

FOREKNOWLEDGE

Foreknowledge is the key to understanding God's sovereign purpose in salvation. Quite often people will say to me, "God knows who will be saved, but He does not determine who will be saved." The purpose of this message is to determine whether the statement "God foreknows who will be saved but does not plan it" is Biblical.

Since the Church began, there have been true Christians who have earnestly believed that God elected men according to His foreknowledge of how they would believe in Christ. They have taken this position in order to preserve man's free will in salvation and to avoid what they call the awful doctrine that God has predestined some men to be saved and some men to be lost. Christians who hold this conviction base their thinking on 1 Peter 1:1-2 which says, "**Who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.**"

My purpose in this message is to help us get a Biblical understanding of this word "foreknowledge." Many sincere Christians are confused on the issue of foreknowledge because they take a philosophical approach rather than a Biblical approach. Before I begin this message, I want to acknowledge that there are in our day many wonderful and committed Christians who will disagree with me, but I ask only that we all come to the Bible and make it the final authority of all we believe. I plead for tolerance and for Biblical interaction.

THE DEFINITION OF FOREKNOWLEDGE

PHILOSOPHICAL DEFINITION

According to the dictionary, "foreknowledge" is simply "to know beforehand." It is a knowledge of something before it happens. Unfortunately, this is the definition that many Christians take when they study the Bible. Consequently they conclude that God knows how men will believe but He in no way plans it.

BIBLICAL DEFINITION

The word "foreknowledge" is from the Greek word *proginosko*. *Pro* means "before" and *ginosko* means "to know experientially." Notice carefully that *ginosko* means "to know experientially" or "to know intimately" and it does not mean just to know something is going to happen.

Old Testament

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the word *ginosko* to speak of the act of sexual intercourse between a man and woman. **“Now the man had relations with (knew) his wife Eve, and she conceived”** (Gen. 4:1). This speaks of intimacy. In Amos 3:2, God said to Israel, **“You only have I known of all the families of the earth”** (KJV). This must refer to more than just a passive knowledge of Israel, for God in His omniscience knew all the Gentile nations then existing when He spoke this of Israel. He knew Israel in a special way as His chosen people.

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept this oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut 7:6-8).

We may conclude, then, that this is a term of intimate relationship and special love. The Jews actually translated Amos 3:2, **“You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth.”**

New Testament

In the New Testament, the word *ginosko* means an active experiential love, not just a passive knowledge of events. In 1 Corinthians 8:3 it says, **“If any one loves God, he is known by Him.”** Surely this is a knowledge of God’s sovereign love which speaks of an intimate kind of a relationship. Galatians 4:9 says the same thing, **“But now that you have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God.”** This must be a knowledge with selective or special love.

We can, therefore, conclude that the basic meaning of the word “foreknowledge” in the Bible is a loving relationship which God sustains to certain individuals because of His purpose (plan).

THE USAGE OF FOREKNOWLEDGE IN THE BIBLE

The terms “foreknowledge” (noun) and “to foreknow” (verb) occur seven times in the New Testament. A proper understanding of the usage of the word will help us understand the concept of foreknowledge in the Bible.

2 Peter 3:17

“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand (foreknowledge), be on your guard.” In this one place, the word “foreknowledge” seems to retain the Classical Greek connotation of knowing something beforehand.

Acts 26:5

“So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time previously (foreknown) if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our nation.”

In this verse, the term “foreknowledge” refers to the previous knowledge of the Jews about the Apostle Paul’s life before his conversion to Christ. From this verse we can say that the Jews had a personal, vital and firsthand knowledge about Paul. Paul was actively and not passively known by the Jews.

We can conclude that when “foreknowledge” is used in relation to men in 2 Peter 3:17 and Acts 26:5 it means “to know beforehand,” but when “foreknowledge” is used of God it means experiential knowledge according to His plan or purpose.

