He proactively caused it to happen or He allowed it to happen, it still has His fingerprints all over it and He has a purpose in it before it ever reaches us to begin with.

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free/human will? I know that God certainly CAN make things happen, but I just wonder how often He does.

“Just happening” sounds a lot like “accident” or “coincidence.” And in a universe where God is sovereign, there are no accidents. Nothing “just happens” apart from His permission. God is big enough to use both things He directly sends to us, as well as indirectly such as through people’s choices, to accomplish His purposes. The “how often” part is a shrouded mystery that He doesn’t let us in on. There’s no way to know that, only to speculate.

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Absolutely! And that’s why God calls us to always give thanks for everything (Eph. 3:20). From our very limited perspective, we don’t always know the difference between the good things that happen in our lives, and the bad things. The biggest example of that is the horror and pain the disciples experienced when Jesus died, which devastated them because they thought it was a bad thing, but it was the very best thing that ever happened-until right around the corner, an even better “best thing” happened, when Jesus was raised from the dead. When we give thanks for what feels like a bad thing, we are relinquishing it into God’s hand and affirming our trust in His goodness and His sovereignty. (By the way, this is one of the major lessons God has taught in my Christian walk. I invite you to read my story, which I call “How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can’t Change” here: www.probe.org/how-to-handle-the-things-you-hate-but-cant-chang

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Unfortunately, God often doesn't let us know the "why" of our trials. But when you consider that He calls us to honor him in the midst of our suffering (1 Peter 2), then the reason behind them doesn't matter as much as our response to them.

Also, in regards to our infertility problem, how do we know what God's will is for us? We have been trying for 2 years now. We've had advanced and expensive treatments that have failed. Sometimes people tell us to "just trust God." But what do they mean, that we should stop pursuing treatments and just let it happen naturally? I mean, we have medical diagnosis that need treating... one would do the same for a cold, or flu, or cancer right? They would seek help. I feel the same way about infertility. Do you have an opinion on that? Now, maybe by saying "Just trust God," they mean not to worry so much. And that I can understand. I know that God has a plan and that it will be perfect for us. So I do need to not worry so much. It's just a very emotional issue!

Yes, I think that God's command to Adam and Eve to exercise dominion over the earth was the overarching principle that resulted in modern science. So, if there's something that can correct infertility, it makes sense to do what we can (and what we can afford, while still remaining good stewards of the money God has put in our hands). Of course this is an emotional issue for you. . . it's much more than just a command to "be fruitful and multiply," it's also the desire of your heart which God put there as an element of your

femininity and your husband's masculinity!

But as far as knowing God's will.... I mean, I just wish I knew if His will for us was to never be parents, or to adopt, or to keep trying for a biological child. We pray for guidance, but it's hard to tell if we're "hearing" God or just doing what we want to do. If I ask God to "speak" to me, will He always? How will I know it is God rather than just myself telling myself, "it's a sign?" Does that makes sense?

Boy, it's hard when we're trying to discern God's leading, isn't it?

Here's one way to look at it: God will not open a door that violates His will for you. Which is how fertility clinics can put all the right chemicals in a Petri dish, add eggs and sperm. . . . and the stuff just sits there and no baby is made. Only God can create life. (And yes, we can theoretically force a clone, but we can't control whether or not a healthy baby makes it to full-term delivery.) Which is why you have to go with the biblical principles, which are to be fruitful and multiply. If you try in vitro and God doesn't bless it, He is speaking His will to you. You can try to adopt and if God doesn't allow an adoption to go through, He is speaking His will to you.

I think the best route is to commit your desire for children to the Lord, ask Him to guide you, and then move forward, trusting Him to take care of the details. If you have submitted yourselves to the Lord about this issue, then you can rest in Him and in His love for you that He will be faithful to lead you. (My guess is, that describes how you've been living already. . .??)

I do think that often, God leads us through His peace (consider Col. 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule [act as umpire] in your heart. . .") or the lack of it. I often counsel people, "Go to where the peace is." After praying much

about it, you probably don't have any peace about the idea of never being parents, for example, which would constitute direction to continue to seek His ways of getting His children into your family, whether by adoption or biology.

