

# LESSON 34

Last week we continued our special lesson on prophecy, and specifically we considered the questions of how prophecy works and how prophecy is related to our free will. We discussed two views on the subject: the open view and the closed view.

Under the closed view, the future consists only of settled events as far as God is concerned. Everything, no matter how seemingly trivial, that has ever happened or will ever happen is part of an eternal decree by God that was made long before we were ever born. Every thought and every action that we will have during our life was known to God before we were born, and so God knew before we were born whether we would be saved or lost. Under this view, God is unchanging in every way — he cannot learn anything new, he cannot be surprised by anything, he cannot experience regret. The closed view is central to Calvinism.

Under the open view, the future consists of settled events and unsettled events. Future events are settled only to the extent that God has settled them. For example, Jesus will return someday to claim his own, and this world will end in a conflagration. Those future events are settled because God has settled them. God has told us they will occur, and God will cause them to occur. But that *some* future events are settled does not mean that *all* future events are settled. God has created us as free will creatures, and that means that many future events are unsettled. Many of our future free will decisions are, at present, unknowable, and thus God does not know them.

Why do I say that “many” of our future decisions are unknowable? Because we are very predictable, and especially to our Creator, who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves. Many future events are inevitable and certain effects of

preceding causes, and thus are predictable with absolute certainty. In such cases, God knows perfectly well what will happen, but God did not cause it and God is not directing it. For example, God can see a train that is going much too fast, and he can see the sharp turn in the track, so he knows with certainty that the train will come off the tracks — but that does not mean that God is driving that train. And yes, God could keep the train on the tracks — but not without violating the free will of the conductor. That the train will come off the tracks is an inevitable and certain effect of past causes.

God knows us much better than we know ourselves. We are constantly being told that much of what we do is controlled by our DNA — and God knows all there is to know about our DNA. God programmed our DNA. Human nature has not changed at all since the days of Adam. Can anyone read the Old Testament and then come away surprised when the first century Jews reject and kill Christ? Hadn't they done the same to the prophets? It was certain that Jesus would be crucified — that had been prophesied long ago. But those who crucified Jesus did so of their own free will (Acts 2:36 — “whom ye have crucified”).

There are actually two different closed views. Those who adopt the closed view disagree on how the future is eternally settled. Does God's foreknowledge determine the future, or does the future determine God's foreknowledge?

Augustine and Calvin argued that the future will occur in a certain way because God foreknows it that way. Under their view, history is a movie written and directed by God long ago — a movie that we are just now seeing even though it existed long before we were born.

Arminius argued that God foreknows the future a certain way because the future will simply be that way. Under this view, history is a movie directed by chance and God simply watched the movie before any of us did.

Both views are flawed, but the second option avoids the dreadful conclusion that God is responsible for every evil action that has ever occurred, and in fact that

those evil actions are part of his will and his plan for mankind. (And yes, there are many who teach and believe that!)

Fortunately, the open view avoids both of these extreme positions. Under the open view, God determines some but not all future events. If God foreknows a future event (and there are many such examples in the Bible), then it is either because he determined that he would cause that event to occur in a certain way or because that event is an inevitable and certain effect of past causes.

What is the origin of the closed view of the future? Those who adopt it would tell us it comes from the Bible, but I think a good argument can be made that it comes instead from Plato's idea of an unchanging, timeless reality — because it is that very concept that the closed view uses as its basis for understanding how God operates in this world. The closed view of God has far more in common with the “unmoved mover” of Aristotle than it does with the God of the Bible. An examination of its history uncovers roots in pagan Greek soil rather than in Hebrew soil.

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 it 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 (albeit possibly very predictable). Otherwise, the idea of free will is meaningless. Otherwise, we are just acting out a script written long ago.

Under this open view, in Luke 5:22 (where we read, “but when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?”), Jesus knew their thoughts after they had them — but not before they had them (which, by the way, is what that verse says — he “perceived” them).

But what about prophecy? What about the plans of God foreordained before the world was established? One thing is clear, if God tells us that something will occur, then that thing will occur. All throughout the Bible, we see God working to accomplish his plans — and those plans will be accomplished perfectly.

A common view of prophecy is that God peers into the future from his exalted vantage point and provides us with a preview of coming events — but what that view neglects to notice is that, after the prophecy is made, God works to bring that prophecy about. God does not just sit back and watch it unfold — God unfolds it!

For example, you sometimes read commentaries that try to calculate the odds that someone would fulfill all of the prophecies about Jesus, and after calculating the astronomical odds, they conclude that Jesus must be the Messiah. How ridiculous! Jesus knew perfectly well the prophecies he was fulfilling. They were not just happening by chance. God was not just an observer watching the prophecies unfold, but rather God was actively involved in making them unfold.

The fundamental purpose of prophecy is to reveal the will of God as he declares his intentions to accomplish certain things and declares his intentions to act in a certain way.

**Isaiah 46:11** — *I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.*

The Bible also contains many conditional prophecies that are designed to evoke a positive response in the present so that the undesired prophetic event may be avoided. Under the closed view there can never be a truly conditional prophecy because God must know at the time of the prophecy which path will be taken.

Under the closed view, for example, God knew that Ninevah would repent even before there was a Ninevah. But how then do we explain the final verse of Jonah where God says that he spared Ninevah — spared it from what? Under the closed view, Ninevah was never in any danger. Also, I agree with those who say that God knew Jonah would go to Ninevah — but God knew that because God was deter-

mined to make it happen, even if it meant having Jonah swallowed by a giant fish! Did Jonah have free will? Yes — how else can we explain his decision to go left when God told him to go right?

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. He knows all that is knowable about the past and about the future.

As we proceed in our study, I believe we will find that God is repeatedly depicted in the Bible as facing a partially open future. What does the closed view have to say about such verses? It says that they are figurative and should not be taken as literal descriptions of God — and yet what is the basis for that conclusion? Where in the Bible do we get any indication that we cannot learn about the nature of God from reading about how God operates in this world? If we can learn about the nature of God from his creation, then wouldn't it follow that we can learn even more about his nature from his written word? Should we, as the closed view proponents seem to suggest, learn about God from Plato and Aristotle rather than from his word?

Finally, some have adopted a view under which God *could* know the future actions and thoughts of his free will creation, but instead chooses to remain ignorant of certain future events. This view must be rejected because it contradicts the omniscience of God. For God to be all-knowing, he must know all that is knowable, and any idea of selective divine ignorance would mean that God does not know all that is knowable, and thus that idea must be rejected.

What is our task? Our task is to determine which of these two views better agrees with what we read in the Bible about God and about the future. It will likely not come as a surprise that in my view the open view fits better with what we read in the Bible than does the closed view.

But how we can prove that the open view is the correct view? It is not that difficult. The closed view says that every future event is settled. The open view says that while some future events are settled, other are not. With the open view, the future consists of both settled events and unsettled events.

We know that some future events are settled. No one can believe the Bible and not agree that some future events are settled. The question is whether *all* future events are settled. If we can show that even one future event is not settled, then the open view is correct. To counter a view that says *all* future events are settled, all we need to do is show that at least one is not.

What does the Bible tell us about how God views and experiences the future?

**The Bible tells us that sometimes God regrets how things turn out.**

In Genesis 6:5-6, we see that God once regretted that he made man at all. Doesn't the fact that God regretted the way things turned out — to the point of starting over — suggest that it was not a foregone conclusion at the time of creation that man would fall into such a state of wickedness? And if so, then how could it have been a foregone conclusion that man would fall? Was the fall a certainty or a possibility or a likelihood? We know that God had a plan to deal with sin from before the foundation of the world, but does that mean the fall was certain to occur? if so, why the regret?

In 1 Samuel 13:13 and 1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35, we see where God regretted that he made Saul king. If God knew all that Saul would do and think long before Saul was born, then how could God experience regret over how Saul turned out? Common sense tells us that we can regret a decision we made only if the outcome of that decision was different from what we had expected or hoped it would be.

If God never wanted to experience regret and always wanted to have things turn out as he willed them, then he could have created programmed robots without free will, but that is not what God did. Instead, God created free will beings, and in doing so he necessarily gave up some control. How else can we explain the entry of

evil into the universe? We know that evil is not part of God's will — from whose will did it come?

If God experiences regret, then doesn't it follow that God sometimes takes a risk? Calvinists reject the notion that God ever takes a risk of any sort. After all, how could someone take a risk when all future events are determined and known to that person? And yet in our own experience doesn't risk often accompany love? We know from John 3:16 that God loves the entire world, but doesn't that love involve the risk that the world will not love him back? Don't we take risks, sometimes very great risks, for those we love?

Did God *risk* the moral harmony of the universe in creating man, or did he simply *sacrifice* it? In 2 Peter 3:9, we see that God does not want anyone to perish, but didn't his creation of free will human beings run the risk that many would perish? How can we read 2 Peter 3:9 and conclude that God always gets what he wants in dealing with mankind?

And isn't there another risk in John 3:16? Can we even imagine the risk that God took in sending his Son to die on our behalf — or was that act of love risk-free as the Calvinists must argue? We know that Jesus is God and that he did not sin, but he was tempted to sin. Were those *actual* temptations? How could they be otherwise if Jesus was tempted like as we? Was Jesus sinless because *he did not sin* or because *he could not sin*? If it was the latter, then we must conclude that the temptations were not actual temptations — and yet that is not at all what we see in the Gospel accounts of those temptations.

At the incarnation, God undertook the risk that his son would fail in his struggle with temptation. We can only speculate as to what the consequences of that possibility would have been. Perhaps they are literally unimaginable to us. But the genuineness of Christ's temptations strongly supports the reality of the risk of God.

**The Bible tells us that God sometimes asks questions about the future.**

In Numbers 14:11, God asks Moses, “how long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?” In 1 Kings 22:20, God asks, “who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?” Some suggest that these questions are merely rhetorical, just as when God asked Adam and Eve where they were hiding in Genesis 3:8-9, and that is a possible interpretation but not a necessary interpretation. Under the open view, it is possible for God to genuinely wonder how things will turn out — as evidenced by numerous questions where he appears to do exactly that.

**The Bible tells us that God sometimes confronts the unexpected.**

In Isaiah 5:1-5, we read where God once planted a vineyard and was surprised to find that wild grapes had grown. In these verses God describes Israel as his vineyard. He explains in verse 2 that he expected his vineyard to yield grapes, but instead it yielded wild grapes. Because it did not turn out as God expected, verse 5 tells us that he decided to destroy the vineyard. Note that in verse 4 God asks “what more could I have been done?” and, in verse 2, God explicitly says that things did not turn out as he expected they would. Don’t those verses tell us that the sad state of Israel at that time was not a preordained certainty, but rather was a possibility that did not become a certainty until the free will decisions of Israel made it so?

And if the future is entirely in the mind of God in every respect, then wouldn’t it follow that God made a mistake if he expected things to occur other than how they did occur? If God knew the vineyard would yield wild grapes, then how could he expect it to do otherwise as he says in verse 2? How could he even hope it would do otherwise under those conditions?

The Bible tells us that men sometimes did things that had never even entered the mind of God.

**Jeremiah 19:5** — *They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto*

*Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind.*

**Jeremiah 7:31** — *And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.*

**Jeremiah 32:35** — *And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.*

How are we to interpret these verses? Are they simply idioms or did the depths of man's depravity in murdering their own children truly not even enter God's mind when he made mankind? Was infanticide a free will decision that God expected us to make? Don't we see shock and surprise here on the part of God at what men would do? Yes, they had free will, but not even God thought they would choose to murder their own children. (Perhaps that is why there are so few verses in the Bible dealing directly with abortion.)

Do we prefer a God who is shocked at evil or a God who ultimately wills that evil will occur as a necessary part of his plan? Which God do we see in the Bible?

**The Bible tells us that God sometimes gets angry and even seems to be frustrated.**

In Exodus 4:10-15, Moses tells God that he cannot go to Egypt and do what God wants because he is slow of speech. Finally, in verse 14, we see where the anger of God was kindled against Moses. Did God know beforehand how Moses would respond? If so, wouldn't the anger have also occurred beforehand?

