

**§ 3. Doctrine of God**  
**Lecture 13**  
**God Is More Than Omniscent**

We have been talking about the scriptural data concerning God's omniscience or his attribute of being all-knowing. As a result of the question time last week I realized that I had omitted an important part of the scriptural data concerning divine omniscience, so I want to add that and read a couple of passages that are pertinent to it.

This would be, if you will, a fifth point under the scriptural data and that is that God knows what would happen under different circumstances. God not only knows everything that is happening, everything that has happened and will happen, but he also knows even what would happen under different circumstances.

One of the classic passages illustrating this is found in 1 Samuel 23:1-13. This is the story of David at Keilah.

Now they told David, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and are robbing the threshing floors." Therefore David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the Lord said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." But David's men said to him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the Lord again. And the Lord answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah; for I will give the Philistines into your hand." And David and his men went to Keilah, and fought with the Philistines, and brought away their cattle, and made a great slaughter among them. So David delivered the inhabitants of Keilah.

When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David to Keilah, he came down with an ephod in his hand. [This is a sort of divining device to inquire of the Lord.] Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, "God has given him into my hand; for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars." And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men.

David knew that Saul was plotting evil against him; and he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." Then said David, "O Lord, the God of Israel, thy servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as thy servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech thee, tell thy servant." And the Lord said, "He will come down." Then said David, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the Lord said, "They will surrender you."

Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.

So what the ephod said did not, in fact, come to pass. Saul did not come down to Keilah, and so the men of Keilah did not surrender David over to Saul. The ephod was probably a device that yielded either just a “yes” or “no” answer and so answered in such a way that it told David what would happen if David were to remain in the city. If he were to remain there then Saul would come down. And if he were to come down and attack the city the men of Keilah would surrender David over to Saul. This is an example of where God knew not only what will happen (namely, Saul will not come down), but he knew what would happen under different circumstances.

In a case like this the conditions or the circumstances did not eventuate so that the subjunctive conditional that is involved here – If David were to remain at Keilah, Saul would come down – has a false antecedent. David did not remain at Keilah. These types of subjunctive conditionals are often called counterfactuals.<sup>1</sup> A counterfactual is a subjunctive conditional statement with a false antecedent like “If I were you, I would apply to study at Kennesaw State” or something like that. I am not you! But if I were you, that is what I would do. That is a counterfactual statement.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned last week, we native English speakers don’t have a very good handle on the subjunctive mood. We often misstate it or speak ungrammatically. Very often people will use the simple singular past-tense: “If I was you then I would do this.” That is completely incorrect. “If I was you” meant that if at some time in the past I was you then this is what I would do. Or if I said, “If I was rich, I would buy a Mercedes.” That means if at some time in the past I was once rich then I would buy a Mercedes. That is not what is meant. Rather, the correct use of the subjunctive mood involves the use of the word “were.” “If I were rich, I would buy a Mercedes.” “If I were you, I would study at Kennesaw State.”

So the easiest way to remember how to use these subjunctive conditionals would be in the if-clause, say “If it were the case that . . . then it would be the case that something else.” That is the easiest way to express these. “If it were the case that (something) then it would be the case that (something else).” So if it were the case that I were you then it would be the case that I would study at KSU, or something of that sort.

However, not all of these subjunctive conditionals have false antecedents. Sometimes the antecedent might turn out to be true. So let’s look for an example of this in the New Testament, in John 21:6. This is the story of the miraculous catch of fish where the disciples had fished all night and had caught nothing. Then Jesus comes to them and in

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John 21:6, "He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish." What did Jesus know here? He knew that if they were to cast the net on the right side of the boat then they would have a great catch. So he tells them, *do it – cast it on the right side and you'll get a great catch*. Because he knew if they were to do that then they would catch these fish. In this case, they obeyed his command, so it is not a counterfactual. It turns out that the antecedent of this is true. If you were to cast the net on the right side of the boat then you would catch the fish. They do cast it on the right side of the boat, and they do catch the fish.

Here you would have a subjunctive conditional that isn't a counterfactual strictly speaking because it has a true antecedent. Sometimes we call these deliberative conditionals, not counterfactual conditions, because we often use these in decision making. For example, "If I were to pull out into traffic now, I would make it." Or, "If I were to ask the boss for a raise, he would tear my head off." We use these kinds of subjunctive conditionals in deliberation about what to do. Sometimes they may then have true antecedents if we think that the consequence would be good. If I were to quit smoking, my breath would smell better, and so I decide to quit smoking. The antecedent then is true.

The point is that there are these true subjunctive conditionals. Scripture gives examples of where God evidently knows the truth of these. He knew what would happen under these different circumstances. That needs to be included in the scriptural data concerning God's being all-knowing, however we in the end understand it.

