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The Foreknowledge of God

BY BOB DEWAAY

"*Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me. Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure*.'" (Isaiah 46:9)

"*[A]lso we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*." (Ephesians 1:11)

In recent years, some evangelicals have rekindled an old controversy by asserting that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. That is to say that He does not know everything that is going to happen. This is an old controversy. For example, Jonathan Edwards devoted many pages of his famous book, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (commonly known as *Freedom of the Will* for obvious reasons). Edwards wrote:

> First, I am to prove, that God has an absolute and certain foreknowledge of the free actions of moral agents. One would think it should be wholly needless to enter on such an argument with any that profess themselves Christians: but so it is, God's certain foreknowledge of the free acts of moral agents is denied by some that pretend to believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God; especially of late.[1]

This was the situation in the eighteenth century. Edward's work on this issue is profound and timeless. He supplies page after page of Scriptural proof that God foreknows the future choices of free moral agents.[2]

In this article I shall respond to a recent challenge issued in the book *God of the Possible* by Gregory A. Boyd. He writes: "What is particularly sad about the current state of this debate is that Scripture seems to be playing a small role in it. Most published criticisms raised against the open view have largely ignored the biblical grounds on which open theists base their position."[3] If it is so that published criticisms do not interact with the specific Scriptures put forth to support the "open" position, then I shall make a contribution toward rectifying this. In this essay I will interact with several of Dr. Boyd's key proof texts, though space does not permit dealing with all of them. I shall show that the passages cited, if taken in their Biblical context, do not prove Dr. Boyd's assertion that God lacks knowledge of some of the future.

Defining the Open View

Evangelicals like Dr. Boyd who call themselves "free will theists," or call their view "the open view of God," assert that God does not know all of the future. Typically, the specific aspect of the future that is supposed to be unknown by God is the future choices of free moral agents. This was the claim being made in Edward's day, and was commonly called Socinianism.[4] Dr. Boyd makes this same claim.[5] He asserts that a limitation on God's foreknowledge does not detract from God's omniscience, since God knows everything that is "knowable." However, the future choices of free moral agents are by nature not knowable. He writes: "So God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions."[6] This is in keeping with the claims of others who have denied God's exhaustive foreknowledge.

In his latest book, Dr. Boyd states his position this way: "God determines whatever he sees fit and leaves as much of the future open to possibilities as he sees fit. The God of the possible creates the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' structure of world history and of our lives within which the possibilities of human free choice are actualized."[7] He states this position again in another section of his book: "God predestines and foreknows as settled whatever he sees fit to predestine and foreknow as settled."[8] In this view, some of the future is predetermined and some of it is not. I, for one, cannot understand how God can decide what aspect of the future to choose to foreknow unless the future is already laid open before His eyes, in which case it is foreknown. I will leave that conundrum for others to grapple with. According to the "open" view, future choices of free moral agents are in the category of being unknowable to God and not determined by God.[9] The rest of this article will examine some of the texts that are used to support the open view of God.

When God Expresses Regret

We shall look at two passages where God expresses regret and determine if God's regret is due to a lack of knowledge about the future. The first is **Genesis 6:6**: "*And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart*." This grief

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was due to mankind's continual wickedness (**Genesis 6:5**). Dr. Boyd sees this as evidence that God did not foreknow this situation: "Doesn't the fact that God regretted the way things turned out — to the point of starting over — suggest that is *wasn't* a foregone conclusion at the time God created human beings that they would fall into this state of wickedness?"[10]

There are two important points to be discussed here: 1)did God foreknow the wickedness and rebellion of mankind and 2) does this language of regret require that God could not have foreknow? On the first point, we need only refer to the fact that the Scriptures teach a plan of salvation that is eternal as proof that God foreknew human rebellion. For example: *"And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain*" (**Revelation 13:8**). Whether the phrase "from the foundation of the world" modifies the names written in the book or the lamb who was slain (see KJV), the passage still shows that the need for a savior was foreknown before mankind rebelled. Other passages express the same thought (**1Peter 1:20**; **Heb: 4:3**; et. al.). Concerning the **Genesis 6:6** passage, it could be argued that God did not know things would get as bad as they did (which is doubtful) but it cannot be said that God did not know the human race would rebel and fall into sin.

