

TIME and CHANCE

Handout for Lesson 20 of *Thought Provoking Questions*

MANY QUESTIONS

1. Does God know the outcome of a coin flip before the flip? Does anything in the universe actually occur by chance, or is every event, no matter how seemingly minor, part of a preordained plan of God?
2. Does God know our actions and thoughts before we do them or think them? If so, how long in advance does he know these things? Did he know them before we were born?
3. Did God know Adam and Eve would sin before he created them? Was it a certainty or just a possibility? Is it possible for God to experience a possibility rather than a certainty?
4. Do we have free will? Can a belief in free will be reconciled with a belief that each action or thought we have had or will have throughout our lives was known to God before we were born?
5. Is it possible for God to create beings with free will and simultaneously know beforehand every action and every thought that those free will beings will ever experience?
6. And most importantly, what does the Bible tell us about free will and God's foreknowledge? Does the Bible ever depict God as changing his mind? Does God ever speak about the future in terms of possibilities rather than certainties? Is God ever disappointed about how things turn out? Does God ever experience regret? Does God ever experience surprise? Does God ever have any new experiences? Does God ever experience risk?

DOES IT MATTER?

1. A wrong view on this issue can lead to fatalism and resignation.
"Christian fatalism is not merely an innocuous doctrinal interpretation. Fatalism is a paralyzing disease. It infects its victims with complacency and apathy that immobilize their will to resist evil while eroding their determination to accomplish the great work of Christ."
2. A wrong view on this issue can lead to Calvinism.

John Calvin: "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death."

3. A wrong view on this issue can cause us (inadvertently for some but purposefully for others) to lay charges of evil against God.
4. A wrong view on this issue can hinder our prayer life.

TWO PITFALLS

1. We must not exaggerate our ability to understand God. This pitfall leads to anthropomorphism — the view that God is just a glorified human being.
2. We must not exaggerate our inability to understand God. This pitfall leads to agnosticism — the view that we can know nothing at all about God.

THE CLOSED VIEW

The Closed View of God or the Closed View of the Future says that the future consists exclusively of things that are settled. The future contains no possibilities but rather only certainties. It may look to us that the future contains possibilities, but that is only because of our limited knowledge. Under this view, God is unchanging in every respect. Not only his character, but also his will, his knowledge, and his experience are unchanging. They are what they are from all eternity, and thus God's knowledge of the future is unchanging. Under this view, whatever takes place in history, from events of great significance to the buzzing of a fly, must take place exactly as God eternally foreknew it would take place.

THE OPEN VIEW

The Open View of God or the Open View of the Future says that the future consists of both unsettled possibilities and settled certainties. Under this view, if God does not know our future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in some way incomplete, but rather is because there is nothing definite yet for God to know. The central thesis of the Open View is that God experiences the events of the world he created as they happen rather than all at once in some sort of timeless, eternal perception. Our future actions and thoughts are at present not knowable.

The difference between the past and the future is not that the past is wholly definite and the future is wholly indefinite. The difference is that whereas the past is entirely definite, the future is only partially definite. The future is to some extent open and to some extent closed. The

closed part is definite and knowable; the open part is not. As for the closed part of the future, God of course knows all there is to know about it.

WHAT SAITH THE BIBLE?

- » Sometimes God regrets how things turn out. (Gen. 6:5-6; 1 Sam. 13:13; 15:10-11, 35)
- » God sometimes asks questions about the future. (Num. 14:11; Hos. 8:5; 1 Ki. 22:20)
- » God sometimes confronts the unexpected. (Is. 5:1-5; Jer. 19:5; 7:31; 32:35)
- » God sometimes gets frustrated. (Ex. 4:10-15; Ezek. 22:30-31)
- » God sometimes speaks in terms of what may or may not be. (Ex. 4:1-9; Ex. 13:17; Ezek. 12:3; Jer. 26:3)
- » God does not want anyone to perish — and yet many will. (2 Pet. 3:9; Matt. 26:24; Ex. 32:33; Rev. 3:5)
- » God sometimes changes his mind. (Jer. 18:1-12; 2 Ki. 20:1-6; Ex. 32:14; Deut. 9:13-14; 1 Sam. 2:30-31; Jer. 26:2-3; Ezek. 4:9-15; Amos 7:1-6; Jon. 3:10)

JEREMIAH 18:1-12

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good. And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart.