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Pastor's Bible Study

If God Is Good

A Bible Study Series
Based on the book
"If God Is Good" by Randy Alcorn

Part XI

January 10, 2012

Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Evil and Suffering: Limiting God's Attributes Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Most proposed solutions to the problem of evil and suffering have been around for a long time; "open theism" is recent.

Open theists believe that God does not and cannot know in advance the future choices that his free creatures will make.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

What are the basic tenets of Open Theism?

Following are the basic tenets of Open Theism; it is with these presuppositions that open theists approach the Bible and interpret it:

God's greatest attribute is love.

This attribute of God is often elevated above His other attributes and used to interpret God in such a way as to be a cosmic gentleman who wants all to be saved, mourns over their loss.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Man's free will is truly free in the libertarian sense.

Man's free will is not restricted by his sinful nature but is equally able to make choices between different options.

By contrast, compatibilist free will states that a person is restricted and affected by his nature and that his nature not only affects his free will choices, but also limits his ability to choose equally among different options.

Free will is the ability to make choices. There are debates as to what extent this free will is to be understood as it relates to people. There are two main views: compatibilism and libertarianism.

The compatibilist view is the position that a person's freedom is restricted by his nature as is described in Scripture. In other words, he can only choose what his nature (sinful or regenerate) will allow him to choose. Therefore, such verses as [1 Cor. 2:14](#); [Rom. 3:10-12](#); [Rom. 6:14-20](#) are used to demonstrate that, for example, the unbeliever is incapable of choosing God of his own free will.

- ⊙ Libertarian free will says that the person's will is not restricted by his sinful nature and that he is still able to choose or accept God freely. Verses used to support this view are [John 3:16](#) and [3:36](#). Two subdivisions of libertarian free will would be "open absolute free will" which says that man's choices are not knowable by God until they occur, and "non-open absolute free will" which would state that God can know man's choices but he cannot determine them.

- ⊙ The biblical position is compatibilism. Since the Bible clearly teaches us that the unbeliever is restricted to making sinful choices ([1 Cor. 2:14](#); [Rom. 3:10-12](#); [Rom. 6:14-20](#)) then we must conclude that anyone who believes in God ([John 3:16](#); [3:36](#)) does so because God has granted that he believe ([Phil. 1:29](#)), has caused him to be born again ([1 Pet. 1:3](#)), and chose him for salvation ([2 Thess. 2:13](#)).

All the cults and false religious systems teach the libertarian view of free will that salvation and spiritual understanding are completely within the grasp of sinners (in spite of their enslavement to and deadness in sin). For them, salvation would be totally up to the ability of the individual to make such a choice.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

God does not know the future.

This is either because God cannot know the future because it does not exist, or...

It is because God chooses to not know the future even though it can be known.

God takes risks.

Because God does not know the future exhaustively, He must take risks with people whose future free will choices are unknowable.

God learns.

Because God does not know the future exhaustively, He learns as the realities of the future occur.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

God makes mistakes.

Because God does not know all things and because He is dealing with free will creatures (whose future choices He does not know), God can make mistakes in dealing with people. Therefore, God would change His plans accordingly.

God changes His mind.

God can change His mind on issues depending on what He learns and what He discovers people do. Usually, God's change of mind is due to Him being surprised by something for which He didn't plan or expect.

As you can see, Open Theism presents a view of God contrary to classical and historic Christianity which sees God as sovereign, all knowing, and unchanging.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theists argue that our free choices preclude God's knowledge of future circumstances.

While God can know in advance what *he* has planned to do, open theists claim he cannot know what his free *creatures* will choose to do. They believe this distances God from evil human choices and the consequent suffering they bring.

Process theology has long taught that God grows in knowledge, learning more, becoming more knowledgeable as events unfold.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theism stands in contrast to the biblical and historical teaching that God knows absolutely everything.

