

THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

By Dub McClish

Introduction

The only appropriate attitude with which to approach a study of any feature of the Godhead is unmitigated humility. Finite creatures are not capable of fully comprehending the nature of the Infinite Creator. At the outset I therefore freely acknowledge my human limitations in understanding and discussing the limitless nature of the characteristics of Deity, and thus I enter into this study, I trust, with due reverence and humility.

The foreknowledge of God is one of those facets of His attributes that has ever intrigued men in their limited capacities. The Bible, which is God's revelation of Himself, undeniably and frequently affirms, argues, and illustrates the case that God possesses this amazing trait. (Thus He obviously wanted mankind to know that absolute foreknowledge is innate to Godhood.) The 139th Psalm is the fullest concentrated statement of this facet of God's nature. Although the Bible says much about this grand subject, I am convinced that it surely must still remain shrouded in mystery to some degree until we are freed from the strictures of our time-bound existence.

This subject relates to and raises such questions as the following:

- Is God everywhere all the time (omnipresence)?
- Does God know everything (omniscience)?
- Can God choose not to know some things?
- If so, does He choose not to know some things?
- If He knows everything, is the future already unalterably set?
- Did John Calvin have it right in his doctrine of foreordination and predestination?

While all of these questions relate to God's omniscience, they relate more especially to His foreknowledge.

There will ever be, as long as time lasts, those "secret things that belong unto Jehovah our God" (Deu. 29:29a),ⁱ which, according to God's wisdom, are either inappropriate or unnecessary (or perhaps both!) for us to know or matters which the human mind cannot grasp. However, the Bible is composed of facts, promises, commands, and principles, which God **has** revealed to us, and "the things that are revealed belong unto us..." (v. 29b). While the foreknowledge of God is an awe-inspiring and challenging subject, it is still one about which much is revealed to us in the Bible. Our research into it should deepen our reverence for and appropriate fear of our Creator. We are both privileged and obligated to study this topic as to do our best to comprehend as fully as possible the teaching of the Bible concerning it.

Foreknowledge Defined

The Word Defined

The meaning of the word *foreknowledge* seems obvious enough. This word translates the compound Greek word *prognosis*, composed of *pro* (“before,” as with the same English prefix) and *gnosis* (“knowledge”), thus literally, “before-knowledge.” It thus means the possession of information concerning an event prior to its occurrence, knowledge in advance, knowledge of the future. When Anglicized, we have our word *prognosis*, meaning to forecast or predict outcome, especially common to the medical profession. In noun and verb forms combined the term appears seven times in the Greek New Testament. As applied to Deity, God’s foreknowledge (along with knowledge of all past and present events and realities) is one element of His omniscience, which refers to the unqualified, all-knowing property of Deity. The doctrine of God’s foreknowledge is indispensable to the doctrine of His omniscience. If God’s foreknowledge is not infinite His omniscience is not infinite.

Uninspired Statements of the Concept

Perhaps it will be helpful to note some of the definitions of the foreknowledge of God that men have offered:

A.H. Strong, in *Systematic Theology*, states:

Since it [i.e., God’s foreknowledge, DM] is free from all imperfection, God’s knowledge is **immediate**, as distinguished from the knowledge that comes through sense or imagination; **simultaneous**, as not acquired by successive observations, or built up by processes of reasoning; **distinct**, as free from all vagueness or confusion; **true**, as perfectly corresponding to the reality of things; **eternal**, as comprehended in one timeless act of the divine mind (emph. DM).ⁱⁱ

Henry C. Thiessen, in *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, comments as follows:

God is infinite in knowledge. He knows himself and all other things perfectly from all eternity, whether they be actual or merely possible, whether they be past, present, or future. He knows things immediately, simultaneously, exhaustively, and truly.... God knows the future. From man’s standpoint God’s knowledge of the future is foreknowledge, but from God’s standpoint it is not, since he knows all things by one simultaneous intuition...(emph. DM.)ⁱⁱⁱ

William G.T. Shedd, in *Dogmatic Theology*, describes God’s foreknowledge as resulting from His instantaneous knowledge of all events:

