

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 16
Practical Application of God's Omniscience /
God's Omnipotence

In our last time together we looked at God's knowledge of so-called subjunctive conditionals or counterfactuals which is known as middle knowledge. I argued that although this is a controversial subject that not all Christians agree on, nevertheless there are considerable theological reasons for believing that God does have middle knowledge, namely, it is the only way to provide a robust doctrine of divine providence and sovereignty that is compatible with human libertarian freedom. For that reason I think that this is an aspect of divine omniscience that is important and well worth affirming.

Let's go to the application section of the lesson. I want to draw three practical applications of this attribute of divine omniscience to our lives today.

First of all, God's omniscience serves as a basis for total trust in God's guidance in your life. Because God is omniscient, he never makes a mistake. He never changes his mind due to a lack of foresight. He never overlooks anything; nothing ever catches him by surprise. Therefore we can confidently trust him as he guides us through life. This is especially true if we affirm the doctrine of middle knowledge because then it means that everything that happens in your life happens either by God's direct will or at least his permission with respect to greater goods that might be achieved. No matter what you go through, no matter how difficult the suffering or the trial, no matter how far away God may seem and you feel abandoned by God, nevertheless, on the basis of God's omniscience, we can know that God is guiding you and leading you as you trust in him.

Proverbs 3:5-6 give us this advice: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." That is such good advice in view of God's omniscience and middle knowledge. The complexity of the planning of a world of free creatures is such that we could never trust our own insight to discern the right way, but we can trust in the Lord who is omniscient as he guides us through life.

That means that God's will for your life, whatever it might be, is perfect. It is exactly what God wants for you. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul makes the following appeal:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, [why?] that you may prove what is the will of God, [and what characterizes the will of God?] what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Notice that Paul here calls for a total surrender to God of body and of soul, confident in the fact that you will be able to prove or discern what God's will is for you. God's will for your life, Paul says, is good and acceptable (not only to God but if you could understand it it would be acceptable to you) and it is perfect, which means there is nothing that you could do to improve upon it. What a call, what a reason, to trust in God as he leads you even through the dark valleys and the difficult seasons of life. We can trust him for a marriage partner in life. We can trust him for our career path. We can trust him during times of illness and disappointment and suffering, even as we go into death we can trust in him because of his omniscience and guidance.¹

Secondly, God's omniscience is a source of comfort in God's knowledge of your heart. In many circumstances, others may misunderstand us and our motivations. They may malign us and impute to us false motivations that aren't at all what we intended. In these kinds of situations it is comforting to know that God knows our hearts. He knows where your heart really lies and what your motivations really are. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "For the LORD does not look on things as a man looks on them; man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

God knows our heart; he discerns our true motivations. He understands us even when we fail and do not live up to the standard that we should. Psalms 103:13-14 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." Here God is described as a compassionate God who understands us and our frailty and fallibility and has compassion on us as a father has compassion on his children.

Even at times when our devotion seems low and we are not in fellowship with the Lord as we ought to be, God knows the truth. He knows the truth about your heart and that you do love him and that you want to follow him. In John 21:17, John describes the scene where Jesus meets with Peter during the miraculous catch of fish on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus asks Peter three times, "Peter, do you love me?" John records that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him for the third time, "Do you love me," (doubtless this reflects Peter's denying Christ three times and Jesus brings this painful memory back to Peter by asking him three times, "Do you love me?") and Peter said, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you." Peter finds comfort in Jesus knowing his heart and knowing all things. He knows that he loves him even though he has failed him in the past. So there is a comfort, I think, in the awareness that God has a knowledge of our hearts and understands and has compassion on us.

Finally, God's omniscience is a source of security in God's love. There is no new information that God might acquire about you that would affect his love for you. There

¹ 5:06

are no skeletons in your closet that he is not already aware of. There is no future fall that he isn't aware of that could affect his love for you. He knows us entirely and thoroughly – through and through. And yet, in spite of all that, he loves us unfailingly.

1 John 3:19-20 says, “By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” Even when we are fallen and we sin and disappoint ourselves and God and let God down, God knows our hearts. He still loves us and we can reassure our hearts before him, as John says, by having the knowledge of this unfailing love.

