

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 15
Middle Knowledge

We've been talking about divine omniscience – God's being all-knowing. In the last class we raised a problem that is occasioned by God's knowledge of the future. If God foreknows everything that happens including our choices then are we really free to do otherwise than as God foreknows we shall do? In other words, does God's foreknowledge imply a kind of theological fatalism about the future that everything that happens happens necessarily. I argued that that conclusion does not follow so long as we keep clear the distinction between the chronological priority of God's knowledge to the event foreknown but the logical or explanatory priority of the event foreknown to God's knowledge. God's knowledge does not determine the event. If we use the language of "determine" we would say that the event determines what God foreknows.

So when Judas' betrayal was predicted by Jesus, Judas had the ability not to betray Jesus. He did not have to do it. But if he had chosen not to betray Jesus then God would have foreknown that instead and Jesus would not have predicted it. So we have the ability to do other than as God foreknows that we shall do, but if we were to do other than as he foreknows that we shall do then he would have foreknown something else instead. So long as we keep that distinction between chronological and logical priority clear I think we can see that God's foreknowing the future doesn't in any way threaten human freedom.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Just to clarify, I understand fully what you are saying as far as at each point in time we had the freedom to make decisions of our own free will. When you consider prior to time that God created this world and those that he predetermined or preordained would be his people at the end of time in that sense, we are basically working that out if you will to that conclusion. When you are born and he put you in a certain situation knowing that the situations that he put you in would determine your decisions and therefore at the end it was predetermined you would be saved or not saved. In that sense it seems even before you were born it was working out a play if you will. He knew. I am not suggesting that isn't free will for every point along the way. But his grace and his predetermination, his providence, set the stage for you to make those decisions and come to him. Some would not. I guess that is where people get confused because it seems as if, yes, you have free will along the way but he made you to be one of his and he made this other person not to be one of his and he knew before creation how that would play out. I agree – if we had the total free will in the sense that we determined our destiny, it puts us

above God in the sense that we have that full choice. But it is God's grace and God that determines our ultimate destiny.

Dr. Craig: All right. You've said a mouthful! I think what you've done is you've run a number of issues together that need to be teased apart and made clear. We need to make clear distinctions.

First of all, we need to distinguish, I think, between God's foreknowledge of the future (which is the subject of our present discussion) and God's foreordination of the future (predestination is another word for foreordination).¹ The question of divine providence and election and determining your eternal destiny (whether heaven or hell) is a matter of foreordination, not foreknowledge. We'll take up these questions when we get to the doctrine of salvation. We'll discuss the subject of predestination. You'll see there that I consider predestination to be primarily a corporate notion, not an individual notion. That is to say, God predestines a people or selects a people for himself. But then it is up to you by your free choice whether you want to identify with that corporate group and be a member of that elect body. On that basis, foreordination and freedom are entirely compatible. But that needs to be developed, and we will discuss it later.

Right now we just want to talk about foreknowledge. What you said actually forms a nice segue to the next question because what you were asking about was not "does God foreknow what people will do and where they will end up" but you were asking about "does God know what anybody would do if he were to place them in certain circumstances that would determine then how they would choose and where they would wind up." That is not foreknowledge. That is middle knowledge, which is the next subject.

END DISCUSSION

The next subject that we want to broach is the one that was just mentioned, and that is the notion of God's so-called middle knowledge or we could call this hypothetical knowledge. This is God's knowledge of subjunctive conditional statements like "If you had been in Pilate's place, would you have condemned Jesus?" How would you have acted had you been in that situation? That is not foreknowledge because you never are in that situation. What this is called is middle knowledge or knowledge of subjunctive conditionals or hypothetical knowledge.

This kind of knowledge is beautifully illustrated in Charles Dickens' classic story, *A Christmas Carol*. You will remember at the end of that story Scrooge is confronted by the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. He is shown horrifying visions of his own death and the death of Tiny Tim and people laughing about Scrooge's death. Horrified by these visions that Scrooge sees, he implores the Spirit, "are these shadows of things that will be or

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shadows of things that might be only?" The Spirit does not answer Scrooge. Why? Well, obviously we know from the story's end that the Spirit was not showing Scrooge visions of things that will be. We know Tiny Tim does not die. We know that Scrooge reforms and repents. As a result, the horrible things that the Spirit showed him don't actually happen. So it wasn't foreknowledge. But the Spirit wasn't showing him merely things that might be – mere possibilities. After all, Scrooge might sell his business and become a florist in Covent Garden. That is possible. But why worry about that sort of eventuality? No, what the Spirit was showing Scrooge is what would happen if Scrooge were not to repent. He was imparting to Scrooge knowledge of subjunctive conditionals. Scrooge's question didn't take that into account, so the Spirit does not answer Scrooge.