Romans 11:2

“God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew . . .” God has not cast away His people Israel whom He foreknew. God did not passively know the Jews but rather actively knew them and put His sovereign, elective love upon them (Deut. 7:6-8). Because God set His sovereign, elective love on Israel, He still has a purpose for them, even though the nation is now in rejection.

Acts 2:22-23

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this 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.”

This verse tells us that the death of Christ was no freak accident in history but was part of the “predetermined plan” of God. Whatever else we may say about this verse, it clearly teaches that foreknowledge is either part of the plan of God and comes after the plan of God, or foreknowledge is equated with the plan. God knew about the death of Christ because He planned it. This verse also tells us that God the Father had an intimate, loving relationship with His Son Jesus Christ, and willingly and deliberately sent His Son to the Cross to fulfill His sovereign purpose to save sinners.

Romans 8:28-30

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

All things work together for good to every person who is called to salvation according to God’s purpose (plan). God’s purpose is further defined as God’s foreknowing, predestining, calling, justifying and glorifying the Christian. These verses clearly teach that foreknowledge comes after God’s purpose. Foreknowledge is according to God’s purpose. God’s purpose is not according to God’s foreknowledge.

These verses in Romans 8:28-30 teach that God sovereignly, lovingly and experientially knew every Christian from the eternal counsels. God knew and loved the Christian before He ever called him to Himself. What love! When we were rebels and enemies, God knew us and waited patiently until the day on which He knew we would trust in Christ and be saved. He knew and loved us long before we ever knew and loved Christ. God knew all about our sin; yet for His own glory, He chose to save us through Christ. Such love is too wonderful for us to comprehend.

1 Peter 1:19-20

“But with the precious blood, as a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.” This tells us that Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world. Christ was foreknown by the Father in that His death was planned. Yet Christ was more than passively foreknown. The Father had an active, vital and loving relationship with the Son through all eternity. It is interesting to note that the translator of the King James Version translated the word “foreknown” as “foreordained” because he understood foreknowledge to be a part of God’s plan.

1 Peter 1:1-2

“Who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” This says that election is according to foreknowledge. Remember, foreknowledge means a loving relationship and is related to God’s purpose (plan). Some have attempted to translate this verse, “chosen according to election” or “chosen according to foreordination.” These translations would not be entirely wrong because election is according to God’s purpose or plan. However, the best translation would be “chosen according to selective love.”

God in eternity past put His love upon us and chose us to be His in much the same way a man falls in love with a woman before he chooses her to be his wife.

The great Puritan preacher John Newton used to tell the story of the little old lady who would say, “Ah, sir, the Lord must have loved me before I was born, or else He would not have seen anything in me to love afterwards.”

Summary

Based on the linguistic definition and usage we can now say that foreknowledge as it relates to salvation should be defined as follows: Foreknowledge is an active word based on God’s eternal purpose. It indicates a loving relationship which God sustains with certain individuals that results in the choice of them to salvation.

THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR FOREKNOWLEDGE

As in most doctrinal issues, the problem always comes when Christians try to express foreknowledge theologically. We have already proven the Bible teaches that God foreknows and chooses men to salvation according to His eternal purpose. However, this causes frustration in many Christians because they do not understand how this fits with man’s choice in salvation. Their minds crave for logic and they do not acknowledge a mystery between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. These Christians want to preserve man’s free will and do not want to fall into fatalism, so they redefine foreknowledge, giving it a philosophical meaning rather than a Biblical meaning.

Those who desire to maintain man’s total free will give a philosophical meaning to foreknowledge and define it as “foresight” or “prescience.” They conclude that because God is omniscient (all knowing), He looked down the corridors of time and saw how men would believe and elected them to salvation on that basis. They continually say that God foreknows who will believe but does not determine who will believe.

Three well-known contemporary men who are free willers in their theology made the following statements:

God, the Father, had the good sense to know who would believe in Christ, and He set them apart, in union with God in eternity past. (R.B. Thieme, Jr.)