On the second point, the language used in **Genesis 6:6** is completely understandable without assuming a lack of foreknowledge on God's part. Allow me to make an analogy. Suppose a man has a teenage son who is prone to wildness and indiscretion. This son desires a sports car. The father warns him saying, "Son you are only going to get into trouble, you will get tickets, you will probably wreck the car and injure yourself and others." Yet the son persists, and is unrelenting in his demands for the car. Finally the son has nagged his dad for the car for an entire year and has reached the age of 17. The father, against his better judgment yet feeling the son needs to learn his own lessons in life, buys him the car. Sure enough, the young man gets tickets and eventually gets into a bad accident with multiple injuries. The father, visiting him in the hospital says, "Son, I regret that I bought you that car."

In this case, the father's regret does not indicate a lack of foreknowledge about what would happen. He was quite sure of what would happen, but still had reasons for buying the car for his son. In God's case the difference is that His foreknowledge is absolute, the earthly father's only a very strong assumption based on present knowledge. However, the point of the analogy is that expressions of regret, as human languages are commonly used, do not always imply a lack of foreknowledge. We regret many things that are very much predictable or even inevitable.[11] So why do we assume God cannot regret what He foreknows will happen? Such an assumption not only is contrary to Biblical teaching: "*And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind*" (**1Samuel 15:29**), it is also contrary to the ordinary use of language.

Greg Boyd's next example is that of Saul's kingship. Ironically, the verses he cites come from the same chapter (**1Samuel 15**) that teaches God does not change His mind. The key text is **1Samuel 15:11**: "I *regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands*." Dr. Boyd explains why he thinks this is important:

"Could God genuinely confess, 'I regret that I made Saul king' if he could in the same breath also proclaim, 'I was certain of what Saul would do when I made him king'? I do not see how." There is even stronger evidence in this case that God's regret does not imply a lack of foreknowledge. **God predicted Saul's wickedness before he became king!**

In **1Samuel 8**, the people of Israel, having bad motives, demanded a king. God told Samuel they had rejected God in their demand for a king (**1Samuel 8:7**). God told Samuel this: "Now *then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them*" (**1Samuel 8:9**). Then verses 11-17 predict the king's abusive behavior. That the king would be so evil that the people would want to be rid of him is also predicted: "*Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day*" (**1Samuel 8:18**). God knew what Saul would be like, yet gave him to Israel partially to bring judgment upon her for rejecting God.[12]

Since the Bible predicts Saul's evil, self-centered ways, this example actually serves as a clarification for other passages where God expresses regret. He knew that the king Israel received would be evil, yet regretted making Saul king. How does this make sense? By the simple fact that God had a greater purpose in mind in the larger scheme of things. Yet God's holy nature is such that He cannot but abhor evil. Thus the expression of genuine regret. God knew what Saul would do, could have stopped it, but chose not to in order to accomplish a greater good in the long run. Part of this greater good was the calling and anointing of David in the midst of Saul's wicked reign. A Messianic plan existed from all eternity, and it included a king that would arise from Israel. Yet, on the scene of history it was Israel's rebellion that first brought about a monarchy.

This is a key point, so further clarification is in order. Consider the outcome of God's Messianic purposes: "*[T]his Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power*." (**Acts 2:23,24**). The act of rejecting and killing Messiah was morally reprehensible and thus repugnant to God's holy nature. Yet it happened by God's plan and foreknowledge. So it must be possible for God to will in one sense (His eternal purposes) what is against His will in another.[13] God grieves over the moral wickedness that led to the crucifixion of Messiah, yet He willed it from all eternity.

This explanation of God's expressions of regret is far more Biblical, taking into account the whole counsel of God, than assuming God cannot have foreknown whatever He regrets. This is just as it was with Saul — God knew Saul would do what was against God's moral will (compare **Deuteronomy 17:14-17** and **1Samuel 8:13-18**), yet had righteous and holy purposes for nevertheless giving Saul to Israel as her first king. Even the fact that the people would demand a king was predicted in **Deuteronomy 17:14**, which was a free moral choice foreknown by God.