Oh, and I don't know what your thoughts are on fertility treatments. We have done in vitro fertilization but we do not believe in destroying any embryos. We also only put in as many as we'd be willing to carry and froze the rest to use in another cycle. We would never do selective reduction or kill an embryo. So I hope if you have time to reply, that you don't automatically say that we should stop fertility treatments because they are immoral... unless you think they are for another reason that I have not mentioned and that you might enlighten me with.

Nope, we don't think they're immoral; we think that using the criteria you specified, that is the God-honoring and life-honoring way to do it.

I hope this helps. I don't have a crystal ball to tell you what you should do, but I CAN encourage you to daily give thanks for your fertility problems, give thanks for your desire for a baby, give thanks that God is in control, give thanks for His faithfulness in guiding you in the process, and give thanks by faith for the baby He has for you, however He chooses to do it.

(And by the way, we experienced secondary infertility after our first baby died, so I have prayed these prayers myself. We have two sons.)

Blessings to you!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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“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

The Sovereignty of God

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.

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



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

Learning About God

The God Who Would Be Known

Recently my wife and I took a few hours off to visit a local nature preserve. You know how quiet and peaceful that can be. Imagine you're out there in nature enjoying your walk, and talking with . . . God. That's what Adam and Eve did, wasn't it?

We don't walk and talk with God the same way Adam and Eve did, but the God of the universe Who holds our very existence in His hand wants to show Himself to us as well; He wants us to know Him. He not only wants us to *know* Him, though; He wants us to know *about* Him.

Sometimes Christians will say they don't need a lot of doctrine; they just want to know God personally, to just *experience* Him, without complicating things by adding all that theological gobbledy-gook. With a little bit of reflection, however, one can see how important knowing *about* God is to *knowing* God.

If my wife were to try to talk to me about her interests or desires or anything about herself, and I were to say, "You know, dear, I hate to get confused with all that information. I just want to *experience* your presence; I just want to *relate* to you personally," you might understand if she experienced some confusion! What does it mean to "know" someone in our

experience without knowing things *about* the person? The most it could mean is that I just want the feelings that come with being near someone I love.

My own joy in her presence, however, rests on certain knowledge about her. How much joy would any of us experience in the presence of, say, a known axe-murderer?! It's amazing what a little knowledge can do for one's "experience!"

Resisting any knowledge about my wife would also indicate that I don't really have much interest in her; I'm only concerned with *myself* and *my* experience. What greater way is there to let someone know you really care and are interested than to want to learn about him or her?

Have I convinced you of the need to know *about* God in order to truly *know* God? If so, I hope you'll invest some time in studying theology. You needn't read a massive work on systematic theology. A writer whose work I'm benefiting from is Alister McGrath. He's a well-respected theologian who makes theology accessible for the layperson. R.C. Sproul and J. I. Packer are two others from whose writings you would benefit. In fact, Packer's popular book, *Knowing God*, would be a great place to start.

You might still be hesitant because you know that it's possible to substitute the "knowing about" for the "knowing personally." How can we let what we know about God feed our personal knowledge of Him? Listen to this suggestion from J. I. Packer: "The rule for doing this is demanding but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God." [\(1\)](#)

In this essay we'll just touch on a few subjects of importance in knowing about God: revelation; the Trinity; God's sovereignty; and idolatry. I hope this will be helpful to you as you continue the wonderful journey of knowing God.

The God Who Can Be Known

In a debate on the existence of God between Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland and atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen, Nielsen argued that, for the educated person, “it is irrational to believe in God.” [\(2\)](#) Why? Because there is nothing in our experience to refer to when we say “God” that gives meaning to the word. If we want to argue, for example, that a certain table exists, we can point to the table or we can describe it in terms we understand. Since we can’t point to God and we can’t understand what God is in Himself, we can’t talk about Him meaningfully, Nielsen says.

So, where does this leave Christians? Does it leave us with an irrational faith? *Can* we know about God? If so, *how* so?

We are able to know God because of revelation. *Revelation* means “disclosure.” As New Testament scholar Leon Morris says, “Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover.” [\(3\)](#) The last book of the Bible is called *Revelation* because it reveals the plans of God which were otherwise unknowable.

Revelation is necessary because of the nature of God. He can’t be seen by us (Jn. 1:18; I Tim. 6:16; I Jn. 4:12); we can’t know his depths or His limits, Zophar told Job (Job 11:7; cf. Rom. 11:33); and no one knows His thoughts except the Spirit (I Cor. 2:11). Jesus said, “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Mt. 11:27). Thus, if God and His ways are to be known, they must be revealed by Him to us. As Deut. 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever. . .”