So there isn't any need to hide from God. There is no need to try to conceal from him our sin, our struggles, our doubts, our failures. We can be honest with God and bring these before him because he knows us thoroughly. In fact, although we very often as Christians talk about the importance of our knowing God, in one sense what is really important is that God knows us, that he is related to us regardless of the awareness we might have of that relationship.² That relationship is one of God's knowing us, not just our knowing God.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, in the second half of that verse, Paul says, “Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.” Paul says, *Right now my knowledge is incomplete, it is partial, but someday I will fully understand. But I am already fully understood by God.* Our knowledge is partial, but God has complete and full understanding and knowledge of us. So in Galatians 4:9 Paul says, “You have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God.” There is that reverse. It is not just that you've come to know God, rather (Paul says) you have come to be known by him. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 8:3, Paul says, “If one loves God, then one is known by him.”

So this relationship to God is not simply one of our knowing him, but even more fundamentally it is his knowing us – something that I think we sometimes overlook and fail to appreciate. As Christians, we are now known by God and loved by him. So we can be totally honest and open before him.

In Psalms 32:3-7, the psalmist says,

When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Therefore let every one who is godly offer prayer to thee; at a time of distress, in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. Thou art a hiding place for me, thou preservest me from trouble; thou dost encompass me with deliverance.

²

Here the psalmist contrasts what it was like hiding his sin from God, trying to cover it up, and the misery that he experienced. But then the freedom that comes with acknowledging and confessing his sin and then experiencing God's forgiveness.

So God's omniscience, I think, is a source of encouragement for us to be honest and open with God and to keep short accounts with God and to confess as soon as we are aware of a sin in our life and to keep those channels open to God because we know that we are secure in his love and do not need to hide anything from him.

Those are some thoughts about the application of this attribute.

START DISCUSSION

Student: It seems to me that when Paul speaks in Athens in Acts 17, I think you went there and quoted his speech a few years ago. He says a couple of things that are implications of not just the omniscience but also the omnipresence and omnipotence of God. We don't sometimes think about these – that God does not need anything from us. We see around us the world seems to be spinning out of control, but he does not need our help. Second, he says God is not far from us. He is talking to people who are pagans, who are unbelievers. Those are two implications it seems to me that flow from what you are saying.

Dr. Craig: These attributes of God coalesce don't they? They come together. Some of the things that I've said you could make a practical application of God's love rather than omniscience. But they all, I think, go together to make up the character of God that has these wonderful practical implications for our lives. Omnipotence and omnipresence would go right in with that of course.

Student: You may have already talked about this in an earlier class. I don't want to make you go over old ground.³ But I am wondering how does this issue of middle knowledge and the fact that God knows what we will do in the future tie into free will since our future acts are already known? As a critic would say, how are we really free then?

Dr. Craig: We did talk about that! I said there were two problems that arise from God's knowledge of the future, you may remember. The first was the problem of theological fatalism. If God knows what you will do then when the time arrives do you really have the ability to do something different? Or are you fated to do what you do? The second question was the question of God's knowledge of these subjunctive conditionals. With respect to the first, you will remember I said we need to differentiate between chronological priority and logical priority. Even though God's foreknowledge is chronologically prior to your choice, your choice is logically prior to God's foreknowledge. You have the ability to choose either way, and which ever way you

³ 15:05

choose will determine then what God foreknows. So when the time comes you have the ability to act in a way that if you were to act in that way God would have foreknown something different than what he, in fact, does foreknow.

END DISCUSSION

We've been talking about God's intellectual attributes as a personal being. Now we want to turn to God's volitional attributes. As a personal being, God has volition – he has will. His volitional attributes are expressed in the attribute of omnipotence or being all-powerful. Let's look at some of the scriptural data that is pertinent to the doctrine of God's omnipotence or his being all-powerful.

First, the Bible indicates that God is almighty. Genesis 17:1 – this is the appearance of God to Abram – “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless’.” The word there in the Hebrew translated as “God Almighty” is the familiar expression “El Shaddai.” God reveals himself to Abram as El Shaddai – God Almighty.

This same name for God carries through the Bible right to the last book of the New Testament, Revelation 19:6, when we see the marriage supper of the Lamb: “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.’” God is called “Almighty” in Scripture.

The almighty power of God in Scripture is most manifested in the act of creation. God creates the world out of nothing. He doesn't need any material substratum (any matter or energy) out of which to create the world. He creates the matter and energy as well as the things that are constituted by matter and energy. The doctrine of creation out of nothing is the most powerful or visual display of God's omnipotence in the Scriptures.