The vast sequences of human history, and the still vaster sequences of physical history, appear all at once, and without any consciousness of succession, to the Divine observer.... Both extremes [i.e., beginning and end, DM] of that unlimited series which make up the history of the created universe, together with all the intermediates, are seen at once, by the eternal Creator of the universe.... God knows the things that shall be wrought, and the order of them in their being brought upon the stage of the world; yet both the things and the order, he knows by one act [of knowledge].... God sees the end from the beginning, and hence for him there is no interval nor sequence between the end and the beginning.^{iv}

Stephen Charnock, in *The Existence and Attributes of God*, makes a similar observation:

God knows immutably [i.e. without change or need of correction or enhancement]... Our knowledge, indeed, is always arriving to us or flowing from us; we pass from one degree to another, from worse to better, or from better to worse; but God loses nothing by the ages that are run, nor will He gain anything by the ages that are run, nor will He gain anything by the ages that are to come. If there were a variation in the knowledge of God...He would grow wiser than He was; He was not then perfectly wise before.^v

Inspired Declarations and Demonstrations of the Concept

In addition to the 139th Psalm, the Scriptures consistently set forth God as filled with all knowledge of all future events. Through Isaiah God said of Himself, in contrast with dumb and lifeless idols: “I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done (Isa. 46:9–10). The fact that “His understanding is infinite” (Psa. 147:5) must include future events or it is not infinite. Nothing past, present, or future is hidden from God, but “All things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13).

There is ample demonstration of God’s foreknowledge in the Scriptures. God knew the identity and the very order of the empires that would succeed that of Nebuchadnezzar over the next five centuries. He knew that in the last of the series His everlasting kingdom would be established (Dan. 2:31–44). Three centuries before Josiah was born Jehovah called the king of Judah by name and described the campaign against idolatry he would undertake (1 Kings 13:2). Likewise, God called Cyrus, the Persian monarch, by name and stated—about a century and a half beforehand that he would serve God’s purpose in sponsoring the rebuilding of the temple and in allowing the Jews to return to their homeland (Isa. 44:28–45:1). God revealed numerous details about our Lord’s life and death, some of them more than a millennium before they occurred (e.g., Deu. 18:18–19; 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Isa. 53; et al.). Moreover, that He would pour out His redeeming blood for sinners was “foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:20).

Since it was “according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” that “the manifold wisdom of God... might be made known through the church,” it must follow that God foreknew the church in eternity (Eph. 3:11)—one of many Scriptural deathblows to the folly of the earthly-future-kingdom heretics. How else could the church have been according to God’s “eternal purpose”? Citation of such passages could be multiplied. We may simply summarize by saying that all of the predictive prophetic material in the Bible is at the same time the result and the proof of God’s advance knowledge of events future to the time of those to whom the prophecies were revealed and spoken.

Implications of the Foreknowledge of God

The foreknowledge of God is a feature of His omniscience. *Omniscience* is the transliteration of a compound Latin word (*omnis*, meaning “all” and *scire*, “to know”), thus all-knowing. When applied to God, it means by definition, without limit. God literally knows everything about everything that is knowable. If this is not so, then He is not omniscient. That He can declare, as already noted, “...the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done” (Isa. 46:10), implies that **He must possess the knowledge** of those things which He declares. The Bible does not teach (as some suggest and I once believed) that God merely **has the power** to know all things, but that He chooses not to know some things (e.g., that Adam would sin). Contrariwise, God’s revelation of Himself states that **He does in fact know all things!**^{vi} Strong says it well: “By this [i.e., God’s omniscience, DM] we mean God’s perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they be actual or possible, past, present, or future.”^{vii}

Absolute knowledge of the future includes knowing future events as they relate to men and the men who will cause and be affected by those events. We have already seen this in connection with certain men (Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Josiah, and Jesus). God’s foreknowledge of men and what they will do is just as full for all other persons who have lived and will ever live. This fact is explicitly stated in Hebrews 4:13: “And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13).