How has God revealed Himself to us? Rom. 1:20 says that we

know God exists through what He has made (i.e., nature). We see the hand of God in the historical events recorded in the Old Testament, such as the Exodus and the establishment of Israel and the regathering of God's people under Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ps. 9:16; 77:14; Eze. 20:9). Our own conscience bears witness through a knowledge of moral law (Rom. 2:15). God has made Himself known specially through Jesus and through the written Word of God (Jn. 15:15; Mt. 11:27). Recall Heb. 1:1,2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son."

Through revelation we know of God's glory (Is. 40:5), His righteousness (Is. 56:1), and His righteous judgment (Rom. 2:5). We know his plans (cf. Dan. 2:28,29; Eph. 3:3-6) and what He desires of us (cf. Micah 6:8). Even the message of the Gospel is referred to as a mystery now made known (Mt. 13:35; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:3-6).

If atheists like Prof. Nielsen refuse to acknowledge the reality of God, that doesn't negate what we know to be true. *Our* belief in God doesn't depend upon the confirmation of others. Besides, God has made Himself known in a tangible way in Jesus as well as in nature, history, conscience and Scripture. At the day of judgment, those who rely upon the excuse "Not enough evidence!" will be in for an awful surprise. God has revealed Himself, and we can know Him.

The Trinity

There's probably no more baffling doctrine taught in Scripture than that of the Trinity. Christians say that God is three in one. How can that be? How can there be one God, and yet we name three persons— Father, Son, and Spirit—as God?

Attempts have been made to find some comparison in our own experience that can make this truth understandable, but they all fail at some point. Some say the Trinity might be like

steam, water and ice—three forms which H₂O takes. But this analogy fails because the same quantity of H₂O doesn't assume all three forms at one time. The analogy of an egg also fails because the three components—yolk, white and shell—are completely different. God isn't three separate parts in one unit. The Bible teaches that there is only one God, and that He is unified in His being. It also teaches that there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, distinct from one another, all existing at the same time. One being, three persons. A mystery, for sure, but not a contradiction.

Theologian Alister McGrath offers a helpful illustration. If a scientist takes a sample of air for some kind of testing, he has real *air* in his sample but not *all* of the air. He just has a sample, but he expects that what can be found in the rest of the air can be found in the sample; they are identical in nature. As McGrath says, "Jesus allows us to sample God." [\(4\)](#) When people saw Jesus, they saw God. This is a better illustration, but it still isn't perfect.

Is this doctrine important? As McGrath notes, it is the foundational reality underlying our belief that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (II Cor. 5:19). God could reach out to us effectively because He reached out Himself. It was God in Christ who acted on our behalf; it wasn't some mere human emissary who brought us a good word from God. And it is the Holy Spirit—God again—who continues to minister in us while we wait for the glory which is to come.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn't only a difficulty for Christians: it's also a favorite target of critics who seek to undermine our faith by finding flaws in it. Apart from the logical question of how one God can be three persons, critics also point to the fact that it was centuries after Christ that the doctrine was formulated. They say it was an invention of the church.

It shouldn't seem surprising that there was a delay in the

development of the doctrine of the Trinity. As noted earlier, it's the theological explanation of the teaching that was present from the beginning, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." As the church came under attack and as Christians thought through scriptural teaching, they gradually developed fuller and more sophisticated doctrines. They weren't making up new beliefs; they were more fully explaining what they already believed.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a necessary component of Christian belief. Any description of God which doesn't include all that this doctrine includes is inadequate. Far from being theologically burdensome, the doctrine of the Trinity is an essential part of Christianity.

The Sovereignty of God

Along with the doctrine of the Trinity, an issue that is equally baffling is that of God's sovereignty and man's free will. The Bible indicates that God is fully in control of this universe, yet it also makes clear that we have real freedom. Our decisions are significant. Our prayers, for example, do make a difference. How can we be free and our actions be meaningful while God determines the course of history?