When God Expresses Surprise or Questions the Future

Dr. Boyd cites **Numbers 14:11** as evidence that the future is partially open: "*And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?'*" His assumption is that God really does not know. He admits that this could be a rhetorical question, like when God questioned Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:8-9. Boyd's response to this explanation is interesting: "This is a possible interpretation, but not a necessary one."[14] The issue is not what possible interpretation could be given, but which one the context and reason demands. Dr. Boyd then asserts: "[T]here is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical."[15]

I am frankly surprised that Dr. Boyd would assert this. Let's take **Numbers 14:11** and consider it carefully. The question "how long" is either rhetorical or a literal request for information. It can be shown to be used rhetorically in many places. For example, "*And Jesus answered and said, 'O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me'*" (**Matthew 17:17**). This cannot be a request for information, the gospels make it clear that Jesus knew what was soon to happen, that He would be rejected, crucified, raised from the dead, and ascend into heaven. This is a similar expression to that in **Numbers 14:11**. So it is clearly false that "nothing . . . . in the whole of Scripture" requires these questions to be rhetorical.

Even more telling is the situation in the dialogue between God and Moses. Suppose "how long" was not rhetorical but a request for information. That would mean that God was asking Moses about the future persistence in unbelief of the people. If Dr. Boyd's thesis is correct and God does not know the future choices of free moral agents, why would God expect Moses to know them? Surely God would know more about what the people are going to do than Moses. So taking the "how long" as a literal question creates an absurdity. However, if we take it as rhetorical, the meaning is that God is grieved by the people's unbelief and is expressing to Moses how unjustified their response to God was. Indeed, the context and the whole of Scripture does "require" this interpretation.

When God Thought One Way and Reality Turned Out Differently

Another similar passage that is offered as proof of a partially open future is **Jeremiah 3:7**: "*And I thought, 'After she has done all these things, she will return to Me'; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it*."[16] If taken literally this passage would suggest God thought Israel would turn to Him, but was wrong in so thinking. Dr. Boyd's reasoning on this is important:

> We need to ask ourselves seriously, how could the Lord honestly say he *thought* Israel would turn to him if he was always certain that they would never do so? If God tells us he thought something was going to occur while being eternally certain it would not occur, is he not lying to us?[17]

Since God cannot lie, the reasoning goes, He must not have known what Israel was going to do. This appears to be a problem for our belief in divine foreknowledge.

We can find help in this case by contemplating how human language commonly works and by examining other Scriptures. When we say, "I thought" to someone, we are not always speaking about cognitive facts as Dr. Boyd's interpretation requires. Let me give you an example. My wife is out of town for a week visiting relatives. The last day before she comes home I scurry about and clean up the house. Alas, I overlook some important points: the laundry has piled up all week and the bed has dirty, unchanged sheets. She says, "I thought you would have done the laundry and changed the sheets." Now, as a matter of fact, given my nature and past experience, anyone given to betting would bet on the laundry not being done and the sheets not changed. It was not that she did not know I would fail to do these things, she was expressing displeasure that she came home to such a pile of dirty laundry.

We use the phrase "I thought" in this very sense in many common situations. We say, "I thought drivers in this city would be more courteous," when in fact all the evidence has pointed to the fact that they would not be. We mean, "I think it would be better and morally right if drivers were more courteous." Thoughts and expectations often have moral connotations. Dr. Boyd writes: "In this case, God would be *wrong* for expecting one thing to occur when it was a settled fact that another thing was certainly going to occur."[18] But this assumes we are talking about *factual* expectations and not *moral* ones. There is a big difference. Back to the example of driving in the city, I *always* expect to be treated courteously in a moral sense, but I *never* expect I will be in a factual sense when driving in rush hour.