Genesis 1:1 begins with the words, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In the beginning God created the universe. Psalm 33:9 is a psalm that extols God's power in creation. It says, “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth.” The creation simply comes into being at the verbal command of the Lord. His almighty word brings the universe into existence.⁴

In Romans 4:17, Paul uses a striking phrase to characterize this creation out of nothing. In the latter part of that verse he speaks of Abraham's being in the presence of God in whom he believed and then this phrase: “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Here the two mighty acts of God – creation and the resurrection – are mentioned as manifestations of his power. God is the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. I love that phrase. He

calls these things into being even though they don't exist. This is truly creation from nothing. He constitutes these things in being.

That is the first scriptural point. God is called "God Almighty."

Secondly, the Scriptures indicate that God can do all things – or God can do anything. There are a number of scriptural passages that state this explicitly. Genesis 18:14 to begin with. This is the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a child in their old age which provokes laughter on Sarah's part. But in verse 14 of Genesis 18, the Lord says, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you in the spring and Sarah shall have a son." Notice the question there - "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" This question is purely a rhetorical question. The answer is clearly no, nothing is too hard for the Lord.

In Jeremiah 32:17 we have a similar question and answer. The question actually appears in verses 26 and 27 of Jeremiah 32: "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 'Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?'" Unless you have any doubt about the answer to that question, look at verse 17: "Ah Lord GOD! It is thou who hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and by thy outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for thee." The Scriptures say that God can do anything. There is nothing that is too hard for God to do.

Job 42:1-2 is the final scene in the book of Job where Job realizes God's incomprehensible greatness and his inability to fathom the power of God. In verse 1 of chapter 42, "Then Job answered the LORD: 'I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.'" Here Job confesses that God can do all things.

This is not a doctrine confined to the Old Testament. It is repeated in the New Testament by Jesus himself. In Matthew 19:26, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. "Jesus looked to them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

Also in Mark 14:36 we find Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." So Jesus also affirms that God can do all things.⁵

So we have the testimony of Scripture that God is almighty and can do all things, which is pretty powerful scriptural warrant for saying that God is omnipotent.

Let's talk about the attribute of omnipotence, which means being all-powerful. We are immediately confronted with the paradoxes of omnipotence because although the Scriptures say that God can do all things it seems intuitively obvious that there are certain things that God cannot do. For example, can God act contrary to his own nature? If God

⁵ 25:07

has certain essential properties then how could God possibly act in a way that would be contrary to his own essence or nature? For example, could God create another god and then worship it? That seems absolutely inconceivable. God cannot be created so God couldn't create another God. It would be idolatrous and blasphemous for him to worship some other god. Or, could God commit adultery? Again this seems absurd to think that God could act in such a way that would be contrary to his moral character. Christian theologians typically do not say that God can act contrary to his own nature. God always acts in a way that is consistent with his own nature. He cannot act contrary to his nature.

Secondly, what about logical impossibilities? Can God do something that is logically impossible? For example, could God have made it true that Jesus both came and died on the cross and that he did not come and die on the cross? These are logical contradictions. Could he make a logical contradiction come true? Could God make a round square, for example? Again, Christian theologians almost universally would say that God's being all-powerful doesn't mean that he can do things that are logically impossible. Though there have been exceptions – for example, the great philosopher Rene Descartes (who was a committed Christian philosopher) believed that God could do logical impossibilities and that the laws of logical and mathematics depend upon God's will. God has willed the law of contradiction to be true, and he has willed certain other logically necessary truths. So ultimately these sorts of logical necessities are not rooted in God's nature for Descartes but in his will. But Descartes stands here as a real outlier, a real maverick. By far and away it is virtually universal among Christian thinkers that to say God is omnipotent doesn't mean that he can do logical impossibilities. These are not things at all. They are just contradictory combinations of words. There is no such "thing" as a round square that God is incapable of making. These are just logical contradictions verbally and therefore are not things that God's power needs to encompass.