The question then is: does God have this kind of knowledge? Does he have knowledge of these subjunctive conditionals? In particular, does he have this kind of knowledge prior to his decree to create a world? Does he have hypothetical knowledge logically or explanatorily prior to his decree of a world of what creatures in that world would freely do if they were in various circumstances, or what those same creatures would do if they were in other circumstances, or what would happen in still another possible world in which different creatures were created in different circumstances.² Does God have this kind of knowledge logically or explanatorily prior to his decree to create a world?

This is a subject of considerable theological controversy. Proponents of middle knowledge follow the Catholic Counter-Reformer Luis Molina in the late 16th, early 17th century in maintaining that God does have this kind of knowledge. But a good many contemporary theologians would say no – God doesn't have this kind of knowledge. So the previous question couldn't even arise for these theologians because God didn't know what you would do if he were to have you born at this time and place in history. Therefore, he can't be held responsible for your ultimate destiny because he doesn't have middle knowledge. For these theologians, God is in no sense responsible for having created such a messed up world as this one – he didn't see it coming so to speak! Granted, he has simple foreknowledge of the future. He does foreknow whatever will happen, but it is not as though logically prior to that he knew, *If I were to create these people in these circumstances this is the way the world would turn out*. He would just have simple foreknowledge of what will happen, but he didn't have this kind of middle knowledge and therefore can't be held responsible for why the world is so messed up, or why there is so much evil, and so forth.

On the other hand, it seems to me there are powerful theological reasons for affirming that God does have this sort of knowledge. The Bible teaches divine sovereignty and providence over the whole of human history. The Bible says that nothing happens simply by accident outside of the plan and providence of God. Let me get my Bible and read you

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a very interesting passage from the book of Acts. This is from Acts 4. The church in Jerusalem is gathered together in prayer. In Acts 4:27-28, this is how they pray:

[blockquote]for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place.[/blockquote]

According to this verse specific persons are named – King Herod, the procurator Pontius Pilate, as well as all the Gentiles that were there, the Jews that were there. This all unfolded according to God’s plan and providence. God is over everything that happens. Everything that happens does so either by God’s direct will or at least his permission in the case of sinful actions.

This kind of providential planning requires middle knowledge. Even the opponents of middle knowledge recognize that you cannot have a robust doctrine of divine providence and sovereignty along with human freedom without middle knowledge. But according to middle knowledge, God knew what every free creature would do under any circumstances in which that creature might be placed. That includes freedom-permitting circumstances. We are not determined by our circumstances to do what we do. In certain circumstances we have a measure of freedom within those same circumstances to act in different ways. By creating certain persons in certain circumstances God can bring it about that his ultimate ends are achieved through the free decisions that people make.³

When you think of this, you can see this would be unimaginably complex. Only an infinite mind could direct a world of free creatures toward his provisioned ends. Just think, for example, of what it would take to providentially arrange the success of the Allied invasion on D-Day without abusing or abridging the freedom of the people involved. You would need to have a Winston Churchill on the scene. In order for that to happen that means that Lord and Lady Churchill had to have sexual intercourse at just a certain time and place so that that sperm would unite with that egg that would eventually be Winston Churchill. Think of the innumerable contingencies that went into that single event – whether Lady Churchill turned her ankle on a clod in the flower garden that day and so maybe wouldn’t have been in the mood for sex, and whether that clod was there was due to whether the gardener did a faithful job in hoeing and raking the garden that morning, and maybe he didn’t do that because he was feeling depressed and didn’t do his work as energetically. That is just one thing – that’s just Churchill. Think of all of the rest of the people – the free agents – involved, and the multitude of circumstances on both the Allied and Axis sides in order to engineer such an event. Truly only an infinite,

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omniscient mind could employ his knowledge of subjunctive conditionals to bring about even a single event in human history.