Given this common use of the language, lets examine the Scripture in question. Did God expect factually, in Jeremiah's day, that the people were going to turn to him? Clearly He did not. He told Jeremiah over and over that the people were rebellious, would not listen and were certainly going into captivity. Lest it be objected that this was after the fact, God told Moses about it many centuries earlier:

> *And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of*

the land, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they shall be consumed, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day, 'Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?'" **(Deuteronomy 31:16,17)**

But according to the open view of God, He genuinely thought that the people would be faithful to Him and their stubbornness was merely a remote possibility. Dr. Boyd writes, "Since God is omniscient, he always knew that it was remotely possible for his people to be this stubborn, for example. But he genuinely did not expect them to actualize this remote possibility."[19]

This shows what problems are engendered when we try to force a factual connotation on God's expressions of expectations when the context shows they have moral connotations. If God genuinely thought that Israel in Jeremiah's day was going to be faithful to Him, then He would be a worse predictor than the casual reader of Scripture. Read the story of the wilderness wanderings, the period of the Judges, the history of the various kings, the sad story of the split kingdom, the apostasy and destruction of the northern kingdom, the degeneration of whole hearted worship of the true God in spite of brief periods of revival, and then tell me when you get to Jeremiah's day that you literally "thought" faithfulness would surely happen and rebellion was only a remote possibility. The writers of Scripture have prepared us for just the opposite. So why would God literally think that Israel would be faithful, against all the evidence?

God knew with complete certainty what would transpire, and inspired His prophets to predict it. When He said "*I thought after all of this she would return to me,*" He is expressing His moral will. God always expects righteous and God honoring responses from His creatures, though He rarely gets them. God is never wrong about the future and never taken by surprise.

When God Says "Now I Know"

Another key passage Dr. Boyd cites is **Genesis 22:12**, "*And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for* ***now I know*** *that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'*" The question before us is whether God literally did not know what Abraham's response would be until Abraham made it. Dr. Boyd writes, "The verse has no clear meaning if God was certain that Abraham would fear him before he offered up his son."[20] He then cites several other Old Testament passages where God tests Israel "to know" whether they would fear God and serve Him. He asserts that these passages cannot be reconciled, "with the view that God eternally knows exactly what will be in the heart of a person to do."[21]

If we had no other information about God, His nature, and His eternal purposes, we would have to grant that these passages seem to teach that God's knowledge is growing, that God is learning things as history progresses. However, to claim that God did not know what Abraham would decide right up to the moment he lifted the knife, one would also have to claim that God does not know the heart. It would also require a view of the human will as being so autonomous as to be detached from any previous causes, inclinations, or influences (a view which was powerfully refuted by Jonathan Edwards). Why? Because if God knows everything, right up to the present moment, and also knows the thoughts and intents of the heart, then He knows everything that has causal effect on a human decision. Even if you do not believe in foreknowledge, God's perfect knowledge of all present and past causes would be sufficient to know the effect, in this case Abraham's decision.

In Abraham's case, we have special "behind the scenes" information, supplied by the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures. "*He* [Abraham] *considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type*" **(Hebrews 11:19)**. Abraham's consideration that God is able to raise the dead must have existed before he lifted the knife, or else it would have had no bearing on his decision. For God to literally not know what Abraham would do, He would have had to be lacking knowledge of Abraham's heart and faith, which the book of Hebrews says motivated Abraham's obedience. This view must be rejected based on the clear teachings of Scripture. God is said to know the heart: "*I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind*" **(Jeremiah 17:10a)**. In **Acts 15:8** God is called the "heartknower" in the Greek. In many passages He is said to judge according to the heart. Since God must have known Abraham's heart, and Abraham had faith in his heart that God could even raise the dead if necessary, God must have known what Abraham's decision would be. Therefore the clear teaching of Scripture demands that we do not take God's statement, "now I know" to be a literal declaration of previous ignorance.

What does it mean? We speak the same way. When a loving grandchild draws us a special picture and beams with joy as he gives it to us, we sometimes say, "how wonderful, now I know that you love me." Such a statement is not a confession of previous ignorance. It is relational, an appropriate loving response at the moment. It is a statement that expresses approval of the act. That is what God's statement to Abraham was. Many such statements are found in the Bible, such as God's interaction with Moses concerning Israel. Since in cases such as Abraham's we have enough information elsewhere in the Scripture to show what was going on, it seems completely reasonable to take other incidents the same way. God lovingly condescends to talk to humans in terms familiar to them, and interacts with them on the scene of history, as if He were experiencing time the same way we do. But the Bible clearly teaches that God's relationship to time is different than ours.

