

What does the foreknowledge of God mean?

As part of God's character of omniscience (all knowing) is the concept of foreknowledge. What is it, and how does it relate to the free will of human beings?

Questions like these form the basis of great debate theologically and philosophically about the omniscience of God and the life of a human being. To what extent does God know the future, exercise control over it all the while human beings are morally responsible for their actions? This apparent paradox or contradiction has challenged people for centuries.

Foreknowledge (Greek: "prognōsis")

This noun is found only twice in the Bible and is used in the context of Divine foreknowledge. In both instances, Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:2, it is in the context of God's foreknowledge of Jesus Christ and His purpose of paying for the sins of mankind.

Acts 2:23

this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge (**prognōsis**) of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

1 Peter 1:2

according to the foreknowledge (**prognōsis**) of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

"Prognosis" is comprised of two elements:

The prefix "pro" means "before."

The noun "gnosis" means "knowledge" and includes other terms for knowledge such as intelligence and wisdom.

Thus the term "prognosis" simply means "foreknowledge." A clear understanding of this term is important for gaining a sense of what it means when God chooses and predestines. So while the normal meaning in English is to have advance knowledge of future events and circumstances, the biblical context implies an additional sense of divine direction or control.

Can the two ideas, **a**) God is infallible and knows the future and **b**) human beings have free will, coexist or are they at odds with each other?

Christians fall into two camps when considering this theological dilemma:

Compatibilists believe that "a" and "b" are compatible and do not contradict each other.

Incompatibilists believe that "a" and "b" are incompatible. Either "a" or "b" is false; either God has limited infallibility of the future or human beings do not have free will.

The Bible does not say explicitly how God knows the future, but several theories have been debated over the centuries. Despite the criticisms of each theory, an awareness of them may be helpful in developing one's theology.

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Theory	How does God know the future?	Compatible with human beings having free choice?
<p>Perceptual Knowledge of the future</p> <p>or</p> <p>Simple Foreknowledge</p>	<p>God sees all of time from His eternal perspective. Foreknowledge is a simple awareness of the future and does not require any inductive or deductive reasoning.</p> <p>God's foreknowledge is not based on any divine foreordination.</p> <p>God simply knows the future and what human beings will do.</p>	<p>Yes. Human beings have free will and God already knows what a person will do. God is not the cause or agent of the actions of man.</p> <p>Human beings have libertarian free will in which one could make any choice or not at all.</p>
<p>Deterministic Foreknowledge</p>	<p>God determines all future events by His sovereign will. The future is known because of God's decrees.</p> <p>God is in complete control of all events that occur and will occur in the future.</p>	<p>No. God has infallible knowledge of the future, and human beings do not have libertarian free will.</p> <p>All human action is determined in advance for God's sovereign purposes.</p> <p>Human beings, in a sense, have free choice, because they chose according to their desires and moral nature.</p>
<p>Open Theism</p>	<p>God only knows what He intends to do in the future independent of what human beings will do.</p> <p>God can be influenced by prayer and the actions of human beings, and so God's foreknowledge is determined dynamically in consideration of the free decisions and actions of human beings.</p> <p>God's foreknowledge is limited, because His foreknowledge of the free actions of human beings is not known or is "open."</p>	<p>No. God has limited infallible knowledge of the future; he does not know what human beings will freely do.</p> <p>Human beings have libertarian free will in which one has complete freedom to choose or not choose.</p>
<p>Middle Knowledge</p>	<p>There are three aspects to God's knowledge / omniscience:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Natural Knowledge. This is knowledge of all possibilities and truths. 2. Middle knowledge. This is knowledge of what would happen in all possibilities. For example, if Joe was placed in these circumstances, he will freely choose to do this. If Joe were to be placed in another set of circumstances, he would freely do that. 3. Free Knowledge. This is knowledge of the future. <p>God knows what will happen, and what would happen under any and all possible circumstances in the future.</p>	<p>Yes. Human beings can freely make choices but their choices are determined by their circumstances and nature.</p>

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Theory	Implications Towards Salvation
Perceptual Foreknowledge	God knows, before a human being is born, whether that person will freely choose to believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In this theory, man is the primary cause of salvation, and God's election is based on foreseeing who will place their faith in Him.
Deterministic Foreknowledge	God chose or determined, before a human being is born, whether that person will be saved by Jesus Christ. In this theory, God is the primary cause of salvation.
Open Theism	God doesn't know, before a human being is born, whether that person will freely choose to believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In this theory, man is the primary cause of salvation.
Middle Knowledge	God chose, before a human being is born, whether that person will receive conditions that will cause him to freely choose to believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In this theory, God is sovereign in the process of salvation but both God and man are causes of salvation.

While the Bible is not explicit about the definition of God's foreknowledge, Bible scholars have developed four major theories in an attempt to reconcile the dilemma of how God could know the future while preserving the free will of human beings.

Perceptual Foreknowledge is seen as the traditional Arminian perspective.

Deterministic Foreknowledge is seen as the traditional Calvinism perspective.

All four of these theories are worthwhile to explore and understand their biblical basis. However be mindful to study the Scriptures through exegesis and allow the biblical truth to emerge, rather than a philosophical exercise to which the biblical text is used to support the logic of human beings.