

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's attribute of omniscience, or perfect knowledge of all things. We were examining Wayne Grudem's statement of this attribute, which is that "God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act."¹ Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: We discussed what it means for God to know "in one simple and eternal act" last time. We also considered the fact that God fully knows himself last time.

Marc Roby: Which led to an interesting discussion of the meaning of infinity.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, as hard as it may be to believe, we did stray off topic a bit.

Marc Roby: But it was an interesting and useful diversion. It is completely amazing to try and grasp the nature of God. But, getting back to Grudem's statement about God's knowledge, he also says that God knows "all things actual and possible". We've talked about God's knowledge of possibilities before as well. I remember in Session 59 talking about when King David asked God if the people in the town of Keilah would hand him over to Saul. When God told him that they would, David left the town to avoid that fate.

Dr. Spencer: We also gave other evidence there for God knowing all things that might happen. That was a part of our discussion of God's eternity, which again illustrates that God's attributes are all tied together. Grudem notes that God's knowledge of all possible events can be deduced from the fact that he knows himself fully. He writes that "If God fully knows himself, he knows everything he is able to do, which includes all things that are possible."²

Marc Roby: Do you want to say anything more about God's omniscience?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I first want to note two objections to this doctrine that are mentioned by Grudem. First, some people object to saying that God knows all things when they read verses in the Bible like Isaiah 43:25, where God says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."³ But that is a silly objection because this verse does not mean that God literally forgets my sins. To say that he doesn't remember them is a figure of speech. It is impossible for God to truly forget anything. The real meaning there is captured by David's statement in Psalm 32:2 where he says that "Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him", that's what it means when it says God remembers my sins no more.

Marc Roby: You said you had two objections to discuss, what is the other?

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 190

² Ibid, pg. 191

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Dr. Spencer: Some people object to the idea that God is omniscient because they think his omniscience is incompatible with human free will. They reason that if I have real free will, then God can't possibly know my decisions before I make them. But there are two fatal flaws with that reasoning. First, to say that my decisions cannot be free if God knows them in advance is illogical. God knows me perfectly and he knows exactly what I will do in any situation, so he certainly can know what I will decide prior to my making the decision, unless, of course, someone wants to try and defend the idea that their decisions are completely random.

Marc Roby: I don't want to defend that position, it doesn't sound very logical or flattering.

Dr. Spencer: That's because it isn't very flattering. And I would also contend that even supposedly random events are not random to God anyway, but let's leave that discussion for another day. This argument against God's omniscience essentially assumes I have a completely free will and can decide to do anything. But as we noted in Session 15, no one acts in a way that opposes their own nature unless they are forced to. So, our nature is one constraint placed on our decisions and there are other constraints as well, for example, our knowledge, experience, physical limitations and so on. In fact, even God is not totally free, he is constrained by his nature too. For example, we are told in Hebrews 6:18 that it is impossible for God to lie. So, these people want more freedom for man than God himself has!

We will talk more about the proper understanding of human free will in a later session, but for now what I've said is sufficient to demonstrate that God's omniscience does not violate our free will.

Marc Roby: I look forward to discussing human free will, that is going to be very interesting. But you said there are two fatal flaws with the idea that God's omniscience is incompatible with human free will. What is the second fatal flaw?

Dr. Spencer: The second flaw is that their argument doesn't account for the fact that God does not experience time the same way we do. He experiences everything that has ever happened or ever will happen immediately as we discussed in Sessions 58 and 59. And, if that is true, then there really is no "future" to God in the sense of its being unknown as it is for us. And the fact that God experiences the past, present and future all with equal clarity is a necessary consequence of his immutability as we discussed in Session 58. If God learns new things as time goes on, then his knowledge is changing and he is not immutable in the same sense that we have used that term.

Marc Roby: Well, I'm sure that some will object and say that he is immutable in his being, but not necessarily in his knowledge.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure that some would object and say that. But the only important question is whether or not such a view is biblical. The Bible is, as always, our ultimate authority. We don't want to go back over God's immutability all over again, but how can God's promises about the future be certain if he doesn't know the future? And how can God be said to be perfect if there are things he doesn't yet know? We noted in Session 56 that God's immutability is a logical consequence of his perfection.

Marc Roby: When you think this through you really see how all of God's attributes are linked.

Dr. Spencer: You absolutely do. The simplicity of God is such an important concept, which is why we keep mentioning it. You can't think about any of God's attributes in isolation from the others or you are bound to go astray in your understanding of God.

Marc Roby: And of course, the Bible is well aware that we struggle with understanding God. It has a number of examples of even very devout believers struggling with understanding God and his actions. With Job being one of the prominent examples.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. Job struggled to understand why God would allow him to suffer as he did when he knew he was not guilty of some horrible sin. And God never answered Job's questions. He simply showed up and gave Job a deeper understanding of who God is. And when Job was confronted with God's perfections; his knowledge, power, wisdom and goodness, he shut his mouth. He didn't have his questions answered, but he realized that he didn't need to.

Marc Roby: Seeing God in some sense answers a lot of questions.

Dr. Spencer: It does. We read about God appearing to Job in Chapter 38 of the book of Job. We are told in the first two verses, "Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?'"

Marc Roby: That pretty well describes the situation anytime we speak to God. We have words without knowledge.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. Compared to God we are abysmally ignorant. God makes this point clearly. In Verses 3 and 4 we read that God went on to say, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." God goes on at some length making clear that compared with God Job knows nothing and has no power whatever. And we read Job's response in Job 40:4-5, he replied, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I will say no more."