In Ezekiel 22:30-31, we read where God sought for a man to stand in the gap, and yet he could find no such person. Could God have sincerely sought for someone to stand in the gap if he knew all along that none would be found?

**The Bible tells us that God sometimes speaks in terms of what may be or may not be.**

In Exodus 4:1-9, God told Moses that the Israelites *might* listen to him. Notice in verses 8 and 9 that God twice says “**IF** they will not believe.” Under the closed view of the future, shouldn’t God have said “**WHEN** they will not believe”?

Those verses show us exactly how God operates in determining the course of the future. God was perfectly certain in the final outcome (that the elders of Israel would listen to Moses) even though in achieving that outcome he was working with free agents who were to some extent unpredictable. The only uncertainty was what would be required to convince them; that they would ultimately be convinced was not uncertain at all. It was certain because God knew beforehand that he would accomplish it.

What we see here is a God who is as creative and resourceful as he is wise and powerful and loving. God’s plans are accomplished because God accomplishes them. God is active in this world, and he expects us to be active as well.

**The Bible sometimes shows God speaking of the future in conditional terms.**

In Exodus 13:17, God chose a certain route for the exodus because of what the Israelites might have done otherwise — “Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt.” Don’t we see there God considering the possibility — but not the certainty — that the Israelites would change their minds if they faced battle?

In Ezekiel 12:3, God tells Ezekiel, “it may be they will consider, though they be a rebellious house,” and in Jeremiah 26:3, God says, “if so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings.” When God gave Jeremiah and

Ezekiel their assignments, doesn't it seem from these verses that there was at least a possibility that the people would heed their warnings? If not, then how do we explain these statements by God to the contrary?

**The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish — and yet many will do just that.**

In 2 Peter 3:9 we see that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” In 1 Timothy 2:4 we see that God's will is that all men would be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth.

Why does God continue to strive with people, trying to get them to believe, if their eternal fate has been known from before the dawn of time? Why, as Paul says in Romans 10:21, does God ever say “all day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.” Why is he stretching forth his hands to people he has predestined for hell?

The Bible also tells us in Exodus 32:33 and Revelation 3:5 that some will have their names blotted out of the book of life. How can the book of life ever be changed if the closed view of the future is the correct view. Under the Calvinists' view, the Book of Life is written in indelible ink — and the names were written in that book long before anyone was ever born!

**The Bible tells us that God sometimes changes his mind.**

Don't we see the possibility of God changing his mind in Genesis 18 as Abraham bargains with God over the people of Sodom? Yes, God already knew how many righteous people were living there, so God knew it would be destroyed even if only ten righteous people were enough for it to be spared — but how does Genesis 18 make any sense at all if God could never change his mind? Why didn't God just tell Abraham, “I change not, so don't ask me to change!”

But what, you ask, about those verses that say just that? What about those verses that say God does not or perhaps cannot change his mind?

**1 Samuel 15:29** — *For he is not a man, that he should repent.*

**Numbers 23:19** — *God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good.*

**Malachi 3:6** — *For I am the LORD, I change not.*

And we could add:

**Hebrews 13:8** — *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.*

When read in context, these verses pose no problem for the open view. We already know that the character and nature of God are unchanging. But that does not mean that God is a like a photograph that will forever remain fixed in time and unchanged. That is not the description of God we see in his word.

As for that verse from 1 Samuel 15, the immediate context shows God regretting that he had ever made Saul king at all. Samuel had prayed all night trying to change God's mind about Saul's dethronement, which indicates that Samuel at least felt that God might change his mind. But when the morning came, Samuel came to the conclusion that God would not change his mind — not that God *could* not change his mind, but that he *would* not. Unlike men, God cannot be cajoled into changing his mind for any reasons other than those consistent with his unchanging character. God in Ezekiel 24:14 and Zechariah 8:14 says that he will not change his mind. Doesn't the need for God to make this statement suggest that he *could* change his mind? The verse from Numbers 23 regarding Balak and Balaam has a similar explanation. The point is not that God is unable to change his mind but rather that God is totally unlike man. Unlike men, God does not lie when it's profitable or change his mind for the sake of convenience — both of which were common for the false prophets who spoke on behalf of false gods.