Conclusion

I do not think Dr. Boyd has given us sufficient Biblical evidence to warrant

changing our whole view of God's foreknowledge. The passages cited are incidental to the issue at hand. What I mean by this is that they are not specifically addressing God's relationship to time and whether or not God's knowledge is unchanging. There is no clear passage of Scripture that says God does not foreknow, while many state that He does. The passages we have examined, taken in their context, are easily understood without importing the notion of a God who lacks exhaustive foreknowledge. In several instances the Bible predicts what was going to happen in these very examples, showing that God **did** have foreknowledge. Therefore the "open" view of God should be rejected on purely Biblical grounds.

The End from the Beginning: Embracing God's All-Encompassing Sovereignty

BY RYAN HABBENA

"*It makes God the author of sin*."

"*It renders humans as robots*."

"*It suggests fatalism*."

And the list goes on. God's all-encompassing sovereignty has always given rise to many objections, criticisms, and fears. Virtually all Christians believe that God is sovereign to some degree. However, the *extent* of His sovereignty has been vigorously debated.

If we are to understand the extent of God's sovereignty, we must first understand its definition. James White defines the sovereignty of God as the "free and proper kingship of God" who has unfettered, unlimited, undiminished authority to do as He wishes with His creation.[1] This, in turn, leads to " the soul comforting truth that God has wisely and perfectly decreed whatsoever comes to pass in the universe. Nothing is outside His control. Nothing is without purpose."[2]

Do the Scriptures teach that God's sovereignty is all-encompassing; that He wisely decreed all that comes to pass? Many in the current evangelical climate do not believe so. Note Dr. Gregory Boyd's comments: The open view of God[3] "does not hold that the future is wide open. Much of it, open theists concede, is settled ahead of time, either by God's predestining will or by existing earthly causes, but it is not *exhaustively* settled ahead of time. To whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is unsettled."[4] Boyd is basically asserting that God's sovereign will is only extended over His own plans and general history – not the choices of humanity.[5] Similarly, he further states that, "God's sovereignty partly consists in his openness to us, and the future we help create."[6] Is this the teaching of the Scriptures? Does God grant humanity autonomous sovereignty to "create" their own decisions apart from His permission, making much of the future unsettled, even in God's knowledge?

In the following I seek to establish that the Scriptures explicitly teach that God's sovereignty is indeed "all-encompassing." As previously noted, this belief gives rise to many objections and difficulties. I will briefly address several of these, and ultimately demonstrate that God's all-encompassing sovereignty is not to be dreaded, but rather is to be preciously embraced by all those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Sovereignty and Scripture

Many scholars have picked up the pen and addressed the passages that affirm God's sovereignty over the course of human history. Such texts as Daniel 4:35, Isaiah 48:3-5, and Acts 17:26 are cited to establish God's governance over history. Virtually all that adhere to some degree of Scriptural authority agree that these passages (amongst others) teach that God is sovereign over human history in some capacity. The point of contention is not whether God is sovereign over the course of human history. Rather, it is the answer to the question: "Does God's sovereignty extend over the choices of humanity?" which gives rise to the debate that has been raging for eons.[7]

Sovereign over the Human Will

"The full and final resolution between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility is a mystery."[8] This quote appears in the introduction of one of the best contemporary works that explores the issues regarding God's sovereignty and the human will. Several of the keenest minds in Evangelicalism contributed to this work. Consequently, even the keenest finite minds cannot come close to comprehensively understanding the infinite God's eternal plan and purposes.

Scripture affirms God's sovereignty over human choices in numerous texts.[9] Perhaps the most explicit passage occurs in Proverbs 21:1. "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." Many respond to this by stating this is a "special case" for kings in God's *general* sovereignty. However, this proverb is most probably an example of the common Hebrew argumentation from the "greater to the lesser." The king has the most freedom of all the people to act in his domain, yet God is the one who ordains his decisions. How much more of the commoners! That God is sovereign over all of humanity's choices is further demonstrated in Proverbs 16:9 "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." And, Proverbs 19:21, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand."

The teachings of these proverbs are manifested in actual historical events in

Scripture. For instance, in Genesis 50:20 Joseph proclaimed that God's good hand was working through the evil intentions of his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Even clearer is Peter's proclamation to the "Men of Israel" regarding the crucifixion of Christ in Acts 2:23: "[T]his Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."