With that in mind, we want to turn to a systematic summary of this data concerning God's omniscience in the Scriptures. The attribute of God's omniscience is one of the most discussed and most fascinating of all of the various attributes of God.

Omniscience is usually defined in terms of truth.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, for any true statement or any true proposition, God believes and knows that proposition, and he doesn't believe any false propositions. We could say this: for any proposition *p*, God knows that *p* (you can fill in whatever you want for that proposition *p* – that Obama is the President of the United States, that Bryant Wright preached this morning at Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, that this tree has fake green leaves on it, any proposition you want to fill in for *p*), and does not believe *not-p*. For any true proposition *p*, God knows that *p* and does not believe *not-p*. In other words, omniscience means that God knows only and all truths. He knows all the truths there are, and he doesn't believe any falsehoods. That is the way omniscience is usually defined.

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So God knows all past-, present-, and future-tense truths, even before the foundations of the world. Before he created the world, God foreknew the motion of every subatomic particle that would occur in the history of the universe. He knew your very thoughts before you think them. He knows our free choices before we make them. He even knew what we would do under different circumstances than the ones that we will be in. So for any true proposition, God knows that proposition and does not believe the negation of it.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Belief is faith right?

*Dr. Craig:* Not in this context. I am glad you mentioned that. When we talk about belief in this context, we mean just having a certain attitude toward a proposition. So, for example, I believe that I am Bill Craig. I believe that I am in this room. I believe that I am married to Jan. None of those things is by faith. Believing something in this context just means affirming it or asserting it. So to believe a proposition  $p$  is to accept or affirm or assert  $p$ . That is often confused because the word “belief” for some people is synonymous with having faith, and that is not the way it is being used here. Good clarification.

## **END DISCUSSION**

God, then, is omniscient. He knows all truths. He doesn’t believe any falsehoods. This would be an incredible enough attribute for God to possess. But even omniscience does not exhaust the scope and the excellence of God’s knowledge. Philosophers have noted that there is a different kind of knowledge than just propositional knowledge. In addition to knowledge of true propositions, there is also a kind of knowledge which is non-propositional in nature.

Let me try to illustrate this as best I can. Suppose I am visiting Canada and I am chased up a tree by a ferocious moose. While I am in the tree hanging on for dear life I say to you, “Go and tell Jan that I’ve been treed by a moose!” What do you do? You run up to Jan and do you say to her, “I’ve been treed by a moose!”? No! You would say “Bill has been treed by a moose.” You would communicate to her the information that I wanted you to communicate by using different words than I used. I told you to tell her that “I’ve been treed by a moose.” But you go and say to her, “Bill has been treed by a moose.” In other words, the proposition that you are expressing is the same one that I was expressing but we used different words. We used different words to give the same information content.<sup>3</sup> When I say “I’ve been treed by a moose” I express the same proposition that you do when you say “Bill has been treed by a moose.” We both have the same propositional knowledge in this case; namely, that Bill Craig has been treed by a moose. Yet, our knowledge isn’t perfectly the same. There is a difference here. Why? Look at the

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way we react to it. I react to that knowledge by hanging on for dear life in the tree! But you react to that knowledge by running to tell Jan about it. You don't hold on for dear life because you don't believe that you are Bill Craig; you are somebody else. So we have different responses to what we know. That shows that what we know is not exactly the same in both of these cases. We also have a different self-knowledge in addition to the propositional knowledge that we share. We have the same propositional knowledge but our self-knowledge is different.

This self-knowledge is essential to timely action in the world. For example, it is not enough for me to believe the proposition "Bill Craig is hungry" in order to be motivated to get something to eat. For suppose I've been in a car accident and I am lying in a hospital bed with temporary amnesia so that I don't know that I am Bill Craig. If someone were to tell me "Bill Craig is hungry," that wouldn't do anything to motivate me to ask for something to eat. What I need to have is the self-knowledge either that *I* am Bill Craig or that *I* am hungry. Then I will ask for something to eat. This self-knowledge, though it is non-propositional, is vital to getting along in the world and being able to act in a timely way. It is absolutely essential.

If someone or even something, say a supercomputer, had all of the propositional knowledge in the world so that it counted as omniscient because it knew only and all of the truths that there are, it still couldn't decide to take any sort of timely action because it wouldn't have any self-knowledge. So if God is to be a "self" or a "person" he is more than omniscient. In addition to all of the propositional knowledge that he possesses, he also has appropriate self-knowledge. He knows "I am God." That is a perfection. He doesn't know "I am Ronald Reagan" or "I am Napoleon." That would be an imperfection indeed because he is not Ronald Reagan or Napoleon. But it is a perfection for him to have appropriate self-knowledge of who he is – that "I am God." So God's cognitive excellence exceeds even omniscience. He is more than omniscient, as incredible as that sounds, because he not only knows all truth but he also has appropriate self-knowledge as well.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Is it true that we also, through him, have some of that in that we have self-knowledge particularly in light of other animals and so forth that we have I guess, through God's image, can you use that same sort of knowledge base that now human beings have in addition.