Roy H. Lanier, Sr. well states this implication as he reasons from the case of Cyrus:

If God can know a man by name one hundred fifty years before he is born, and can know what he will do, is it impossible for Him to know a man by name a thousand or ten thousand years before he is born and know what that man will do? Is our God so small, so limited, that He can foresee one hundred fifty years and cannot foresee a person or an event several thousand years in the future?^{viii}

The same questions are appropriate (and bear the same implications) concerning God’s foreknowledge of Nebuchadnezzar, Josiah, and the Lord. And what about the omniscience and foreknowledge Jesus, the Incarnate Word, possessed? The Christ “...needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:25). Hence, He knew “from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who it was that should betray him,” namely Judas Iscariot (John 6:64, 70–71; 13:21–27). And what of His repeated warnings to the apostles of His death and the circumstances of it and the promises that He would be raised the third day?

Paul wrote of himself as follows: “But when it was the good pleasure of God, **who separated me, even from my mother’s womb**, and called me through his grace, to reveal his

Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood” (Gal. 1:15-16; cf. Acts 9:15; emp. DM). How can this be understood to mean anything other than that God in His infinite foreknowledge both knew Saul/Paul personally (i.e., by name) and knew the issue of his life (both as a persecutor and a preacher of the Gospel) **before the apostle was born**? So it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4), along with similar statements about David, Isaiah, and John the Immerser.

In His omniscience, God’s knowledge is so complete that He knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, and he even knows the number of hairs on a person’s head, at least on the heads of the apostles (Mat. 10:29–30). The doctrine of the foreknowledge of God implies that He knows of the fall of every sparrow **yet to occur**. Are we to understand the Lord to be saying that God the Father was limited to knowing the number of hairs only on the heads of the apostles or Jesus’ contemporaries in the first century? Hardly. Jesus’ statement has the force of implying that God’s knowledge is absolute to the point that He knows the number of hairs on the heads not only of every man, but of every woman and child **who ever lived or ever will live**. He **already** sees and knows every species of bird that is/will be hatched, that flies, and that dies.

When did God come into such specific and detailed knowledge? Did He only come to know of each sparrow’s fall at the time of its falling, or did He know of its fall before it occurred? Was Jehovah able to know the hairs of a person’s head only **after** each one was born and then grew a head of hair? Such hypotheses cannot be harmonized with the Bible’s claim of God’s unqualified omniscience, including His unlimited foreknowledge. Jesus’ statement about the sparrows and the hairs does not merely **imply** that God has the **power** to know, **but it declares that He knows!** Remember, Isaiah is very explicit on this point: “I am God, and there is none like me; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done” (Isa. 46:9-10). Although this capability is incomprehensible to us (due to our finite limitations), God’s infinite foreknowledge implies that **He has always known** the biography of every bird the number of hairs on every person’s head **even before He created either the first bird or Adam!**

While we may not be able to comprehend how God possesses absolute foreknowledge, the Bible plainly tells us how He **does not** acquire it. Again, Isaiah is helpful: “Who hath directed the Spirit of Jehovah, or being his counselor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed to him the way of understanding?” (Isa. 40:13–14).

God does not acquire any of His knowledge by learning from any man or men. Just so, neither does His knowledge come through a process of learning from experience, observation,

reasoned conclusions, or any other source exterior to Himself. The definitions of God's omniscience and foreknowledge quoted earlier, though uninspired, correctly emphasize the simultaneous, instantaneous, and immediate nature of God's knowledge. To speak of the "foreknowledge of God" is actually an accommodation to our finite limitations—an anthropomorphism (from *anthropos*, "man," and *morphe*, "form"), attribution of a human trait to God, frequently seen in Scripture (e.g., hand, eyes, ears, etc., of God). Remember Theissen's astute observation earlier that **what appears to us** to be God's foreknowledge is not really such at all to Him Who knows all things (whether past, present, or future) **simultaneously**.

To state it in other words, if God **learns** the number of each person's hairs only as that person is born and grows a head of hair (as remarkable as this would be), then He is not omniscient—His foreknowledge is limited, faulty. If He must **learn** the number of hairs on one's head only when one comes to have his hair (as remarkable as this would be), then there is at least one thing that God did not know **before He learned it**. If God knows more now than He did at some previous point, and if He will yet learn more (e.g., when another person is born and grows a head of hair), then **His knowledge is incomplete**. The Bible's claims for God's omniscience, foreknowledge, yea for His immutability, are all thereby falsified. Furthermore, if God is not infinite in knowledge (which includes foreknowledge), then are not all of His other infinite traits open to question?