These two passages exemplify two motifs that are evident throughout the Scriptures: 1) God is sovereignly working through both the good and evil decisions made by humans. 2) Humans genuinely make choices and are responsible for their decisions. There is an acknowledged tension and mystery regarding how these two motifs exactly coexist. However, both are well established and must be maintained if we are to remain true to the whole counsel of God.

All-Encompassing Sovereignty

If God is sovereign over all of creation and history, including the choices of all free moral agents, then logic requires us to affirm that God's sovereignty is all-encompassing. Nothing occurs outside of His plan, purpose, and permission. Do we find any explicit Biblical support of this claim?

The book of Isaiah contains one of the most significant passages regarding God's purposes and sovereignty.

> Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done. Saying my purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure. (Isaiah 46:9-10)

A significant point to note in this text is that God explicitly relates His *uniqueness* to His *ability* to "declare the end from the beginning" in "establishing His purpose and good pleasure." However, Dr. Boyd notes regarding this passage: "[God] tells us he is talking about his *own* will and his *own* plans. He declares that the future is settled to the extent that he is going to determine it, but nothing in the text requires that we believe *everything* that will ever come to pass will do so according to his will and thus is settled ahead of time."[10] Although the context argues otherwise,[11] I am willing to grant Boyd's conclusion regarding *this passage* for the sake of argument. However, if there *is* a passage that explicitly affirms that God indeed has ordained *all* that will come to pass is according to His own plan and purpose, we are compelled to accept it. To his credit, Boyd affirms: "If we truly want to hold beliefs that are determined by the Word of God and not simply by what we're used to believing, we must take care to examine *all* of Scripture and to consider objectively perspectives that may differ from the one we're used to."[12]

We find the most significant passage regarding the extent of God's sovereignty in Ephesians chapter one. In the midst of proclaiming the glorious grace that God has lavished on His children, Paul proclaims: "We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works *all things after the counsel of His will*" (Ephesians 1:11). Here we not only have an explicit reference to the extent of God's sovereign will, we also have language that echoes the Old Testament passages noted above. While Boyd cites Ephesians chapter one in passing,[13] any interaction with this explicit verse regarding the extent of God's sovereignty is conspicuously absent. In all the open-theism literature I have read, I have never read an adequate treatment of this passage.[14] Why? Because it is absolutely devastating to their position. When these two passages (Isaiah 46:9-10, Ephesians 1:11) are examined together in their respective contexts, it is evident that God's sovereignty encompasses "the end from the beginning" – and everything in between.

Objections, Objections

Objections to the exhaustive sovereignty of God have a long-standing history. While the objections to God's all-encompassing sovereignty are numerous with various nuances, I have chosen to focus on the three most frequently voiced.[15]

1. *If God's sovereignty is all-encompassing, doesn't this entail that we live in a fatalistic universe?*

Part of the answer to this question is required to be dealt with on a semantic level. What is *fatalism*? Loraine Boettner comments: "Fatalism holds that all events come to pass through the working of a blind, unintelligent, impersonal, non-moral force which cannot be distinguished from physical reality."[16]

Contrarily, God's all-encompassing sovereignty is purposeful, with an intelligent intent and design. God sovereignly crafts all of history, including the choices of humanity, whether good or evil, into His plan and ultimate *purpose*. Unlike fatalism, our sovereign God is *personal*, and enters into relationships with His children. Therefore, a true belief in the intelligent design and plan of a personal God, that is realized through His sovereign will, is the exact *opposite* of the vanity of fatalism.

2. *Doesn't God's all-encompassing sovereignty render humans as robots?*[17]

God's exhaustive sovereignty does not mean that God is the only cause in the universe, and all moral agents are just puppets. Rather, God has given all of humanity the power of choice; to make decisions in accordance with their own desires. Yet, God rules over and above these decisions, and crafts them into His overarching plan. Erwin Lutzer notes:

> The will of man is not violated by God in the sense that God forces a man to do something he does not want to do. When the Bible says that God raises up men, such as Pharaoh, God

> may have done no more than simply withdraw any positive influence in Pharaoh's life.[18]

Another Scriptural example of this principle is found in Revelation 17:17, speaking of the great, sinful rebellion at the end of the age: "God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled." *We need not hide from these texts*.[19] They simply demonstrate the tension between the sovereign decrees of God and human freedom and responsibility; both of which must be maintained.

