

**§ 3. Doctrine of God**  
**Lecture 14**  
**Against Fatalism**

The study of divine omniscience, as I explained last time, involves two questions – two problems – which are very much discussed and which we want to now address ourselves.

The first of these is the famous question of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The objection arises here that if God knows in advance everything that happens, every choice that you will ever make, then isn't everything fated to occur? For example, if God knows in advance and predicts that Peter will deny Christ three times then when the time arrives isn't Peter fated to deny Christ three times? Isn't it necessary that Peter deny Christ three times? How could he do anything else since God knows and has predicted that he would do so and God cannot err. It would seem that if Peter could do anything else then God could be mistaken which is impossible. Doesn't it follow from God's complete foreknowledge of the future that fatalism is true? That everything that happens happens necessarily?

Some Christian theologians agree with this. Martin Luther, for example, believed that in virtue of divine foreknowledge of the future there is no human free will – that human freedom is illusory. Others in the Reformed theological tradition have said that God's foreknowledge of the future is based upon his foreordination of everything. Because God foreordains unilaterally everything that will ever happen, then of course by knowing his own will and his omnipotent ability to bring about whatever he ordains, God thereby knows the future. On these views, there really is no human freedom to do otherwise. Everything that happens happens necessarily. Even the fall of man into sin, on this view (since it was foreknown by God) happens necessarily and therefore is part of what God has foreordained to happen.

But this, I think, is a serious theological mistake. If we say that everything that happens happens necessarily in virtue of God's foreordination then that makes God the author of sin. It means that man falls into sin because this is what God ordains to happen unilaterally, and man couldn't possibly have done otherwise. That would make God the author of sin, which would seem to make God himself evil. So this equation between divine foreknowledge of the future and divine foreordination of the future is one, I think, that we ought not to accept.

How then could we defend the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom? I think in the first place we want to break that equation between foreknowing something and foreordaining something. Those are not the same things. God knows in advance all of the choices that people will freely make, but that doesn't mean that he determines those choices. In fact, quite the opposite. If we want to speak of

determination, it is the choices that determine what God foreknows, not vice versa. It is not that because God foreknows you will do something that you do it, it is because you will do it that God foreknows it. If there is any determination going on here it is the event that determines what God foreknows, not that what God foreknows determines the event.

In understanding this, I think it is very helpful to distinguish between two types of priority. *Chronological priority* which would be something being earlier in time. If something is chronologically prior to something else, it is earlier than it in time. *Logical priority* is where something is explanatorily prior to something else. These are not the same thing.<sup>1</sup> Something can be logically prior to something else without being chronologically prior to it. I think that is exactly what we have in the case of divine foreknowledge and the events foreknown by God. Chronologically God's foreknowledge comes before the event. First God foreknows it, then the event occurs. So the foreknowledge is chronologically prior to the event foreknown. But logically the event is prior to the foreknowledge. God's foreknowledge is what it is because the event is what it is. It is because you will choose pizza for lunch that God foreknows it. It is not that you eat pizza for lunch because God foreknows it. That is to confuse chronological priority with logical priority.

As long as we understand that the object of God's foreknowledge is logically prior to what he foreknows, it doesn't really matter that God's foreknowledge is chronologically prior to the event foreknown. What that means is that if the event were to be different then God's foreknowledge would be different. Those of you who have been with us the last few weeks will recognize there a subjunctive conditional, right? If the event were different then God's foreknowledge would have been different. You will choose pizza for lunch, let's suppose. But you don't have to. You are free to choose something else. If you choose Panda Express instead then God will foreknow that. So if we were to choose Panda Express, God would have foreknown that instead of knowing that you will eat pizza for lunch today. God's foreknowledge tracks your choices like an infallible barometer. The barometer doesn't determine the weather even though chronologically the reading of the barometer may be first. The barometer infallibly tracks what the weather will be in the same way God's foreknowledge infallibly tracks your choices. If your choices were to be different then God's foreknowledge would have been different.