But let us notice another implication of God's ultra-foreknowledge. Since God knows **in advance** such insignificant minutia about each one of His rational creatures (as the number of their hairs), it surely follows that He also knows **in advance** the more significant details about each of us, including whether or not we will be saved or lost. So I affirm that the doctrine of God's foreknowledge **logically demands**, and so I affirm that the **Scriptures teach**.

Here we begin to notice the Biblical doctrine of predestination. Ephesians 1:4 is relevant to our subject. In his letter to the Ephesian church Paul states that God "...chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love." Disciples of John Calvin, comprising most of Protestantism, cite this verse as proof that God arbitrarily and unconditionally **chose** in eternity the **very individuals** who would be saved and that this number can neither be augmented nor diminished. However, neither this nor any other passage teaches such a dark, dismal, and damnable doctrine.^{ix} Rather, the demands of the passage are quite well satisfied by understanding Paul to be declaring that God determined before time began (a reference to his foreknowledge) that those whom He would save would be those alone who would enter into Christ and live holy and unblemished lives. Those who are in Christ constitute the church (1:1), "which is His body" (1:22–23), and which He

expects to be “holy and without blemish” (5:27; cf. 1:4). While I utterly reject the Calvinistic perversion of this passage, we do **no** violence to it to suggest that in God’s foreknowledge He knew “before the foundation of the world” the specific individuals who would be added to the church so as to constitute the elect.

Paul also wrote to the Roman saints of the foreknowledge of God:

For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified (Rom. 8:29–30).

This passage declares that God possessed foreknowledge of those whom He (1) foreordained to follow His Son, (2) called (by the Gospel [2 Thess. 2:13–14]), (3) justified, and (4) glorified (i.e., the eventual reward of those who are justified). Lanier’s comments are worthwhile on this passage:

Paul speaks of the church in the eternal purpose of God (Eph. 3:10–11); and it was in this eternal purpose that He foreknew, foreordained, called, justified, and glorified the people that make up His church (Rom. 8:29–30). Since none are yet glorified (Rom. 8:17), we are forced to accept this as a statement of purpose and not as things accomplished.^x

While “whom he foreknew” would certainly include the church in the aggregate, this phrase may more specifically refer to God’s foreknowledge of individuals who meet Paul’s description.

John writes of those whose names have “...**not** been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 17:8; cf. 13:8). If some names have **not** been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, then by implication some names **have been** written from that time. Not writing or writing the names of people requires knowledge of their identity—“The Lord knoweth them that are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). Some might quibble over the preposition “from” as opposed to “before” regarding “the foundation of the world” (as in John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20; et al.). Others suggest that “world” refers to a dispensation of time (e.g., the Mosaical Age, see endnote 9) rather than to the material universe. In either case John still depicts God as foreknowing the names of those who will be saved and lost, whether by a few years or a few thousand years. As previously pointed out, **if** God learns those who are His only as they become His, then He learns something new every day and His knowledge is incomplete. Were this so He would not be omniscient, as the Bible consistently declares Him to be.

Some Misconceptions Considered

In an effort to avoid and refute one erroneous extreme Bible students sometimes adopt an opposing extreme that is also erroneous. This phenomenon may explain some of the positions that men have come to occupy and some of the arguments they make concerning the

foreknowledge of God. Objections to the conclusions set forth above fall into both Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic categories.

The Calvinistic Misconception of God's Foreknowledge

While Calvinists correctly advocate the absolute and unlimited foreknowledge of God, they incorrectly conceive of this fact as eliminating the exercise of man's free will. However, the Bible sets forth the free will of man with as much clarity and frequency as it does the foreknowledge of God. If man does not have the freedom to choose whether or not to believe and obey the Gospel and be saved, then the great commission (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark. 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) is ludicrous and its execution is a waste of time, effort, and money. If man has no power to choose then all the invitations to come to and abide in Christ (Matt. 11:28–30; 2 Cor. 5:20b; Rev. 22:17; et al.) and all the warnings not to reject Him (Mark 16:16; John 12:48; Acts 8:20–23; Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; et al.) are useless. Indeed, one might ask why we even have the New Testament at all?