3. *Doesn't God's all-encompassing sovereignty entail that He is the author of sin?*

"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away by his own lust" (James 1:13-14). The Holy, Sovereign God can never be attributed with sin. It is the creature that is drawn away by *his own lust* and has willfully rejected God and His precepts. Yet this does not entail that God lacks sovereignty over human choice. As noted above, God knows the sinful heart and is able to guide it either by adding His sustaining grace, or removing by it – He *never* coerces someone to sin. God hates, and is genuinely grieved by all sin.[20] Yet, in his His great and sovereign wisdom, God uses the *even* the sinful acts of humanity to achieve His plans and purposes.

Humbled before the Sovereign Lord

In contemplating all of the above, we do well to learn humility before our Sovereign Creator and Redeemer. Since many of the areas surrounding this issue are relegated to the realm of mystery, we must acknowledge our finitude, and trust our Lord who is "righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds" (Psalm 145:17). Romans chapter 9-11 carries possibly the deepest teaching in all of Scripture. It is in this section where such concepts as predestination, human responsibility, and election are examined by the apostle Paul. While several potential objections are cited[21] (and to some degree answered) by the apostle in regards to God's sovereignty in such matters, Paul's concluding doxology is something all can learn from when contemplating such difficult matters:

> Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

Sovereignty in Everyday Life

In light of the Scriptural teaching regarding God's sovereignty, how should we, as recipients of God's unmerited favor, respond? King David was one who had experienced God's sovereign grace. As one who was frequently subjected to persecution and various trials, David found his comfort in God's all-encompassing sovereignty. This is poetically set forth in Psalm 139.

> O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid your hand upon me. *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me*. It is too high, I cannot attain to it. (Psalm 139:1-6 [*emphasis added*])[22]

> Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in your book were written all the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. *How precious are your thoughts to me*, *O God*. (Psalm 139:16-17a [*emphasis added*])[23]

God's all-encompassing sovereignty was not an offense to David – it was the *reason* for the contentment and humility that are clearly evident in this passage. It is God in His all-encompassing *sovereignty* that guarantees His children that He is working all things together for their good (Romans 8:28).[24] It is God in His *sovereignty* that guarantees His children that He will keep them in His grace and usher them into His everlasting Kingdom (Romans 8:31-39).[25] It is God in His *sovereignty* that guarantees His children that all evil will ultimately be conquered, and He will reveal the fullness of His glory to His vessels of mercy (Romans 9:23, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). May all of God's children reflect on such wonders, and concur: "*How precious are your thoughts to me, O' God*."

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END NOTES

The Foreknowledge of God

1. Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, 96 from Ages Digital Library, Ages Software, version 7 [CD-ROM] (Rio, WI: The Master Christian Library, 1999).

2. Ibid. 96-114.

3. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible — A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 12.

4. Socinianism departed from orthodoxy in other ways that open theism has not, at least at this point in history. For example, Socinianism became unitarian, whereas contemporary open theism is Trinitarian.

5. Gregory A. Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic*, (Victor Books: Wheaton, 1994) 30.

6. Ibid.

7. Boyd, *Possible*, 44.

8. Ibid., 53.

9."If we are truly free — if this is in fact part of the way reality really is — there can be nothing beyond possibilities to be recorded until we choose to act on one of those possibilities. We freely *create* the fact and *then* God records it." Boyd *Possible* 123.

10. Boyd, *Possible, 55.*

11. Humans also regret the outcome of things they would do again if given the opportunity. For example, many people regret the behavior of our current President, yet when many are asked they say they would vote for him again.

12. see Bob DeWaay, "*Saul the Choice of the Carnal Minded*," Critical Issues Commentary, Issue 47; Nov./Dec. 1997 for a fuller treatment of Saul's kingship.

13. See John Piper, "*Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved*" in The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will, Vol. 1, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware ed.; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) for a tremendously enlightening treatment of this matter.