Thus God's foreknowledge doesn't prejudice anything. When the time comes you are completely free to do something other than what you will do. It is just that if you were to do that other thing then God's foreknowledge would have been different instead.

But God's knowledge of the future doesn't fate anything to occur. Let's think about it. Think about some events here on the timeline. Let's imagine a line that is time, and let's

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<sup>1</sup> 5:01

imagine here some event E which is foreknown by God. God is in time and he knows in advance that E will take place. God's knowing that E will take place is not a causal connection between God and E. Merely knowing something about something doesn't cause E to occur. The causes of E will be the prior events in the timeline that bring about E. For all we know E could be a completely contingent event. It might be the decay of a subatomic particle or a free-will decision of a human being, and therefore with respect to the events earlier than E, E may be causally indeterminate. It could happen or it could not happen. How does God merely knowing about the occurrence of a causally indeterminate event make that event fated to occur? How can that event occur necessarily simply in virtue of God's knowing about it? Imagine God didn't know about it. Let's suppose God didn't know E will occur. What has changed with respect to E? Nothing! There is no causal connection between God and E that has now been removed. Everything remains as before. Yet the theological fatalist who thinks foreknowledge implies fatalism would have to say that now E is not fated to occur. Now E doesn't occur necessarily because it is not foreknown by God. But merely adding God's foreknowledge, as I say, doesn't do anything to effect E. So how could E be contingent and free in the one case and yet fated and necessary in the other?<sup>2</sup>

I think fatalism posits a constraint upon human freedom which is simply unintelligible and therefore really makes no sense at all. If an event is not causally determined to occur then that event occurs freely or randomly, and God's merely knowing about it doesn't do anything to make it occur necessarily. Fatalism posits a constraint on human freedom which is simply unintelligible.

So long as our free choices are logically prior to what God foreknows then there is nothing about the chronological priority of divine foreknowledge that prejudices human freedom and implies that everything that happens happens necessarily.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Because there is such a definite correspondence between human behavior and their spiritual alignment so the human behavior happens necessarily according to their spiritual alignment and God knows all about their spiritual alignment and knows the decision that follows and also the behavior will incur what kind of consequence; therefore he reads everything clearly.

*Dr. Craig:* It sounds to me that you are affirming determinism. You are saying that in virtue of their spiritual character everything you do is determined. I don't think that is true. Even if you think that in virtue of total depravity and our fall into sin, we sin necessarily, still, I think people have the freedom to choose the array of sins that they might commit. So, for example, to take Peter's denial of Jesus. He could have denied him

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<sup>2</sup> 10:04

two times, or maybe he could have denied him four times, or he could have done something different. But for Jesus to be able to predict that Peter would deny Christ three times before the cock crows twice, it just seems to me that cannot be attributed to a person's spiritual disposition such that God was able to infer from his spiritual disposition exactly what would happen. Think about the fall of man into sin. There it seems Adam, not having a sin nature, is free to obey or disobey, and there is nothing about God's foreknowing the fall that would make Adam fall into sin. There was nothing about his spiritual disposition that would make him sin, I think. I want to affirm the view that even though we are fallen and sinful nevertheless there is still genuine human freedom.

*Student:* This seems to deny the existence of randomness. If I know enough about how something occurs I can postulate it, I can forecast it. I can use the formulas if I had all of the inputs; I could figure out what would happen. But it seems to deny the possibility that there is randomness at that point.

*Dr. Craig:* I am surprised to hear you say that because I would have thought just the opposite. What I am trying to defend is the view that there can be genuine freedom or randomness in the world.

*Student:* Then how would it be foreknown?

*Dr. Craig:* That is a question we haven't addressed. That is the second question. I said there were two questions we want to talk about. The first one is: if God does foreknow your choice or the motion of the subatomic particle, does it happen necessarily? Does God's foreknowledge obliterate randomness and freedom from the universe? What I am saying is "no." This event E (remember E, again, could be random or a free choice theoretically) – whether God knows about it or not doesn't do anything to affect E.