"Do you understand how the clouds float, those wonderful works of Him who has perfect knowledge?" (Job 37:16, HCSB)

"He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them." (Psalm 147:4, HCSB)

"Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him." (Matthew 6:8, HCSB)

"But even the hairs of your head have all been counted." (Matthew 10:30, HCSB)

"Aren't five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight." (Luke 12:6, HCSB)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

"Yes," an open theist will say, "I believe the passages that teach God's vast knowledge. But while he knows everything that *can* be known, future choices of his free creatures *can't* be known."

What does scripture tell us?

"Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I stand up; You understand my thoughts from far away." (Psalm 139:1–2, HCSB)

"Before a word is on my tongue, You know all about it, Lord." (Psalm 139:4, HCSB)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

From eternity past, God knew everything that will happen on every day of our lives:

"Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in Your book and planned before a single one of them began." (Psalm 139:16, HCSB)

God knows all the choices, free or not, we will ever make and all the consequences they will ever produce.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

God doesn't only know what choices his creatures will make, but what would have happened(what philosophers call *middle knowledge*) if his creatures made different choices.

God reveals to Elisha *what would have happened* if King Joash had struck the ground five or six times with arrows -- "*The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times. Then you would have struck down Aram until you had put an end to them, but now you will only strike down Aram three times."*"

(2 Kings 13:19, HCSB)

To Korazin and Bethsaida Jesus states, "*What sorrow awaits you, Korazin and Bethsaida! For if the miracles I did in you had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have repented of their sins long ago, clothing themselves in burlap and throwing ashes on their heads to show their remorse.*" (Matthew 11:21, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theist claim God knows all possible future events, but not the actual ones that will result from human and demonic choices.

It that's true, given the number of free beings and the quantity of daily choices they make, this leaves countless *billions* of choices, and events coming from those choices, that God cannot know with certainty since they haven't yet happened.

If people make meaningful choices to turn to Christ, as open theists believe, and God doesn't know in advance then how could this verse be true: "*The beast you saw was once alive but isn't now. And yet he will soon come up out of the bottomless pit and go to eternal destruction. And the people who belong to this world, whose names were not written in the Book of Life before the world was made, will be amazed at the reappearance of this beast who had died.*" (Revelation 17:8, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theist believe that a partially unaware God brings greater comfort than a God who knows everything that's coming.

Open Theism and Our Suffering and Pain

How should Christians respond to the pain and tragedy and suffering they see around them and around the world? In open theism, God does not know the future and cannot totally control all the future. Therefore, while God feels the pain of our suffering, He is often unable to prevent it. When "pointless" evil occurs, we are not to blame God. After all, "He feels as badly as we do." According to open theists, we gain great comfort in knowing that God had nothing to do with our suffering and that His disposition toward us remains one of uncompromising love.

This sounds great, doesn't it? But is it right? What do the Scriptures teach us about suffering? A few passages offer us insight. Consider Romans 8:28-32, and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in

advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:28–32, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

"even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:7–10, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Believing in God's limited future knowledge does *not* solve the problem of God withholding justice or allowing evil in the present.

Open theism sacrifices God's future knowledge, but what does it gain in exchange? Open theists suppose we should find comfort in believing God has not ordained our suffering from eternity past. But open theism's answer to the problem of evil is an illusion.

The only way to fully defend God's goodness would be to believe that God not only lacks knowledge of the future, but also of the present.

I find it easier to trust a God who has planned how he will use the tragedy for his glory and our good, than one who just found out about it but chose not to stop it anyway.

Open theism is not only biblically wrong; it's a shallow answer to the problem of evil

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theism portrays God as making mistakes.

Open theism, also known as the Open view, teaches that God learns, that He gains knowledge as He discovers what people decide to do. They teach this because they believe that God does not know the future.

Therefore God learns what happens as things occur. Unfortunately, the logical problem is that God could then make mistakes. Just as we make mistakes because we do not know what will happen, so too the God of open theism can also error. He could make a prediction that could fail. He might expect someone to repent who does not. He might believe that one thing will happen and yet it fails to occur. These would be mistakes on God's part.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

What are the ramifications of such a position? Very simple. It casts doubt on such a God who can make mistakes. Is such a God trustworthy? Is God who is supposed to be holy, righteous, and perfect in all his ways, capable of making mistakes? Is this someone that you should trust with the awesome responsibility of saving your soul?