14. Boyd, *Possible*, 59.

15. Ibid.

16. Cited ibid. 60. Jeremiah 3:19 is also cited as a similar example, but there is a translation issue, the NASB does not use "I thought" in this passage.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. 61.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid. 64.

21. Ibid. 65.

The End From the Beginning

1 James White, *The Potter's Freedom*, (Amityville: Calvary Press, 2000) 41.

2 Ibid., 45.

3 The open view of God, sometimes called free-will theism, holds to the belief that God cannot have foreknowledge of the future choices of free moral agents. Greg Boyd notes in *Letters from a Skeptic* (Chariot Victor, 1992) "God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions" (pg. 30).

4 Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 30.

5 In researching Boyd's book in preparation for this article we wrote him to clarify this assertion. To us, it sounded as if he had somewhat modified his position seemingly implying that God can foreknow free actions if he foreordains them. We wrote Boyd to ask if this was the case. He wrote: "To say God cannot in principle know future free actions does not limit God, in my view." In light of this, I am confident that this summary correctly represents his position. Thus, his statement in a previous work, cited in note 3, is still indicative of his position.

6 Boyd, *Possible*, 69.

7 For a wonderful historical and Biblical examination of this tension and debate, see D.A. Carson's, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility,* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

8 "Introduction," *The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will, Vol. 1*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware ed.; (Grand Rapids:Baker, 1995) 17. This two volume work has been abridged and republished by Baker Books under the title "*Still Sovereign*."

9 Space does not allow for a thorough treatment of all the passages that affirm God's sovereignty over the human will. Outside of the ones I interact with in the section, here is a partial list of others regarding this issue for further study. Genesis 20:6, Exodus 4:21, Psalm 135:6, Psalm 33:8-11, Isaiah 41:21-23, Isaiah 64:8, Amos 3:6, Romans 9, James 4:15, Revelation 17:16-17.

10 Boyd, *Possible*, 30.

11 Isaiah chapters 45 through 47 are about the future deliverance of captive Israel from Babylon through the agency of the Persian King Cyrus. Since this involves the futures choices of free moral agents, including Cyrus, these must be in view in Isaiah 46:9,10. Especially since the "bird of prey from the East" (46:11) is Cyrus.

12 Boyd, *Possible*, 29.

13 Boyd, *Possible*, 46-47.

14 See John Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinistic Thinking," *The Grace of God the Bondage of the Will*, *Vol.2* . Ed. Thomas R. Schreiner, Bruce A. Ware, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 465-468 for a refutation of the attempts to avoid this particular understanding.

15 I direct the reader to Loraine Boettner's work, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination,* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1932) section III, which deals in-depth with the major objections to God's sovereign plan.

16 Ibid., 205.

17 Related to this objection is the question: "Why should I pray or evangelize if God has ordained all that will come to pass?" I direct the reader to J.I. Packer's classic book, "*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*" (InterVarsity Press, 1961) for a convincing answer to this question.

18 Erwin Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 190.

19 See John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" *The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will Vol. 1*., for an excellent examination of this text (pg. 112-113), among several others that are addressed in this work.

20 Again, see Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" for an extremely helpful essay on exactly how God can be genuinely grieved by sin, yet still allows, and indeed ordained it to come to pass.

21 The most significant potential objections Paul cites germane to this issue are in Romans 9:14 and 9:19.

22 I find it odd that Boyd cites this Psalm and attempts to refute its significance to God's sovereignty and foreknowledge (40-41) yet does not at all interact with David's proclamation: "Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold O Lord, you know it all (vs. 4)" – one of the most compelling passages that points to God's foreknowledge of free actions.

23 See Raymond J. Ortland's, "The Sovereignty of God: Case Studies in the Old Testament," In *The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will*, *Vol. 1*. pages 28-34 for a great summary of the exegetical evidence supporting God's all-encompassing sovereignty in this Psalm; including the translation issue in vs. 16.

24 See author's, "*Count it All Joy,*" Critical Issues Commentary, Issue 55, Nov/Dec. 1999 for further commentary on Romans 8:28, and its practical implications.

25 See Chapter 4, "Is Salvation Forever?" of author's booklet, *The Anchor of Assurance* (Didache Ministries, 2000), for a more in-depth treatment of the security of salvation issue.