*Student:* In quantum physics, the old Schroedinger's Cat thing, it seems like observing things cause different things to happen. Could that not be something that is happening here?

*Dr. Craig:* Ah. OK! All right.<sup>3</sup> That is very interesting because on certain . . . oh boy! You are really opening up a Pandora's Box or a Schroedinger's Box here! On certain interpretations of quantum mechanics the so-called measurement problem arises; namely, the quantum description of the physical system isn't completely determined until it is measured by a classical measuring apparatus which would not have a quantum description. The problem is you could give a quantum description of the classical measuring apparatus, and then that would need then to be measured by a further apparatus. This goes on to infinity. Some have suggested, wait a minute, maybe you can break the chain – the infinite regress – by saying when a conscious observer sees the

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<sup>3</sup> 15:00

result of the measurement then that stops the regress and makes it determinate because you can't give a quantum physical description of a conscious state. That is a non-physical state, right? When a conscious observer looks at the classical measuring apparatus, you can't give a quantum description of the state of consciousness so that breaks the regress and makes reality determinate all the way down.

*Student:* Does that apply here?

*Dr. Craig:* That is a very, very interesting question for theism because God is such an observer on a sort of cosmic scale. Maybe he collapses the wave function of the universe so that he is the ultimate observer and makes everything determinate. What I am trying to do, for the sake of argument (I, in fact, don't believe that quantum indeterminacy is ontic or real – I think it is just epistemic; in fact, having God would eliminate indeterminacy), let's assume for the sake of argument that quantum indeterminacy is real. What I am trying to show here is that merely knowing about it doesn't eliminate it. If you don't like the example of E being a quantum indeterminate event then make it a free choice instead. Make it be Peter's denying Christ three times. That will be then unproblematic. You are quite right in raising this interesting question, but I am asking you just for the sake of argument let's not go down that route. Let's assume that these quantum events are random and indeterminate and ask: would merely having knowledge that it would occur mean that it is fated to occur and has to happen? That is an independent question of whether or not in virtue of being observed by an observer the event is now determinate. In fact, even on this version of quantum mechanics, it doesn't mean the event occurs necessarily. It just means it is determinate. It means that there is a time and place specifically at which it occurs. But it doesn't mean that it happens necessarily. So even given that it wouldn't remove the contingency of the event simply by being known about it. It would remove its being indeterminate.

*Student:* So now I have to have a Newtonian view of God and a quantum view of God!

*Dr. Craig:* I am trying not to draw those issues in here to keep us, as I say, from opening Pandora's Box.

*Student:* If our actions are the cause that then is creating the effect of God's foreknowledge . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Now, wait! I didn't say that. Let's be very careful. Did you hear the question? Do our choices cause God to foreknow what he does? I didn't say that. That would require backward causation.

*Student:* That's what I was thinking.

*Dr. Craig:* That you could have an event in the future which would have causal effects in the past. I think that that is a very, very difficult idea. It is problematic. I don't want to

say that. That is why I used the word “determined” rather than “caused.” I also kind of, even then, waffled on that. I said, “If there is anything here about determining, it would be the event that determines the foreknowledge; not the foreknowledge that determines the event.” But I don’t think of this as causal priority. We could distinguish another kind of priority here which would be causal priority.<sup>4</sup> There I don’t want to say that God’s knowledge is causally prior to the event or that the event is causally prior to God’s foreknowledge. We don’t cause knowledge or ideas to pop into God’s mind, right? We don’t have any kind of causal connection with God to make those things happen. Rather the way it works is like this. We have the ability to choose A or not-A. Whichever we do, the proposition “I will choose A’ is true” or the proposition “I will choose not-A’ is true.” You have the choice to determine which of those propositions is true by making that free choice. God is omniscient and knows only and all true propositions so, in virtue of that proposition being true, that is what God foreknows. But notice neither the relationship between you and a proposition nor the relationship between a proposition and God is a causal relation. This is sort of logical priority or explanatory priority, not causal priority.

