

“Does God Know the Future?”

Questions: Does God know the future? Is the future knowable or do we have to wait until people make their own decisions to know what the future is? What difference does it make whether God knows the future or not?

Introduction

For much of church history these questions were not discussed much in the Church or among believers. The idea that God knew the future was one of the hallmark doctrines of historic and biblical Christianity. It was a doctrine that brought comfort, certainty, and peace to believers across the generations.

Recently, however, there has been a movement of theologians, pastors, and Christian leaders who have called into question the traditional view of the Church on these issues. This movement, known as *Open Theism*, says that God does not know the future because the future is not yet knowable. The future only becomes knowable when humans, using their “free wills”, make decisions about their lives and activities. Then the future is something that can be known and is known by God. A representative statement of this movement is found in the following citation, taken from a book written by Dr. Gregory Boyd, one of the leading proponents of *Open Theism*.

“If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don’t exist. Thus, in my view at least, there simply isn’t anything to know until we make it there to know. So God can’t foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people, and they, in turn, create their decisions.” (Gregory Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles With His Father’s Questions About Christianity*, 1994, p. 30).

What are we to think about such an idea? Can it stand up to biblical scrutiny? Does it really provide the comfort, freedom, and peace that it promises? Is it a more biblical view of the God than the traditional view? These are the types of questions that we will explore in this lesson.

I. An Introduction to “Open Theism”.

A case study from Greg Boyd. The story of “Suzanne”.

A. God decides to limit his knowledge.

1. God knows all that can be known but limits His knowledge to what can actually be known.
2. God is creative and resourceful; He can anticipate every possibility and He knows how to respond to each one.
3. God is like a “master chessman,” who is able to respond to any possible situation.

B. Supposed benefits of “open theism”.

1. It makes our relationship with God real. God listens to us and we help write our own stories and create our own worlds.

2. It upholds the “free will” of people and makes them truly responsible for their decisions and actions.
3. It gives meaning to our prayers. God listens to our prayers and learns things from them. Moreover He takes into consideration our prayers to help Him decide what to do.
4. It has a more “literal” understanding of the Bible.
 - a. When the Bible says that God “repents” (e.g. 1 Sam. 15:11), it means it. God does change His mind about some things.
 - b. When God says that He is surprised by something that happens, it means that He really is surprised.
5. It relieves God of the responsibility for evil.

II. A Brief critique of “Open Theism”.

- A. This view focuses too much on man and his ability.
 1. Proponents claim that God will supposedly not violate our “free will”.
 2. However, if God will not “violate” our free will, in what meaningful sense can God still be free as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe?
 3. For this view to be true God must be lessened and man must be elevated.
 4. If God doesn’t know the future, then He may make mistakes in the guidance that He gives us His children.
- B. This view presupposes a “libertarian” view of man’s free will, i.e., man’s choices are truly free and that man can choose whatever he may without any outside constraints.
 1. “Libertarian free will means that our choices are free from the determination or constraints of human nature and free from any predetermination by God.” http://www.theopedia.com/Libertarian_free_will).
 2. However, if man is truly free to choose, then God is not. God is seen as depending upon or responding to man.
 3. But this view of human freedom and human will has to be proven and not merely asserted as being true.
- C. This view affects our prayer life and ability to trust God.
 1. God may mean well, but if He doesn’t know what will happen in the future, how can we trust His guidance? If it is possible for God to make mistakes how can we trust His counsel?
 2. How can we trust that God will cause all things to work together for good for those who love Him? (Rom. 8:28).
 3. Can we put our hope in God when even He is not sure of what will happen next?
- D. This view has a “wooden” reading of Scripture, i.e., an overly literal view of the Bible.
 1. If we are to take “God repents” in a literalistic sense, then we must also say that God has limited knowledge of present events (e.g., Gen. 3:9; 18:20-21).
 2. A literal understanding of the Bible means we take the Bible at what it intends to say. That is to say, we read it as literature and interpret it as literature (story, teaching, poetry, symbolic language, imagery, etc.)

III. A Brief description of God from the Bible.

- A. God is good – all the time, in the good times and in the bad (Nah. 1:7; Ps. 100:5).
- B. God is sovereign over all of His creation (Eph. 1:11; Matt. 10:29-31).
 - 1. God is not taken by surprise by anything that happens in the universe.
 - 2. If He is not sovereign, how can He work all things for the good of His Children (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11; Job 1:21; 1 Thess. 5:18)?
 - 3. How can we trust and give thanks to Him in all circumstances?
- C. God is omniscient.
 - 1. A limited knowledge is not omniscient at all.
 - 2. God has perfect knowledge of all things – real and potential (Matt. 11:20-24).
- D. In the Bible, God is not seen as the “Great Responder”; He is seen as the “Great Initiator”.
 - 1. He creates (Gen. 1:1).
 - 2. He appears to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).
 - 3. He raises up Moses (Exod. 3-4).
 - 4. He sends prophets to His People (Deut. 18:18-19; Hos. 12:10; 2 Chron. 20:20; 24:19; Amos 3:7).
 - 5. He predicts the future with great accuracy (Is. 40-48).
 - 6. He sends Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:4; Jn. 3:16; et al).
 - 7. Many, many more examples could be provided. The point is that God is active in His creation, not passive.

