



Openness Theology

Part 5: The Omniscience of God and Prayer

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Isaiah 40:13-18 - “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. . . All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?”

By this point in this series of articles on the subject of open theism, you may be asking, “What do they have right?”¹

Open theists have humanized God by stripping Him of His foreknowledge and sovereignty. They have attacked the work of Christ on the cross by making Christ’s death little more than an example and not an actual substitution for sinners. They have distorted the scriptural teaching on suffering beyond recognition.

What is left to distort? Actually there is plenty for the open theist to distort (and they do), but let’s turn our attention to the subject of prayer.²

In the Thick of Another Dilemma

Have you ever wondered, “If God knows what I am going to ask before I ask it, why ask it?” Or to put it another way, “If God knows the future infallibly, and thus it must

happen and come to pass just as He knows it, then how can prayer possibly change anything?”

Doesn’t this make a mockery of the real, personal relationship involved in prayer? If God hears our prayers and knows in advance our requests, then His response is, “Yes, I knew you needed that. Yeah, I know that. Yep, I knew you would ask for that, too.”

If what we end up asking God is only that which He has known from eternity that we would ask, then how dynamic and personal can prayer really be?

For instance, why pray for safe travel? God knows that you are going to pray for it, and He has already determined that you will either arrive safely or not. If He knows you will arrive safely, then nothing can happen which might show His knowledge to be faulty. In other words, nothing can happen that might prove God’s knowledge to be in error, so why pray about things, when it will all happen the way God wants it to anyway?

The solution to this dilemma, as far as the open theist is concerned, is to deny that God has actual knowledge of our prayers before we pray them. They are quick to assure us that God has perfect knowledge of the past and present; however, God cannot know the future free-will actions of His creatures until they perform those actions. So we are told by the open theist that our confidence rests in the fact that God does **not** know what we will ask before we ask it. Therefore, it is meaningful to ask God for safe travel, since He can then work to assure us safe travel.

However, the solution backfires on the open theist. I would suggest that if God doesn’t know the future free-will decisions of His creatures, then even for the open theist, it is pointless to pray for safe travel, since God cannot foresee what the decision the driver in the oncoming car will make.

That driver may decide to commit suicide by driving into the oncoming lane. If God can’t foresee this, He can’t

1 For a description of the beliefs and proponents of open theism, their attack on the atonement of Christ, and a discussion of open theism and suffering, see previous articles in this series. You can read archived columns on the website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

2 It should come as no surprise that the great doctrines of election, eternal security, human depravity, predestination, and God’s foreknowledge of the death of Christ are all among the victims of open theism.

prevent it. He certainly isn't going to tamper with the sacred "free will" of the suicidal driver. So what confidence do I have in making any request of such a God? There may be thousands of decisions made by free creatures in the course of my travel that will affect my safety. If God can't foresee the outcome, or if God cannot direct those creatures to assure my safe travel, why pray?

Far from instilling confidence in God, open theism actually destroys confidence in God by making Him nothing more than an impotent spectator of man's actions.

Openness and Prayer

Here is how open theist Greg Boyd describes prayer:

*"Because God wants us to be empowered, because he desires us to communicate with him, and because he wants us to learn dependency on him, he graciously grants us the ability to significantly affect him. This is the power of petitionary prayer. God displays his beautiful sovereignty by deciding not to always unilaterally decide matters. He enlists our input, not because he needs it, but because he desires to have an authentic, dynamic relationship with us as real, empowered persons. Like a loving parent or spouse, he wants not only to influence us but to be influenced by us."*³

God wants to be influenced by you! He wants you to affect Him! So much for God deciding what is best for you. So much for God writing history before it happens. Real prayer, according to the open theist, means that God **learns** our hearts and desires, and He is affected by them. He does not know what to do or how to do it until we come to Him in prayer and influence Him.

What power we have! Our thoughts, our desires, our requests can actually change the mind of God and change the future! According to the openness view, God waits to receive from us—our ideas, our longings, our desires—before He forms His will and chooses what is best to do.

Open theist John Sanders writes,

"It is God's desire that we enter into a give and take relationship of love, and this is not accomplished by God's forcing his blueprint on us. . . . Together we decide the actual course of my

*life. . . . To a large extent our future is open and we are to determine what it will be in dialogue with God."*⁴

So we are to believe that, contrary to **Psalm 139:16**, God does not know the content of your "**days before there was yet one of them.**" God is waiting to find out what you will decide before He decides anything. Rather than God "foreordaining" your days, it is now your role in the divine plan.

God has not planned your future. It doesn't rest in His hands because it is all to be determined in your choices and your conversation with God. Such is the fog in which the God of open theism lives and guides His people.

Openness and Guidance

How does a God who does not know the future guide His people? He can't. Open theists are quick to admit this, and it poses no problem for them.