Marc Roby: When God speaks it is wise for us to shut our mouths and simply listen.

Dr. Spencer: And God speaks in the Bible. So, when the Bible clearly teaches that God knows the future as well as the past, the wise response for us it to believe that and go on from there.

Marc Roby: I think that deals with the objections to God's omniscience. What else would you like to say about this topic?

Dr. Spencer: I want to point out that God himself tells us that knowledge of the future is a test to determine whether or not someone is truly God. In Isaiah 41:21-23 we read, "'Present your case,' says the LORD. 'Set forth your arguments,' says Jacob's King. 'Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods.'" God is telling us here that if someone is truly a god, he should be able to tell us the future.

Marc Roby: There are people today, usually called open theists, who will say that God can predict the future in some ways, but they still deny that he can know the decisions of human beings in advance.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, and John Frame does a very good job of destroying their arguments in his book *The Doctrine of God*. He lists four ways in which open theists believe God can predict the future:⁴ 1) He can say what he intends to do, 2) he can speak in very general terms, 3) he can say what consequences will follow a given state of affairs, and 4) he can say what will happen if a given set of conditions are met.

Frame then goes on to give numerous examples from the Bible that do not fit into any of these four categories. Now we must admit some mystery here and be careful with our language so that we don't misrepresent the Bible. We don't know exactly how God is able to know in advance what human beings will do. He is certainly able to *predict* what we will do because of his perfect comprehensive knowledge of us and all of our circumstances as I noted earlier. But the Bible indicates that God does more than just passively predict human behavior.

Marc Roby: Can you provide some examples of that?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. One of the classic stories has to do with the patriarch Joseph. Most of our listeners probably know the story. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him because he was the favorite of his father Jacob, and because of some of the things he had said and done. In any event, they sold him as a slave to some travelers, who then took him down into Egypt and sold him as a slave there. He ended up being unjustly imprisoned, but then he was able to interpret a dream for Pharaoh and was raised up to be the second most powerful person in Egypt. Years later there was a famine in the land and Joseph's brothers had to come to Egypt for food and they discovered Joseph was ruling there.

Marc Roby: A most unpleasant surprise I might add.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it was unpleasant for them. And I'm leaving out tons of interesting details to get to the point I want to make right now. In Genesis 50:20 we read that Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." This statement makes it clear that God's intent was for Joseph to be taken to Egypt and to become the ruler under Pharaoh. And it also makes it clear that Joseph's brothers had their own intent, and it was not the same as God's. We aren't told exactly how all of this was done, but we see in this verse both divine sovereignty of many events that certainly include the free decisions of human beings, and the fact that humans are still responsible for their own decisions.

Marc Roby: That certainly shows that God didn't just predict what would happen, he planned it.

⁴ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 488

Dr. Spencer: And he can't carry out plans like that if he can't in some way control the free decisions of people. But I want to be clear that when I say "control" I am not implying that God forces people to do something against their will.

Marc Roby: We know for certain that God planned all of this because he told Abraham hundreds of years before that his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt, which happened as a result of this whole episode with Joseph and his brothers.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good point. In Genesis 15:13-14 we read that God told Abraham, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions." And all of that happened, including the episode we just related about Joseph.

Marc Roby: Are there any other examples you want to present?

Dr. Spencer: Let me just mention a couple. We've seen before that God predicted the actions of the Persian king Cyrus more than 100 years before he was born. In Isaiah 45:13 God says, "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty." That prophecy clearly requires that God can cause this man to be born, to be named Cyrus, to grow up and become the king of Persia, to conquer Babylon, and then to set the Israelites free and send them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. Notice that this isn't just God knowing what will happen and telling it to his people before hand, he says that he "will raise up Cyrus" and that he "will make all his ways straight". And in Isaiah 44:28 God had said of Cyrus that "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please".

Marc Roby: That does make it clear that God wasn't just saying what he knew would happen, it was accomplishing his purposes. What other example did you want to present?

Dr. Spencer: Judas Iscariot.

Marc Roby: You mean the disciple that betrayed Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. When the apostle Peter gave his sermon to the Jews on the day of Pentecost, he told them, in Acts 2:23, that Jesus "was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge". So, it was God's purpose that was being accomplished when Judas betrayed Christ. And, in Acts 4 we read about the believers praying after Peter and John were released from prison. In Verses 27 and 28 we read that they said, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Marc Roby: That's pretty explicit. God "decided beforehand" what should happen. That certainly requires that he have the ability to control what happened.

Dr. Spencer: I think it does require that, yes. And so, we have presented some examples that show that God doesn't just *know* what human beings will decide, he can somehow *cause* certain decisions when he chooses to.

Marc Roby: I assume we will discuss that idea more when we talk about human free will in a later session.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we will. But I want to wrap up this discussion of God's omniscience with one more example. In Psalm 139:16 King David is speaking to God and says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." Which is a very clear statement that God didn't just *know* what would happen to David before he was born, he *ordained* his days. This verse is the only place in the NIV where the Hebrew word used here is translated as "ordained".⁵ It is most commonly translated as "formed" and it can also mean "planned" or "made". The idea clearly goes well beyond God's simply having *foreknowledge* of David's life, God planned, or made, or formed David's life before he was born. And that is true of all of us. The Westminster Confession of Faith properly summarizes the biblical teaching when it says in Paragraph 1 of Chapter 3 that "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Marc Roby: I'm sure we will have to spend more time with that wonderful statement later, but we are out of time for today. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd love to hear from you.

⁵Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, Zondervan, 1990, pg. 1476