*Dr. Craig:* That is absolutely right. Nobody else in the world has the knowledge "I am Cindy." You are the only person in the world that has that self-knowledge, because you alone are that person. You are right in saying that this differentiates us from animals. As far as we know, all the evidence indicates that animals are not selves. They do not have

this sort of self-knowledge. This has profound implications for the problem of animal pain and suffering. Because even though animals like zebras when they are attacked by a lion suffer pain, they don't have the knowledge "I am in pain." That, I think, has really profound implications for God's permitting animal suffering. They don't suffer in the way that we do because they don't have this self-knowledge that "I am in pain."<sup>4</sup>

*Student:* It seems to me to be part of the characteristics of the soul.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, exactly. I think you are right in saying this is a reflection of the image of God – that we are selves, we are persons, in this special way.

*Student:* This self concept brings to mind the scripture of "For now we see through a glass darkly but then clearly and we will know ourselves as we are known." We don't really have self-awareness to the degree we are supposed to. The longer we walk with the Lord the more we do.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that is a little different than what I am talking about here. I would call what you just described self-understanding. That is true. We don't understand ourselves very well. Sometimes we are puzzled why we do the things we do. We don't understand our motivations and our weaknesses and so forth. I would call that self-understanding. But this kind of self-knowledge is something that you have just in virtue of being able to say "I think that . . ." That is unique to each one of you – that you have that kind of first person perspective.

*Student:* It seems to me like this is more of the case of that first definition being inadequate. If you are going to truly use "omni" for "all" then it is demonstrably inadequate if you base it only on this propositional situation because self-knowledge is not included so that can't be all.

*Dr. Craig:* Let me respond to that. This is a good point. This would mean that there is knowledge in addition to propositional knowledge. You might say then "omni" ought to include all of that, too. If you say that, though, then I think that omniscience becomes incoherent because then God would have to know and believe that he is Ronald Reagan. Right? Because there is that self-knowledge – Reagan had it. Or the knowledge that he is Napoleon. Napoleon had that knowledge. So I don't think that we want to say that omniscience means that you have to have all knowledge whether propositional or self-knowledge. I think, to be a perfection, it would be to have appropriate self-knowledge, namely, he knows that he himself is God. It would be an imperfection for him to think that he is Napoleon or Ronald Reagan. For that reason I think most theologians would be reluctant to say that in order to be omniscient you have to have all self-knowledge in addition to all propositional knowledge.

*Student:* The example you gave of the possible computer that would have all propositional knowledge but lack the knowledge of self – why would it be unable with artificial intelligence for that computer not to be able to be given self as part of its original programming?

*Dr. Craig:* I am not making a judgment about that. I am just asking you to imagine a device that knew all true propositions but it did not have self-knowledge. I am simply saying that such a thing doesn't have maximum cognitive excellence. Whether or not you could program a robot to have a self-awareness I am not qualified to say. But I am just asking you to think about this illustration to motivate the idea that God's cognitive excellence exceeds even propositional omniscience.

*Student:* It seems like the middle ground on this is that God knows what it is like to be Ronald Reagan or Napoleon. I am thinking of Dallas Willard's statement, *no physical entity defines its own existence*. So Napoleon or Ronald Reagan couldn't determine in advance that they were going to be who they were rather than a stone or a drop of water or what have you.

*Dr. Craig:* It is metaphysically impossible, I think, that Ronald Reagan could have been a stone or a drop of water because he is essentially a person. It is possible for him not to exist but I would think that a person's being a person is essential to him. It would be impossible for Reagan to have been a stone.

*Student:* I agree. But Ronald Reagan couldn't say in advance, *I am going to arrange these molecules to be Ronald Reagan and living.*

*Dr. Craig:* Right. I want to speak to the more important point that you are making, and that is that God knew what it was like to be Ronald Reagan. I would say that is propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup> He knew to be like Ronald Reagan is to be courageous, congenial, outgoing, and optimistic. Right? That is what it is like, partially, to be Ronald Reagan. And that is propositional truth and God knew all of that. But he did not believe that he himself is Ronald Reagan, which is what Reagan believed and knew.