IV. God knows what the future holds long before the events themselves actually happen.

- A. Facts about Jesus that God knew ahead of time.
 - 1. Jesus would be born in Bethlehem – 1000 years before the fact (Mic 5:2).
 - 2. Jesus would be born of a virgin; be the Messiah; suffer; be crucified; and rise from the dead – 700 years before the fact (Is. 7:14; 50:6; 52:1-53:12).
 - 3. The Messiah would come from Judah – 1500 years before the fact (Gen. 49:10).
 - 4. Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey – 500 years beforehand (Zech. 9:9).
 - 5. His hands and feet would be pierced (Ps. 22:17). 1000 years before the fact.
 - 6. Seven specific facts about Jesus’ betrayal (Zech. 11:11-13) – 500 years before the facts. (1) Betrayed; (2) by a friend; (3) for thirty pieces; (4) of silver, to be; (5) cast onto the floor; (6) of the Temple; (7) and used to buy a potter’s field (McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, p. 212.)
 - 7. There are over 60 major prophecies, with over 330 specific details, that were predicted about the life of Jesus hundreds of years before they actually happened.

- B. Historical events/acts that God knew ahead of time.
1. The destruction of Tyre (Ezek. 26:3, 4, 7, 8, 12, 14, 21).
 - a. “I will bring many nations against you” (3).
 - b. She will be a bare rock and her walls will be destroyed (4, 14).
 - c. Fishermen will spread their nets there (5).
 - d. Nebuchadnezzar will come against Tyre (7-8).
 - e. “Your stones and timber and soil will be cast into the midst of the waters” (12).
 - f. “You shall never be rebuilt” (14).
 - g. “Though you be sought for, you will never be found again” (21).
 2. The destruction of Babylon (Is. 13:19-22; 14:23; Jer. 51:26, 43).
 - a. Babylon will be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (Is. 13:19).
 - b. It will never be inhabited again (Is. 13:20).
 - c. Arabs will not pitch their tents there (Is. 13:20).
 - d. Shepherds will not bring their flocks to lie down there (13:20).
 - e. It will be inhabited by wild animals (Is. 13:21-22).
 - f. Its stones will not be carried away for use in building anything elsewhere (Jer. 51:26).
 - g. Babylon will lie in the desert with few visitors (Jer. 51:43).
 - h. Babylon will be flooded (Is. 14:23).
 3. The destruction of Edom and Petra (Is. 34:6, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15; Jer. 49:17-18; Ezek. 25:13-14; 35:5-7).
 - a. Edom and Petra will be destroyed (Ezek. 35:3-4).
 - b. They will no longer be inhabited (Jer. 49:18).
 - c. They will be conquered and destroyed by Israel (Ezek. 25:14).
 - d. They will have a bloody history (Ezek. 35:5-6).
 - e. Edom will become a widespread desert (Ezek. 25:13).
 - f. Petra will be inhabited by wild animals (Is. 34:13-15).
 - g. All who pass by will be astonished (Jer. 49:17).
 4. The arising of Cyrus as the King of Persia (Is. 44:28-45:1-6; 54:1).
 - a. Isaiah was writing about 700 BC.
 - b. God predicted that Cyrus would become the King of Persia (54:1).
 - c. He is the one who would announce that the Temple will be rebuilt (44:28).
 - d. Cyrus will be an instrument of judgment (54:1).
 - e. Yet, God is the One equipping and empowering Cyrus (45:3, 5).
 - f. God calls Cyrus by name (45:4) long before he was born.

V. **A Study of Isaiah 40-48.**

- A. Nine passages in Isaiah 40-48 point to God knowing the future: (41:21-29; 42:8-9; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 44:24-28; 45:20-23; 46:8-11; 48:3-8; 48:14-16 (Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, p. 102-121.)
1. These passages are a challenge of Yahweh to the false gods/idols of the people.
 2. God says that He knows the future and challenges the gods to do the same.

3. God’s ability to predict what will come long before it does is one of the major proofs that He alone is God.

VI. Some Concluding Remarks

A case study from Gregg Hensel. The story of Sherrie.

- A. If God does not know the future or the future decisions of free will agents, how can we be sure that Jesus will return?
- B. If we say that God sometimes violates the “free will” of man to guarantee that certain things will happen, does this not show that human “free will” is not ultimate? How are we to know when God has violated man’s will? And what are the conditions necessary for God to “violate” man’s free will?
- C. If God is in control, then we can rest in Him. There is a purpose for everything – even in suffering. We can trust Him. He is truly great.
- D. If God doesn’t know the future, how can I trust Him to guide me? He suffers with me, yes; but I need someone who can deliver me. Someone who knows the beginning from the end
- E. Nothing happens to you without it passing by the will of God. God is not absent from difficulty and evil; He is present in the midst of it.
- F. “I may not know what tomorrow holds, but I know who holds tomorrow!”

VII. “Be Still My Soul”

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
To guide the future, as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
And all is darkened in the vale of tears,
Then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,
Who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord.
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love’s purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.