Middle knowledge, I think, therefore provides the key to the mystery of divine sovereignty and human freedom. By knowing how creatures would freely behave in certain circumstances and putting them in those circumstances, God can ultimately bring about his ends without abridging the freedom of persons but actually allowing them to do as they please knowing that ultimately despite their freedom his ends will be accomplished.

Obviously, creatures (free persons) will make a lot of bad decisions that God doesn't directly will. In any moral situation God always wills that you do the good. He never wills that you should sin. Sin is contrary to the will of God. So God knows that creatures will often not do what he directly wills. Instead they will rebel against him. They will sin. They will choose to act immorally. But given his middle knowledge, even allowing these sins and evils to occur ultimately in this infinitely complex scenario, God's ultimate purposes will be accomplished.

When you look at our messed up world and wonder how could God have created such a messed up world as ours with so much suffering and evil, the proponent of middle knowledge could say God's options may have been limited. It may be that given human freedom and given God's desire that creatures are free, it may be that they would have messed up any world of free creatures that God might have created. Perhaps in any world that was feasible for God to actualize or realize which involves this much good as the actual world, there would have also been this much suffering and this much evil. So God's options may be significantly limited by human freedom to worlds that involve a good deal of suffering and evil. God would, in every circumstance, will that people do the right thing but he will permit them to sin if that is what they will to do.

On the Molinist view, one needs to make a distinction between possible worlds (worlds that are possible for God to actualize) and what we could call feasible or realizable or actualizable worlds. For example, a world of free creatures involving this much good in which everybody always does the right thing (no one ever sins) is a possible world. That wouldn't be a robot world. This would be a world in which everybody has freedom, but they all always do the right thing. They always freely do the moral thing.⁴ So there would be no sin in that world. But given human freedom, it may be the case that such a world isn't feasible for God because if God were to create those creatures in those circumstances, even though it is possible for them to do the right thing, they wouldn't. They would go wrong, and they would mess up the world. So God's options of feasible

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worlds may be limited in the suffering and the evil that must be permitted in order to accomplish his will.

Nevertheless, as a good God in his providence he has selected a world which on balance has more good than evil. Ultimately his will will be accomplished. It will win out. His purpose will be achieved. There will be a multitude of persons in heaven from every tribe and tongue and people and nation who have come to know God and his salvation and have freely come into a relationship with him.

We can be confident that God's choice of a world is the best. Despite the evil and the suffering in the world, we can have trust and confidence in God that he has chosen a world which was a wise choice and a good choice. The onus for messing up the world is on us. It is not on God. It is we who, through our free choices, turned the world into such a decadent and evil place. God allows that, but only with the view toward accomplishing his ultimately good purpose.

That would be a defense of the doctrine of middle knowledge. I think it is the only way to give a reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom which affirms libertarian freedom but also God's providence over everything that happens in the world. That gives powerful theological motivation, I think, for adopting a doctrine of middle knowledge.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Under this view, is this the greatest feasible world?

Dr. Craig: Very good question. The question is – granted, this isn't the best possible world because we can imagine worlds that are better than this. Worlds without sin, for example, might be better. This isn't the best possible world. But is this the best feasible world? I think that is an open question. It may be that even with respect to feasible worlds there isn't any maximum. They just get better and better and better. God could always have created more people, brought more folks into the Kingdom. Perhaps worlds don't have an intrinsic maximal value. Therefore what God has to do is not choose the best feasible world but just a good feasible world. For any world that he picks there could always be one better, but so long as he picks a good world he does nothing wrong. I think probably most Christian philosophers today would be inclined to say there isn't any ceiling to the goodness of worlds. It could just go on and on. But if you do think there is a sort of ceiling then I think what you could say is there is a range of feasible worlds which are all in the top rung – they are all at the ceiling so to speak – and this world is one of those and God has picked one feasible world out of the best that could be made. I don't see any problem with that. Given human freedom, it may be that any world feasible for God involving this much good would involve a lot of evil and suffering. So this may be the best God could get.

Student: It appears in the Bible that there are other worlds envisioned, like the eternal state, and if you believe in it the millennium, et. al. Does that imply if a world without sin and all we're all robots in the eternal state where we don't sin – is that a robot world?