Finally, Hebrews 13 does tell us that Jesus does not change — but how are we to understand that verse when we see Jesus changing throughout his life here on earth as he grew from a child to a man and as we read of his changing roles as he ascends back to heaven, now reigns over his kingdom, and one day will deliver that kingdom to God? What never changes about Jesus and what can never change about Jesus is his holy and divine character. We can trust him because we know that his word to us and his love for us are unchanging. We can rely on him because we know his character and his nature will never change.

Jeremiah 18:1-12 is a remarkable commentary on the issues we have been considering here today. In these verses we read where Israel had heard that God was planning on punishing them for their wickedness, and they had then wrongly assumed there was no hope (verse 12 — “there is no hope”). If God has said he would punish them, then they reasoned there was nothing they could do about it — so why not continue in their wickedness? To correct that false fatalistic thinking, God told Jeremiah to go to a potter’s house to watch a potter at work.

**Verse 4** — *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.*

**Verse 6** — *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.*

**Verses 7-10** — *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.*

Paul picks up this same analogy in Romans:

**Romans 9:21-23** — *Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.*

Calvinists read those verses to say that God exercises unilateral control over us, but that is exactly the *opposite* of what is being said in Jeremiah 18 and Romans 9. As the potter is willing to revise his plans once his first plan is spoiled, so God is willing to revise his plan when the circumstances call for it.

There are certainties in the future. It was certain that Christ would come and die; it was certain that his church would be established; it is certain that this world will someday end with judgment. But that there are certainties in the future about which God will never change his plans does not mean that every future event falls into that category. God is the potter; we are the clay. And God is willing to continue working with us until we become what he wants us to become.

In 2 Kings 20:1-6, God told Hezekiah that he would not recover from his illness but that he would instead die. Hezekiah pleaded with God, and God changed his mind and added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. Jeremiah in Jeremiah 26:19 later encouraged the fatalistic Israelites by reminding them of this very event. If God cannot change his mind, then how do we explain this reversal? Was God not sincere when he told Hezekiah in verse 1 that he would die soon ("set thine house in order; for thou shalt die")? And if God always knew that Hezekiah would live another fifteen

years, then how could he tell Isaiah in verse 6 that he would **ADD** fifteen years to his life? There are many other examples:

**1 Chronicles 21:15** — *And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it: and as he was destroying, the LORD beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand.*

**Exodus 32:14** — *And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*

**Deuteronomy 9:13-14** — *Furthermore the LORD spake unto me, saying, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Let me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven: and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they.*

**1 Samuel 2:30-31** — *Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house.*

**Jeremiah 26:2-3** — *Thus saith the LORD; Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the LORD's house, all the words that I command thee to speak unto them; diminish not a word: If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings.*

**Jonah 3:10** — *And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.*

And there are other examples. Ezekiel 4:9-15 shows God changing his mind with regard to a source of fuel in response to a request from Ezekiel. Amos 7:1-6 shows God changing his mind with regard to judgments against Israel in response to a request from Amos.

### **How do we explain prayer under the closed view of the future?**

If every outcome is already recorded somewhere, then what good does it do to pray for some specific outcome? If the outcome is known to God before we pray for it to occur otherwise, then how could God ever be said to answer our prayer one way or the other? How could our prayer change anything in such a situation?

Under the closed view, wouldn't our prayers be like someone watching a Shakespearean tragedy written four centuries ago and praying to God that it will have a happy ending even though that ending had already been determined long ago? Does it make any sense for us to pray that Hamlet will live? Is that how prayer is described in the Bible?

The Bible tells us that God sometimes reverses his planned course of action based on prayer. In Exodus 32:11-14, Moses besought the Lord regarding a planned punishment, and in verse 14 we read, "and the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people."

### **Conclusion**

We have looked at two views regarding God and his relation to the future — the closed view and the open view.

I have tried to make the case that the open view is more consistent with the descriptions of God we find in his word. In addition, the closed view has consequences regarding free will and predestination that are contrary to the word of

God. These are very difficult issues, and I encourage you not to stop here, but rather to search the Scriptures to see for yourself how God is described with regard to time and chance.