In recent years a view of God called the "open view" has gained a hearing among evangelicals. According to this view, "God does not control everything that happens."[\(5\)](#) God often changes His plans to meet the changing situation brought about by our decisions and actions. As one writer says, "God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; . . . history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do."[\(6\)](#) Among other things, this means that God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future; He is learning as we are.[\(7\)](#)

What do we learn from Scripture about this subject? First, we learn that God is unchanging in His being and perfections or

attributes. In Malachi 3:6 God says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." James tells us that in God "there is no variation or shifting shadow." (Jam. 1:17)

Second, we learn that God is unchanging in His purposes. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation," says Ps. 33:11. In Is. 46:9-11 God says clearly that what He has planned from long ago He will bring about.

Third, we learn that God knows the future already. Is. 46:10 says He "[declares] the end from the beginning."

While acknowledging God's control of history leading to His own ends, we must also acknowledge that He does respond to our actions and petitions. In Gen. 6 we read that God was "grieved in His heart" that He had made man, so He acted to wipe out everyone except Noah and his family. In Numbers 14 we read of a time when God said He would wipe out the Israelites, but He relented after Moses interceded for the people.

What are we to make of this? As writer Mark Hanna has noted, we tend to make adjustments in our theology to compensate for this tension between God's sovereignty and our free will. To do this, however, only creates problems elsewhere in our theology. What we must do is leave the tension where the Bible does. [\(8\)](#)

Why is the reality of God's sovereign control important? It's because God is unchanging in His being that we can trust Him to be "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). It's because God has knowledge of the future which is settled that predictive prophecy is possible. It's because God knows in advance what people will do that he isn't blind-sided by evil. Thus we can trust Him to know what is ahead of us; our future is ultimately in His hands, not the hands of people.

Although some people have theological problems with this, for

others the problem might be personal. In other words, maybe we just don't like the idea that anyone else—even God—has ultimate control over us. For those who are truly and joyfully submitted to God, however, the doctrine of God's sovereignty and complete foreknowledge is a source of comfort, not of annoyance.

A Jealous God

In Isaiah 44 we read about a man who makes an idol from a tree. Part of the tree he worships; he calls on it to deliver him. The other part he burns for cooking and for warming himself. Isaiah 44:19 shows the ridiculousness of what he is doing with these words:

No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!"

Idolatry is setting something up in place of God. Paul sums it up in one simple phrase: "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25). Those things to which we devote ourselves and which end up ruling our lives, thus taking precedence over God, become our idols.

Writer Richard Keyes speaks of nearby idols which give us a sense of control over our lives, things as ordinary as a clean house or even a stamp collection. Keyes also speaks about faraway idols, those things that give a sense of meaning to our lives such as financial security or progress in science. Nearby idols give us an immediate sense of security; they're substitutes for the immanent activity of God in our lives. Faraway idols give us a sense of purpose and meaning; in them we put our hope. They are substitutes for the transcendent

rule of God over our world. [\(9\)](#)

In response to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, God often revealed Himself to be a jealous God. "They have made Me jealous with what is not God," He said. "They have provoked Me to anger with their idols" (Deut. 32:21). Why would God respond this way? Because first, God deserves all glory, for all good things come from Him (Jam. 1:17). And second, because created things can't do what God can and wants to do for us. In Is. 42 we read: "Thus says God the Lord, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. . . . 'I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.'" (42:5-8). He is the creator and life-giver. There is no one and nothing like Him.

In contrast to this, idols are created, they aren't eternal, and they are incapable of providing what we really need. Theologian Carl Henry brings to mind Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al when he refers to idols as "the false gods who never show." [\(10\)](#) Ba'al couldn't respond to his prophets no matter how much they shouted and danced and prayed (I Ki. 18:17-40). As the psalm writer said, "They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see" (115:5). The problem is that idols by nature are not gods at all (Jer. 2:11; 5:7; Acts 19:26; Gal. 4:8). Thus it is that when such things as money or power or athletic prowess become our idols, we find that they cannot deliver us from everything that would destroy us.

We began this essay talking about the God Who would be known. To set up an idol in His place is to reject what He has told us about Himself and His desires. Today there are many other gods which call for our allegiance. We must continually recommit ourselves to the One Who won't share His glory with others.

Notes

1. James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 18.
2. J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 48.
3. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 10.
4. Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 205.
5. Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Mark Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 59-60.
9. Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," in *No God But God: Breaking With the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 37-48.
10. Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1966), 5.

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