God's foreknowledge and man's free will must (and can) be harmonized because they are both Bible doctrines and the Word of God does not contradict itself. Calvinists falsely conclude that foreknowledge demands personal, individual, "by-name" predestination and predetermination of salvation. Men therefore are helpless to make any choice concerning their eternal destiny—this choice has already been foreordained for every person. Calvinists (and some non-Calvinists as well) would do well to heed Lanier's warning: "But we must be careful to maintain a distinction between God's foreknowledge of men and events, and the predetermining of men and events."^{xi} A statement from Thiessen is also right to the point: "The knowledge of the future is not itself causative. Free actions do not take place because they are foreseen, but they are foreseen because they will take place."^{xii} A traffic reporter in a helicopter may foresee two automobiles that will crash because they are on a collision course, but his foreknowledge does not cause the accident.

The Non-Calvinistic Misconception of God's Foreknowledge

Ironically, many non-Calvinists (in fact, some who are strong anti-Calvinists) fail to harmonize God's unlimited foreknowledge with man's free will. They actually think (as do Calvinists) concerning the implications of absolute foreknowledge, concluding that such implies rigid **causation** and **predetermination** of that which is foreknown. The Calvinist approaches this assumed clash of principles by denying **men** their free will, which is taught and demonstrated in the Bible from beginning to end. On the other hand, some non-Calvinists approach this perceived contradiction by denying **God** His unlimited foreknowledge, likewise taught in the Bible from cover to cover. They assume that only thereby may men retain the

ability to exercise their free will as set forth in Scripture. The following arguments are made in defense of a limited foreknowledge of God:

First, the late and lamented Guy N. Woods asks, “If God had already devised a plan for the redemption of man from a sin which was certain to be committed, how could Adam and Eve avoid its commission?”^{xiii} (He asks this question in light of Peter’s statement that the sacrifice of Christ was “...foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world” [1 Pet. 1:20]). While extremely hesitant to differ with such a faithful and erudite scholar and beloved friend of forty years, I must do so in this case. A corollary to this question is, “How could God foreknow the sin of Adam without predetermining that he would commit it?” It is assumed that He could not have and that God therefore **did not know** whether Adam would or would not sin. However, if the Psalmist was correct, God’s “understanding is infinite” (Psa. 147:5). Did He have this infinite knowledge merely from the time after Adam sinned and up to the time the Psalm was written? Or does it include eternity—with no point of beginning—thus before the world and Adam were created? If God’s knowledge was infinite before creation then He foreknew the fact that Adam would sin. If God did not foreknow that Adam would sin then His knowledge is not infinite as the Bible teaches.

As earlier noticed, if God has to “learn” things after the fact by experience or observation then, while His knowledge is still vastly superior to ours, the Bible deceives us when it declares: “And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13). The fact that the Lord foreknew that Judas would betray Him (John 6:64, 70–71) did not force him to engage in his treachery. If this had been the case then God would be unjust in punishing him for his crime. According to Acts 2:23 God foreknew at some time that the Jews would crucify the Christ, but this neither forced them to do so nor did it release them from their responsibility for so doing (v. 36; 7:52). The flaw in this misconception is that of equating foreknowledge with Calvinistic predestination. Lanier says it well: “God’s foreknowledge of a man’s choice of a course in life has nothing to do with the man’s freedom to choose his own course.”^{xiv} Rex A. Turner, Sr. agrees:

In short, when God created man, he not only knew the possibility and probability of man’s fall; but also, he knew the certainty of it.... The case is that God made a plan of redemption for man before he made man [Turner then quotes Rom. 8:29–30 and Eph. 1:4 as proof of this statement]. Thus the vicarious death of God’s Son was in God’s plan for man, and that before he made man.^{xv}

Second, T.W. Brents, in his invaluable book, *Gospel Plan of Salvation*, argues that, while no man has the right to limit any of the attributes of God, He can limit Himself. Thus, he avers, although God had the **power** to foreknow all things, He has limited His own knowledge. “He saw

fit to **avoid** a knowledge of every thing **incompatible with the freedom of the human will** and the system of government devised by Him for man [emp. in orig.]”^{xvi} The question that this provokes in me is just what God chose or chooses not to know. Brents apparently thought he knew, but we wonder how or where he got his information. Furthermore, if God has the power to foreknow all things, but chooses to exclude certain things from His knowledge, how could He exclude such things without knowing what He had chosen to exclude?