David Basinger, advocate of the open view, writes, *"[W]e must acknowledge that divine guidance, from our perspective, cannot be considered a means of discovering exactly what will be best in the long run—as a means of discovering the very best long-term option. Divine guidance, rather, must be viewed primarily as a means of determining what is best for us now."*⁵

Basinger goes on to say,

*"[S]ince God does not necessarily know exactly what will happen in the future, it is always possible that even that which God in his unparalleled wisdom believes to be the best course of action at any given time may not produce the anticipated results in the long run."*⁶

These words have to take a true Christian's breath away! We are talking about God, not your guidance counselor, financial advisor, or neighbor Wilson across the back fence!

In other words, God is pretty good at short-range guidance and guessing, but the farther out we get, the worse His track record is in giving reliable guidance. After all, the "anticipated results" may not materialize. God can't tell. He doesn't know.

Is this "god" worthy of our confidence, trust, obedience,

3 Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 96. Notice how the open theist can speak of God "displaying His beautiful sovereignty" by not acting without our input. This is more semantic shell games. Not only do they affirm "omniscience" while denying it; they affirm God's sovereignty while redefining it to mean that God does not "unilaterally decide matters." For the open theist, God's sovereignty means "getting our input."

4 John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1998), 277.

5 Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 104.

6 Ibid.

and unquestioning faith? What confidence can I have in talking to a God that may lead me in what He *thinks* is a good course of action, but may turn out to be bad, or at least regrettable, advice?

What Does Scripture Teach?

As we have seen, God certainly knows what will come to pass. That which God knows will happen, will happen just as He knows it will. His knowledge is without error.

God works **“all things after the counsel of His will”** (Eph. 1:11). Jesus taught us to pray, **“Thy will be done”** (Matt. 6:9-13).

God has a will that predates our prayers. As Ware writes,

“There simply is no suggestion here that somehow our prayers help God shape His will, or that God is affected by our prayer in the very formation of His purposes. Rather, as we come to the Father in Heaven, we recognize that our only appropriate place is to follow in the will of God, not to help shape it.”⁷

We must never be deceived into thinking that we contribute anything to God in prayer. We do not give Him counsel, understanding, or knowledge. Should we think so highly of ourselves as to think that we puny humans can alter the course of history, or the will, plan and purpose of the all-wise God, by uttering a few words?

We are to come before God not with our self-centered view that He is brooding over us, just waiting to toss out all His old plans and form new ones based on our requests. Rather we are to come with humble, childlike dependence and requests, recognizing that these petitions are only as good as their ability to mesh with His already determined will—which we pray to be accomplished on earth as it is in Heaven (Matt. 6:10).

Prayer is not given to us to allow us to form God’s will, but to conform us to God’s will. That will has already been set and determined. Prayer conforms us to it and enables us to do it, understand it, and partake in it.

So does prayer change things? Yes and no. It does not change the will, plan or purpose of God. Yet it does change us. How does it change us?

It changes us by involving us in the accomplishing of His purposes. God uses our prayer to fulfill His will.

Let me illustrate with a personal story. As a Bible college student, I did not have much money. Tuition was my

priority, so any money I ever received was put toward anything owed on my account. That meant that I had no money for extras. I didn’t go into town for coffee and donuts with other students, or buy snacks at the snack shop. Even a Coke was a rare treat.

It may surprise you to find out that I did my laundry most of the time in the shower with a five-gallon bucket and hung my clothes all over my room to dry. Both the washer and dryer were coin-operated, and coins had a way of keeping their distance from me!

I woke up one morning and opened my closet. I pulled my last pair of clean underwear off the shelf. I looked down at the heap of dirty clothes on the floor of the closet and I prayed, “Lord, this is my last pair of underwear. Unless you send me a couple bucks, I am going to be back to hand-washing clothes. Please send a few coins my way.”

After classes that afternoon, I went to my mailbox and found a small package from my church family back here (Kootenai Community). Along with a letter, there was about \$20 in cash, much of it coins. God could have sent a check. I asked for coins. That afternoon, I got some coins.

Nearly two weeks before I ran out of clean underwear, God moved in the heart of some friends 600 miles away to put together some money for me. God had it sent in the mail, and I received it the day I prayed for it. He knew from eternity past that I would ask for some provision. He moved to provide before I even asked.

Isn’t that what Jesus said? **“Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you even ask”** (Matt. 6:8). God sets in motion the answers to our prayers before we ask. He is glorified in our asking and in seeing that we are asking exactly what He willed. He answers, and is glorified as He uses our prayer to accomplish His determined will.

Our God is big enough to plan perfectly everything that happens and still find a way to involve little people like you and me in the unfolding of His purposes. We are involved through prayer. We pray for His will. It is done. Our prayers are answered, and God is glorified.

Prayer is one of the tools that God uses to pull us into the center of the work that He has devised and is carrying out. Such is our great prayer-answering God.

Without Wax -



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⁷ Ibid, 89.