Dr. Craig: This is a good question. I think that the question fails to appreciate that when we are talking about worlds, we mean a maximal state of affairs.⁵ The afterlife – heaven, hell, the millennium – are not possible worlds. They are the final stage of a possible world. But they have a prehistory that leads up to them. In heaven one receives one's reward or recompense for what one did during human history prior to that. These are the final stages of a possible world. They are not possible worlds in and of themselves. You might say, but why not just create heaven by itself. Just lop off the part before death and just start with heaven. The problem there is then you would have a new possible world and it might be that if God were to try to do that then the creatures there would go wrong and would mess it up. You can't just sort of extract the bad parts and think that the situation is unaffected. Once you do that you got a whole new situation and the game needs to be then replayed.

My inclination (and this is just my opinion) is that in heaven I think it is very plausible that the freedom to sin will be removed. I think that in this life God has created us at a sort of arm's distance that allows us freedom to rebel against him and do evil and resist him. But in heaven the redeemed in Christ will have such a knowledge of God and of closeness to Christ that he will be irresistible in his beauty, magnificence, and love, and the freedom to sin will be effectively removed. Sin is possible only during this veil of decision making at which we see through a glass darkly, so to speak. Here we determine our eternal destiny. But then once we see face-to-face that vision will be so lovely and so irresistible that sin will be impossible in heaven.

Student: Will we be able to see the middle knowledge as God dealing with human inclination in terms of the law of inertia? If you are uncertain, you set your course on a certain way unless there is an external force it will just continue that way. In the beginning when Adam and Eve set their inclination into leaning on their own understanding and defining good and evil according to their own understanding, God can project the result of this momentum to the ultimate destruction. So he intervenes. So Jesus says *My Father is always at work; and I am working, too*. That work is just to counter this kind of human momentum. Saying that God has perfect middle knowledge, he can project exactly a little inclination will eventually come through.

Dr. Craig: That isn't the way in which someone like Molina would explain middle knowledge. He would simply say that God sees into each individual creature's essence so deeply that he knows what that creature would do freely in any set of circumstances

including an initial set of circumstances before any character was laid down that might influence subsequent decisions. But as a sociological fact, what you are saying is obviously true, isn't it? People do develop characters and habit patterns and inclinations that will influence them on into the future, both for good and for ill. You can also develop a good character that will help you to resist temptation or do the right thing. I don't think that is incompatible with human freedom because even the person who is morally corrupt can still choose, say, which kinds of drugs he wants to do or whom to beat up and rob. One can choose a variety of sins but certainly you are right that given corrupted fallen human nature there is that kind of inertia to sin that exists within fallen humanity.⁶ But I resist those analogies a little bit because I don't want to, in any way, suggest these decisions are not free and that we are not morally responsible for them. We are not like ball bearings rolling down a chute that have no freedom and no will and hence no responsible for what they hit and run into.

Student: As far as creature groups maintaining their perfection, we are 0-and-2. You've got angels and you've got humans. I'm inclined to believe that any creature with an absolute free will given an infinite amount of time will have to go up against God's will, have to break God's will at some point, and therefore fall. In my mind, it is hard for me to imagine any creature with a total free will remaining totally within the will of God.

Dr. Craig: That is a really, really interesting question. I don't want to say myself that sin is inevitable. That the creatures couldn't avoid it because they do have freedom. But I think what you could say is given enough time every creature eventually will sin. He won't go on forever freely always choosing the right thing. That is not to say it is inevitable, but just that it will eventually happen. He will eventually sin. That seems not implausible at all to me and would be compatible with human freedom. That is one reason, I think, that in heaven it is very plausible that when we see God in all of his beauty and righteousness that our freedom to sin will be effectively removed. It is not as though in heaven we will go on infinitely always choosing the good. It is our ability to choose against God is just removed in the same way iron filings attracted to a giant electromagnet just stick to the magnet because it is so attractive. They couldn't resist it. I am sure that God, once we see him face-to-face and not through a glass darkly, will be so attractive that the freedom to rebel against him and turn against him will be removed.

END DISCUSSION

Next time we will look at some application of the doctrine of divine omniscience to our lives practically. But I will be happy to take any further discussion at that time as well.⁷

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⁷ Total Running Time: 33:17 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)