Third, Brents argues God’s limited foreknowledge on similar statements by God in two passages.^{xvii} The first concerns the evils of Sodom: “I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, **I will know**” (Gen. 18:20–21, emph. DM). The second relates to Abraham’s slaying of Isaac, which was prevented by a message from Jehovah’s angel: “And he said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him. For **now I know** that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me” (22:12, emph. DM). Brents argues that God apparently had no foreknowledge or present knowledge of either the extent of Abraham’s faith before He saw Abraham raise the knife over Isaac or of the moral condition of Sodom before the investigative trip of His messengers.

Lanier correctly points out, however, that Jehovah used figurative, accommodative language in these passages.^{xviii} As earlier noted, when the Bible depicts God as having feet, hands, eyes, and ears He is simply using language (i.e., anthropomorphisms) with which men can identify, although God has no fleshly body with fleshly members as do men. Likewise, when God is said to “go” or to “be” somewhere the language is obviously figurative and accommodative, for God is actually omnipresent (which, incidentally, is a key to His omniscience)—He does not “go” anywhere, but simply **is** always everywhere all the time. Whitelaw, in *Pulpit Commentary*, wrote concerning Genesis 18:21: “The entire verse is anthropomorphic, and designed to express the Divine solicitude that the strictest justice should characterize all his dealings both with men and nations,” and makes a similar comment on Genesis 22:12.^{xix}

The fact that God said concerning Sodom, “I will go down,” as a man might say, **but that He did not literally do so**, also signals that God is speaking figuratively. He actually sent His angels to Sodom. When He said, “I will know,” and “Now I know” He was again accommodating Himself to the way men think, speak, and act. If someone asks me if baptism is necessary for salvation, I might say, “Turn with me to Mark 16:16 and we will know the answer,” although I have read and quoted the passage hundreds of times and committed it to memory in my youth.

Such a statement is to speak, as an accommodation to my querist, as if I did not know the answer. C.W. Hodge, writing in *International Standard Bible Cyclopedia*, observes:

It is true that the Scripture makes use of anthropomorphic forms of expression as regards the way in which God obtains knowledge (Gen. 3:8), and sometimes even represents Him as if He did not know certain things (Gen. 11:5; 18:21); nevertheless the constant representation of the Scripture is that God knows everything. This perfect knowledge of God, moreover, is not merely a knowledge which is practically unlimited for all religious purposes [i.e., which excludes certain God-selected areas of knowledge, DM], but is omniscience in the strictest sense of the term.^{xx}

It is a misuse of these passages to array them against the Bible's declaration of the perfect foreknowledge of God.

Fourth, another incident in Scripture that Brents employs to mitigate the unlimited foreknowledge of God involves the golden calf built by Aaron at Sinai and, because of it, God's intent to destroy the people and create a new nation from Moses (Exo. 32:7–14).^{xxi} In this setting Moses interceded for the people, pleading with God not to destroy Israel and reminding Him of His promises to Abraham and Isaac. God's response was, "And Jehovah repented of the evil which he said he would do unto his people" (v. 14). The argument is that if God has absolute foreknowledge He would have known He was not going to destroy Israel before He said He would; therefore He would have been deceptive in expressing His anger, in stating His intent to annihilate the people, and in pretending to change His mind. Once more this line of argument fails to take into account the nature of Biblical anthropomorphism and figurative speech. In his commentary on the Bible, Matthew Henry puts this entire incident into perspective:

But God would thus express the greatness of his just displeasure against them, after the manner of men, who would have none to intercede for those they resolve to be severe with. Thus also he would put an honor upon prayer, intimating that nothing but the intercession of Moses could save them from ruin, that he might be a type of Christ...[emph. DM].^{xxii}

I do not presume to understand or explain all of the circumstances and statements involved in this episode, including why God acted and spoke as He did, but I am determined not to interpret these or any other statements or events in the Sacred Record so as to impinge in the slightest degree the explicitly-taught foreknowledge of God.

The passages discussed above are representative of a few others that, similar in their statement, have also been put to the same use. However, I believe the solution to their apparent indications of some limitations in the foreknowledge of God is found in the comments on the passages already discussed.