*Student:* Looking at this dilemma on a large scale, when God created the universe he foreknew that man would fall. He had a plan of salvation. In my way of thinking, Christ (being God) took action that then knowing in advance would result in the salvation and a new Jerusalem and new Earth. In that it seems to me prior to the fall of man, prior to creation, there was a simple knowledge of the ultimate realization of a new heaven and a new Earth and a salvation for the human race. We are working that plan out. In my mind, I see that as his salvation of us therefore providing that and knowing that in advance he had to have a plan. He had to have created a plan which, to me, caused the salvation to be possible. In that regard, I am not saying that that action caused us to take certain steps but there seems to be more than just a foreknowledge. There was a plan.

*Dr. Craig:* Oh, absolutely! I am not here attempting to give an explanation of divine providence. When we get to the subject of doctrine of creation then we will talk about the doctrine of providence and God’s sovereignty over the world, directing it, governing it, acting in it to bring about his plan. Don’t confuse divine providence with this mere knowledge of what is going to happen in the future. You are quite right. But the Bible does indicate that Christ and his death and the plan of salvation were part of the foreknowledge of God. The Scripture describes Christ as foreknown from before the foundations of the world.<sup>5</sup> So clearly God knew all of this and he worked out a plan in accordance with his perfect knowledge. But we are not talking about those other aspects here. We are just asking this question of what is called theological fatalism. That is: does

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<sup>4</sup> 20:03

<sup>5</sup> cf. 1 Peter 1:20

God's knowing the future imply that everything that happens happens necessarily; there is no free will and no randomness?

*Student:* Does God's total foreknowledge remove the possibility of God having free will?

*Dr. Craig:* Good question! If you say that foreknowledge is incompatible with freedom, you not only remove human freedom, you remove divine freedom because God foreknows his own choices and decisions. I don't think we want to say that – that God is determined to do everything he does or that he is fated to do everything he does so that when the time arrives he has no ability to do otherwise. So the theological implications of this go beyond exterminating human freedom. It would eliminate divine freedom as well.

*Student:* So you could modify your definition of God's foreknowledge to "he has total foreknowledge of all the ramifications for everything he has so far preordained."<sup>6</sup> He still has the ability to preordain other things or react to free will of man.

*Dr. Craig:* No. I want to stick to the original definition of omniscience that I gave which was that for any proposition  $p$ , if  $p$  is true, then God knows that  $p$  and he does not believe any false proposition. He has complete knowledge of everything that is going to happen – every future-tensed truth.

*Student:* What I always get caught up on is if he created you and put you in this specific time and place with these parents and these circumstances, wouldn't he therefore have created me and put me in a place where I would make specific decisions and choices and therefore because he created me and put me here he made me make those decisions.

*Dr. Craig:* Obviously, there is a kind of soft determinism in virtue of where you are born and of whom you are born. You are not free to suddenly start speaking Vietnamese right now, right? Because you don't have that background. On the other hand, probably Tehwan could start speaking Chinese at the drop of a hat because she has a different background. But that doesn't mean that you are totally determined that you having your hand on your chin is determined causally because of where you were born or by whom. Or the husband that you marry. Certainly our lives are shaped by these things but there is still plenty of room for libertarian free choices within those parameters.

*Student:* For the sake of completeness, could you say a few words about open theism? I think that is the view that God does not foreknow free choices. That is not a deficiency because it is logically impossible, like he can't make a square circle is not a deficiency. I know a number of people who consider themselves in the camp of orthodox Christianity hold that, including, I think, one of your teachers Clarke Pinnock before he died. One of the dividends of that would be it would seem to solve at least a large part of the problem

of evil. You can't blame God if he didn't know at the creation of the world that Hitler was going to commit the Holocaust.