*Student:* It seems like that part of cognitive excellence that would not be mastered by the computer that knew all propositional truth would be like in your “Bill is treed by a moose” example – the ability to reason. For example, if you said that to me, I would immediately figure out that the most important thing to you is not that Jan knows that you were treed by moose but to solve the problem of being treed by a moose. I'd pull out my rifle, kill the moose, and maybe not even go tell Jan. But I would take care of the problem. That wouldn't have anything to do with the propositional truth of the statement “I've been treed by a moose.” It seems like that is the part of God that . . . they say the reason people do better than computers at playing chess is because we can eliminate the

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things that are absurd, where the computer has to analyze every possible move. It seems like it is that part of his cognitive excellence would be the ability to reason that he has imparted on us and not to cats or dogs or whatever.

*Dr. Craig:* All right. I don't want you to be misled by my example into rabbit trails that I didn't mean for us to go down. I think you are quite right. I don't think machines can even add when you think about it. When your little pocket calculator you put  $2+3=5$ , that machine doesn't know how to add those numbers. It is just a program that exhibits these digital patterns on the screen. I think you are right about that. But that wasn't the point that I am wanting to make here.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let me go on and say one other thing. Even yet with propositional knowledge and self-knowledge, the excellence of God's knowledge is still not exhausted. What is also important here is the way in which one acquires one's knowledge. Suppose there were two beings and each one had all propositional knowledge and each one had appropriate self-knowledge for himself. But suppose that the second one acquired his knowledge only because the first being told him everything that he knew and the first being just had this knowledge innately. Clearly the second being would not be as intellectually excellent as the first being because he didn't know any of these things innately. He knew them only because the other being told him everything he knew in an innate way. In the same way, as we've seen from Scripture, God doesn't learn anything from anybody. Nobody has instructed the Lord or taught him anything. But I would say that God simply knows all truth innately and therefore is maximally excellent intellectually.

This is, again, just a stunning conclusion. To think God's intellectual excellence outstrips even what it is to be an omniscient being. It does so in that he has this self-knowledge and also in the way that he does not acquire this knowledge from others but simply has it himself. It gives an insight into how great God's intellectual excellence is. I remember when I first realized this in studying the doctrine of omniscience it just floored me, because I never imagined that any person or being could be smarter than omniscient. It seemed to me that omniscient was as high as you can get. Yet, when you think about it, God's cognitive excellence (his greatness) with respect to his intellectual attributes exceeds even omniscience which ought to issue in praise and adoration and wonder of the person God is.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Are you saying that each person's self-knowledge is gained from other people's understanding of him?

*Dr. Craig:* Are you asking if God's self-knowledge?

*Student:* No, I am saying that each person's self-knowledge – how do we have our self-knowledge?

*Dr. Craig:* There, I think that one has self-knowledge simply, as someone earlier said, in virtue of being a person.<sup>6</sup> A person has a first-person perspective on the things it knows and does and so can say "I think that . . ." It is part of what it means to be a person to have this capacity of self-awareness. So it would be intrinsic to persons.

*Student:* So if a person, after he is born . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Right, that is why I said "the capacity." I do think that a developing fetus is a person even though it may not yet have come to self-awareness, but as a person it has this capacity to be self-aware or to have a first person perspective.

*Student:* So it is possible that this capacity never developed. It is possible that this capacity of self-knowledge could not have been developed completely.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. Think of a person in a coma who is comatose. That is still a person. You are not at liberty to just kill that individual, even though they are not self-aware at that point. They may not be self-conscious at that point, but as a person they have this intrinsic capacity to be self-aware, to have a first-person perspective on things.

*Student:* I think God gives each of us self-knowledge through the relationship that we have with him. As David said *I was formed in my mother's womb and it is too wonderful for me to know all these things*. That relationship a lot of times are replaced by idolatry. So the self-knowledge are distorted because we take a person or a statement or something in place of God to form that self-knowledge. I think if our relationship with God is normalized we all have, as the prophets, know what they are to do and what their roles are. All those self-knowledge is given by God. That is why we were chosen and we were predestined.

*Dr. Craig:* I won't comment on the part about predestination, but I think that the Protestant Reformers agree with the idea that the effect of sin upon us is, as Luther said, we are curved in upon ourselves, and rather than being oriented toward God and seeking his good and his righteousness we seek our own. We are bent in upon our own selves. That is part of the curse and the consequence of sin, it seems to me.

## **END DISCUSSION**

I hope that I've expanded a bit your view of God's cognitive excellence. What we will do next week is look at two problems which arise as a result of God's omniscience. The first will be the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human freedom – how can we be genuinely free to do other than as God infallibly foreknows we will do? Then secondly

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if we are genuinely free, how can God foreknow that? How can he foreknow what we will do if at the time when it comes we are completely free to do or to not do that action? Those will be two questions we will take up next week.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Total Running Time: 34:50 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)