Thirdly, what about things that are logically possible but they are unactualizable? Are there things that are logically possible in themselves but they are incapable of being realized in reality? Incapable of being actualized – I call these unactualizable. For example, it seems logically possible that people could always choose to do the right things – that they would never sin. That would mean that there is a logically possible world which includes God in which people never sin but always freely do the right thing. This would not be a robot world. It is not a marionette world where God is pulling the puppet strings and making these people always choose the right thing.⁶ It is just that in any moral situation in which you find yourself you have the ability to choose to do good or not to do good. You have the ability to choose evil or good, and you are not logically forced to do the wrong thing. It is logically possible for you to do the right thing. What if everybody always did the right thing? What if everybody always simply freely chose to

⁶ 30:00

obey God? Then you would have a world in which there would be no sin even though there is human freedom. So there must be a logically possible world like that. But does that mean that therefore God is capable of creating such a world? That doesn't follow because it may be that given human freedom if God were to try to actualize such a world the people would go wrong and would sin and therefore this world would not result. You can think of it in this way. It is not simply up to God which world becomes actual. If people have freedom then they co-actualize the world along with God. If God gives them freedom then he doesn't determine what they choose. He stands back so to speak and lets them make their choices in those moral situations in which they find themselves. What that means is that there are logically possible worlds that are perfectly consistent in and of themselves but which God is incapable of creating. He is incapable of actualizing them. Why? The reason would be because the wrong subjunctive conditionals are true. It is logically possible that if Peter were in these certain circumstances he would not deny Christ. He would faithfully confess Christ. That is possible. But nevertheless it may be the case that if Peter were in these circumstances he would freely deny Christ three times. So that logically possible world isn't available to God to actualize. It is infeasible for him to actualize even though it is logically possible. I think you can already see this is very intimately related to the question of middle knowledge. On middle knowledge there is a very significant distinction between worlds which are possible and worlds which are feasible for God to actualize. It may be that there is a whole range of worlds that are logically possible – like a sinless world – but which God is incapable of creating because the creatures would in fact go wrong. Therefore, God (even though he is omnipotent) isn't necessarily capable of actualizing just any logically possible state of affairs.

So it seems that there are these paradoxes of omnipotence that seem to impose limits upon God's power. How then should we understand God's omnipotence? I think that we should say, as I've already indicated, that these things aren't really "things" at all that God is incapable of doing. These represent purely logical limits on God's power. Even his inability to actualize a logically possible world is a logical limit because it is logically impossible to make creatures freely do something. The source of the limitation is purely logic, and logic, I think, is based in the nature of God himself. It is a reflection of his own essence and nature that God acts in logically consistent ways.

Here is a possible definition of omnipotence that I think is usable. I have to say this can get very complicated when you read philosophical literature on this. But here is a simple way of putting it.

God can bring about any state of affairs which is logically possible for anyone to bring about in that situation.

If anyone in that situation would be capable of bringing about that state of affairs then God must be capable of bringing about that state of affairs.⁷

How would that apply to some of these exceptions that we talked about? No one could bring about the state of affairs of God's acting contrary to his own nature. That is simply logically impossible. So no one has that power. Similarly, nobody would have the power to bring it about that a square circle exists or that a married bachelor exists. No one could bring about a state of affairs in which there is a stone too heavy for God to lift, for example. This is simply a logically incoherent state of affairs. Nobody could bring that about. Or no one in God's situation could bring about these worlds that are logically possible in themselves but which are infeasible because of the subjunctive conditionals that happen to be true. Anybody in that situation will be confronted with the same limitations – the same counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

So I think this gives a kind of rough and ready idea of divine omnipotence. God is able to bring about any state of affairs which is logically possible for anyone to bring about who is in that situation.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Back to creating the possible worlds – how would you answer the person (I'm sure you've heard it many times; I have), "If God knew who would fall away, who would not believe, and God could do all things, then why did he not just create a world that only had the people in it that would not choose wrong and fall away?"

Dr. Craig: What this question fails to understand is that you can't pluck people out of a world and then assemble a new world with just those people. Say all the people who are elect in this world. You just kind of pluck them out and then put them in a world by themselves. Because what happens then is that's a new world, and they may not act the same way in that world that they do in the actual world. It may well be the case that if you collected all of those people that in the actual world are Christians and put them in a world just by themselves and let them be free, a whole lot of them would not be Christians, would not be believers, and would be damned. The person fails to understand that when you take these individuals and put them together you've got a whole new world now to deal with and you need to ask what subjunctive conditionals are true in that world.

END DISCUSSION

Next time I will continue the discussion of omnipotence and we'll look at an application of this to our practical lives.⁸

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⁸ Total Running Time: 38:39 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)