If God is ignorant of certain things, then He does not know all things and His understanding is not infinite. But, the Bible speaks against such error:

"in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things," ([1 John 3:20](#)).

"Great is our Lord, and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite," ([Ps. 147:5](#)).

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Contrary to the claims of open theism, God does not change his mind or learn and grow in understanding.

Open theists cite 1 Samuel 15:11 to prove that God changes his mind. *"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night.*" (1 Samuel 15:11, ESV)

The word "regret" means to be grieved, to be sorry. The NLT translate it like this: *"I am sorry that I ever made Saul king, for he has not been loyal to me and has refused to obey my command." Samuel was so deeply moved when he heard this that he cried out to the Lord all night.*" (1 Samuel 15:11, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Open theists argue that when God says he "regrets" something, he implies that he didn't know what would happen. After gaining further knowledge, God changes his mind. God acted on the best knowledge he had at the time, but the bottom line is, regardless of the terminology used, God made a mistake.

This is an example of anthropomorphic expression where God speaks in human terms, in human ways, often working through people, in time, and conditioning his comments contextually, relative to the time and situation of the people. God expresses emotion over the sin of people such as anger ([Deut. 9:8](#)), regret ([1 Sam. 15:11](#)), sorrow ([1 Chron. 21:15](#)), and pity ([Judges 2:18](#)). God is merely displaying proper emotions at the proper time even though He knew from eternity that people would sin.

Analogy: I knew my children would sin and grieve me before they were born, but that does not mean that I did not know or was surprised by their rebellion when it happened, nor does it mean that I can't express regret.

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

Remarkably, between verse 11 and verse 35 of 1 Samuel 15 about God "regretting" making Saul king, another verse warns us against wrong conclusions about God: *"And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."* (1 Samuel 15:29, ESV)

"And he who is the Glory of Israel will not lie, nor will he change his mind, for he is not human that he should change his mind!" (1 Samuel 15:29, NLT)

- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?
Here we find an emphatic statement that God does *not* regret as humans do. We couldn't ask for a clearer interpretive guideline.
On the contrary, he directly tells his people, "*I am the Lord, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed.*" (Malachi 3:6, NLT)
"Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow." (James 1:17, NLT)
"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Hebrews 13:8, NLT)
- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?
God knows the end from the beginning; if he didn't, he wouldn't be God.
Fulfilled biblical prophecies are not good guesses on God's part but proof that God knows the future in detail.
Isaiah 40-45 demonstrates that false gods make faulty predictions. Why? Because false gods are either human projections or demons, and therefore finite.
Demons and false prophets may be able to guess certain aspects of the future, but they err on some points because finite beings can't know everything about the future.
- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?
In contrast, the creator says, "*Remember the things I have done in the past. For I alone am God! I am God, and there is none like me. Only I can tell you the future before it even happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.*" (Isaiah 46:9-10, NLT)
That's why God can say, "*If the prophet speaks in the Lord's name but his prediction does not happen or come true, you will know that the Lord did not give that message. That prophet has spoken without my authority and need not be feared.*" (Deuteronomy 18:22, NLT)
 - God absolutely *knows* the future. In contrast to the god of open theism, God doesn't merely predict the future with a high degree of accuracy; he sees it all in advance and cannot make a mistake.
- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?
We can find great assurance in believing God knows the future and that he works even evil and suffering together for our good.
God saw that would happen in a world of human beings, all able to choose. He saw the horrors that would come with the Fall and millennia of evil and suffering.
But he also saw, from the beginning, exactly how the ultimate good of manifesting his love and revealing the wonders of his grace would bring an eternal richness to the universe.
He does not *hope* this to be the case. He *knows* this to be the case.
- Is God's *Limited Knowledge* a Solution?

We may imagine that, on balance, it's not a fair trade. We feel less happy than we'd like to.

But God looked ahead at the benefits and saw they outweighed the costs, even the incalculable cost to his Son on the cross.

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (Romans 8:28–29, NLT)