God knew I would do all this before the world was made. God knew it because He is omniscient. God knew, before the world was, that I would be born; He knew where I would be born; in short, God knew all about me—my name, the color of my hair, how much I would weigh, what I would like to eat. God knew I would be saved; He knew the moment I would be saved, and where. He knew who would be preaching at the time and in what church I would be baptized. He knew exactly how many days I will live before I die. Yes, in the beginning God knew all about me—but that did not determine my salvation! (Oliver B. Green)

Foreknowledge is a very simple subject. It is simply the teaching that God, Who is omniscient, knows everything ahead of time. There is no future to Him. He lives in timeless eternity, knows everything, therefore knows in advance who will accept the Gospel, who will reject it. But His foreknowledge in no way deprives men of freedom of choice any more than people who know me deprive me of freedom of choice when they say, "Here is milk chocolate and bitter chocolate: take your pick." I am free to take either, but I always take bitter (and people who know me know that ahead of time!) (Cornelius Vanderbreggen, Jr.)

Again a free willer says that God foreknows how men will believe in His omniscience, and knowing they will believe, he elects them to salvation. God then predestines the elect to be conformed to the image of His Son, Christ, and ultimately to heaven.

Even a free willer sees that God has a plan.

Election looks back to foreknowledge. Predestination looks forward to destiny. The elect are predestined to a fixed destiny. This is possible because God in His sovereign power and omniscience saw the end in the beginning. (Oliver B. Green)

A free willer has too high an opinion of man and too low an understanding of God. His viewpoint of foreknowledge lessens the majesty of God.

Kenneth Wuest seems to have a good grasp of the meaning of Biblical foreknowledge. He says,

God is not a crystal ball gazer in that He looks down the corridors of time to see how men will believe and act and then sets His plan based on their actions. No! God is God, the Creator, the First Cause, the Author of salvation. He does all according to His own will and for His own glory. (K. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*)

Those who believe in free will theology must always take a philosophical view of God's foreknowledge and not the Biblical view which is a loving relationship to individuals. Furthermore, free will theologians equate "foreknowledge" and "omniscience" and they are not the same. Omniscience says God knows all things actual and possible; foreknowledge is a loving relationship God sustains with an individual. It should be stressed again that in the Bible God's foreknowledge always follows after God's purpose (Acts 2:22-23; Rom. 8:28-30). Foreknowledge is based on God's purpose.

It should also be pointed out that foreknowledge deals with persons and not with faith. It has nothing to do with God discovering by foresight if men will exercise faith but with a loving relationship He sustains with individuals from eternity past. God did not say, "What He foreknew" but "**Who He foreknew**" (Rom 8:29; 11:2).

A free will theology has some serious theological problems to solve. First, if God only knows everything that is going to happen but does not determine or plan it, how does He make anything certain? There would be no certainty of future events because there would be no divine plan. Second, a free willer cannot deny there is a plan so he would have to say that God makes His plan after He sees how man will make his plans.

If God only foreknows how men will believe and act but does not determine, then this makes the whole plan of God dependent upon man. This view makes God less than a man and does not make Him sovereign. Plus it leaves an omniscient, unchangeable God learning something from the actions of men.

Third, a free willer must acknowledge that God has a plan, even though he bases that plan on God's foreknowledge. He says that God sees in His omniscience who will believe and who will reject and then elects or reprobates those persons. However, the free willer in practice is faced with the problem of God's plan. God knows who will be saved and who will not be saved because He foresees it and then sets His plan into motion. Can this number of persons change? The answer is no! As far as God carrying out His plan, no matter how He got His information to put it into operation, it is certain and fixed. Even a free willer must acknowledge something of God's sovereignty in salvation.

It is far better, however, to acknowledge the scriptural teaching that God is sovereign and God has a plan and this is the best plan. God's plan is based on His sovereign, holy, loving character and includes all things, even the free choices of men and sin. Perhaps the theological order of the plan is: omniscience, purpose (foreordination), foreknowledge, election and predestination. God's plan (sometimes referred to as the Decree) was first thought out by God before it was put into action by a sovereign act of God's will. God in His omniscience knew everything actual and possible.