Conclusion

While acknowledging an incomplete understanding of this magnificent subject, I forthrightly affirm my belief in the unlimited, infinite, absolute foreknowledge of God because the Scriptures so teach. I fail to see any contradiction between this view of God's foreknowledge and the full exercise of man's free will in choosing to obey or disobey God. I am unable to see how God's foreknowledge implies Calvinistic foreordination or predestination.

The summary of God's ultimate omniscience, including His foreknowledge, was written by the inspired David:

O Jehovah, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising; Thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, And art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, But, lo, O Jehovah, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, And laid thy hand upon me (Psa. 139:1–5).

Paul marveled over God's omniscience: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:33–34).

With David, we must humbly confess: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain unto it" (Psa. 139:6). If the full understanding of God's omniscience and foreknowledge is beyond the kin of inspired men, then it is surely beyond mine. While we cannot understand how such power, intuition, and capability operate due to our physical and finite limitations, we can understand that the Bible in fact teaches that our God possesses these awesome attributes.

Endnotes

-
- i. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
 - ii. A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: The Judson Press, 1907, reprint 1946), p. 52.
 - iii. Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1949, reprint 1992), p. 81.
 - iv. William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980 reprint), 1:345.
 - v. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Ann Arbor, MI: Cushing-Malloy, Inc., 1969), p. 541.
 - vi. This author at one time maintained that it was compatible with the Bible doctrine of omniscience to hold that, while God **could** know all things, that He has chosen to limit His knowledge so as **not to know** some things (e.g., that Adam would sin). Upon further study he has concluded that such a view cannot be harmonized with God's omniscience, and that said view is contradictory to Scripture, to sound reasoning, and to the necessity of the case.
 - vii. Strong, p. 282.
 - viii. Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *Twenty Years of the Problem Page* (Abilene, TX: Quality Pub., 1984), 1:194.
 - ix. Calvinists conclude that the doctrine of God's unlimited foreknowledge implies the denial of man's free will. Others, not Calvinists, accept the existence of the same alleged doctrinal conflict, but attempt to resolve it by denying the doctrine of God's unlimited foreknowledge (e.g., T.W. Brents, *Gospel Plan*

of Salvation [Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1957], pp. 93–105). In quest of this same resolution, the late and much-respected Guy N. Woods (*A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude* [Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1954], pp. 47–48) argued that *world* in the clause, *before the foundation of the world* (Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20; et al.) should be understood as “dispensation,” thus “before the beginning of the Mosaic Age.” We must respectfully disagree. If “before the foundation of the Mosaic Age” is correct exegesis in one passage, then it should make sense in other contexts as well. In Jesus’ lengthy prayer in the upper room He prayed for a restoration of the glory that was His “before the world was” (John 17:5). Then He spoke of the love with which the Father loved Him “before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). Surely none would seriously argue that the Lord is referring only to sometime before Pentecost or even the Mosaic economy, in these statements. Rather, His statements are clear references to the glory He had and to the Father’s love of Him in His pre-incarnate existence, before creation itself.

- x. Lanier, *Twenty Years...*, 1:200.
- xi. Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *The Timeless Trinity for the Ceaseless Centuries* (Denver, CO: Roy H. Lanier, Sr., 1974), p. 144.
- xii. Thiessen, pp. 81–82.
- xiii. Woods, p. 47.
- xiv. Lanier, *The Timeless Trinity...*, p. 145.
- xv. Rex A. Turner, Sr., *Systematic Theology* (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Christian School of Religion, 1989), pp. 54–55.
- xvi. Brents, pp. 96–97.
- xvii. Brents, pp. 97–100.
- xviii. Lanier, *Twenty Years...*, pp. 197–198.
- xix. Thomas Whitelaw, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H D M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), 1:246, 284.
- xx. Caspar Wistar Hodge, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1939), 2:1128.
- xxi. Brents, pp. 103–104.
- xxii. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 1:410.

[Note: I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the Power Lectureship, hosted by the Southaven, MI, Church of Christ, August 9–13, 1998. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Godhead: A Study of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, ed. B.J. Clarke (Southaven Church of Christ: Southaven, MI)].