*Dr. Craig:* You are right in drawing attention to a significant current within contemporary theology, and evangelical theology frankly. On behalf of those who actually think that foreknowledge implies fatalism, they agree with Luther and certain other thinkers that if God has complete foreknowledge of the future then everything that happens happens necessarily. But unlike Luther and these other theologians, they therefore choose to deny divine foreknowledge rather than freedom. So it is sort of like two ends of the same teeter-totter. Both of these theologians agree that foreknowledge and freedom are incompatible. This leads the Lutheran or Reformed theologian to deny human freedom. It leads the open theist to deny divine foreknowledge. I think, in virtue of the scriptural data that we already reviewed, that open theism is just unbiblical. It isn't even an option for a biblically orthodox Christian. The Scripture not only gives multitudinous examples of God's foreknowledge of the future that couldn't be inferred from present causes like Peter's denying Jesus three times before the cock crows twice. But the Scripture actually says that God has foreknowledge. As I say, it uses words like "foreknowledge" with respect to Christ being foreknown before the foundations of the world and God's entire salvific plan being foreknown. There is a whole family of words in the New Testament that have this prefix "pro" which means "fore" including *prognosis* which is "foreknowledge." It says God has foreknowledge – *prognosis*. But also verbs like *promartureo* ("to bear witness to in advance") and *prokatangelo* ("to tell in advance") and *proginosko* ("to know in advance").<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that it is just biblically unorthodox to deny that God has complete foreknowledge of the future. Therefore, I want to get off the teeter-totter and say that neither of these folks are right – there is no incompatibility between foreknowledge and freedom as long as we keep these crucial distinctions of chronological and logical priority clear in our thinking.

As for the problem of evil, it certainly is true that on open theism since God doesn't know what is going to happen in the future that he didn't know in advance or very far in advance horrible things like the Holocaust and what Hitler would do in World War II. These things catch God off guard, so to speak, on open theism because he is just a sort of super-intelligent but finite counselor who doesn't really know what's going to happen. But I don't think this gets him off the hook for the problem of evil. Once the Holocaust starts to occur, once the Nazis begin to round up the Jews, why doesn't the God of open theism do anything to stop it? You don't need to be a genius to see what is going on in Nazi Germany. Why did he let the bomb plot against Hitler fail by having the bomb be placed behind a heavy table leg? Why didn't he just strike Hitler dead or have the bomb plot succeed? The fact is that the God of open theism sits idly by twiddling his thumbs

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while allowing these evils to go on and he doesn't intervene to stop them. At least on the view that we will defend later on when we get to God's sovereignty and full foreknowledge and middle knowledge of everything that will occur, you could say that though God knows about these evils and permits them to occur he never does so without having an overriding justification for doing so. Unlike the God of open theism, he is not caught off guard, he is not surprised. He has morally justifying reasons for allowing the Holocaust to occur. I find that to be a better solution to the problem of evil than to say that God is caught off guard by these things and didn't see them coming and therefore isn't to blame for the evils in the world. But certainly you have pointed out here one of the key issues in the debate over divine foreknowledge and human freedom today, and that would be the problem of evil.

*Student:* You seem to object to fatalism, and you are using it as a negative, but what then do you do with Ecclesiastes 3:1 where it says, "To everything there is a season, and to everything under the heaven there is a purpose." If God is saying that, or the person who is writing that is saying that on behalf of God, why is fatalism (as it is used negatively) not something where God (as the lady over here said) he has a purpose and a plan and he is working that plan?

*Dr. Craig:* OK. That would be a good verse to quote against the open theist who says God doesn't have a purpose for allowing everything to occur. They catch him by surprise; he didn't know that was going to happen. On my view, God does have a purpose for everything that happens. With respect to human freedom, he allows you to make choices, but if these are evil choices which he doesn't positively will he permits them to occur because he has overriding reasons for allowing that to happen. Again, this will fit into our discussion of divine providence later on. But don't equate fatalism with God's having providence or sovereignty over the world. Those are two different questions. Fatalism is the view that everything that happens happens necessarily, not that things happen for a purpose. Do you see? It is not that things happen for a purpose, it is that they happen necessarily – there is no freedom, there is no randomness. That is fatalism. I am suggesting that divine foreknowledge doesn't imply that kind of fatalism.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>8</sup>**