He had an infinite number of possible plans but He conceived one plan. This is the best plan because it brings this most glory to God. **“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world”** (Acts 15:18 - KJV).

God’s plan (foreordination) includes foreknowledge, election and predestination and explains how God can be certain of the future. God’s knowledge of the future is as complete as His knowledge of the past and the present because the future depends entirely upon Himself. What God has conceived (omniscience) He has purposed (foreordination). The future is certain because God’s plan is certain. Were it possible for something to occur apart from either the direct agency or permission of God, then something would be independent of His knowledge, and He would immediately cease to be Supreme.

On one occasion, after Dr. Charles Hodge had finished a theological lecture, he was approached by a lady who said to him, “So you believe, Dr. Hodge, that what is to be will be?” He replied, “Why, yes, lady, I do.” He continued, “Would you have me believe that what is to be won’t be?” And I might add, there are only three logical choices. What won’t be, will be! What will be, won’t be! What will be, will be!

THE PROBLEM OF FREE CHOICE AND SIN

If a person has been following along with the argument of this message, he might say, “Ah Ha! Does God’s sovereign plan take away man’s free choice? According to foreordination, does God cause men to sin?” In both cases, the answer is absolutely not!

FREE CHOICE

All Christians admit a mystery between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Both are taught in Scripture. Luke 22:22 tells us that everything about the death of Christ was predetermined by God, even the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. **“For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man through whom He is betrayed!”** Judas could not frustrate God’s plan. Yet the Bible teaches that Judas was 100% responsible for his betrayal of Christ. It is useless for us to try to harmonize with our finite minds the plan of an infinite God. All we can do is admit both divine sovereignty and human responsibility and acknowledge our limitations as creatures.

Historically, Protestants have tried to accept this mystery, attempting to maintain the balance between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in salvation.

Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England: While the Scriptures distinctly set forth the election, predestination, and calling of the people of God unto eternal life, as Christ saith, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me;" they no less positively affirm man's free agency and responsibility, and that salvation is freely offered to all through Christ.

Westminster Confession (Presbyterian): God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is liberty or contingency of second causes (free choice) taken away, but rather established.

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

SIN AND DISOBEDIENCE

God, being perfect and holy, can do no act of sin Himself. **"Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt any one"** (James 1:13). God never tempts men to sin, and man always sins according to his own free choice. However, God has somehow included sin in the plan and man is always responsible for it. Yet, God always has control over sin and it can never take Him by surprise or throw His secret plan into a tailspin.

There is only one verse in Scripture that might indicate that God is the author of sin. **"I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things"** (Isa. 45:7 - KJV). The word "evil" could and should be translated "calamity" (NASB). God creates calamity but not sin.

People get hung up over sin in God's plan because they are finite, and also because of theologians who try to carry their logic into their theology. For instance, Charles Hodge in his Systematic Theology says, "It is utterly irrational to think that God cannot foreordain sin if He foreordained the crucifixion of Christ." If he means that God planned to permit sin, I can accept that concept. If he means that God causes men to sin in His plan, I cannot accept that because it is contrary to Scripture.

It is best to state that God has willed to permit sin but He is in no sense the chargeable cause. God, by permission, willed the possibility of sin. The very fact that He allows sin to happen and does not prevent it shows that He wills its permission. God takes the responsibility for the inclusion of sin as a theoretical principle in His plan. God is not shunning this relationship. However, God does not take the direct responsibility for sin. When God chose to include sin in His plan, He entered into a certain relationship to that sin in such a way that man is still responsible. Only God can do that and we can only accept it by faith.

When God willed to permit sin, this allowed Him to be sovereign over sin and yet not be the author of it. God is governor over sin, for He determines its exercise and regulates its bounds by permission (Ps 76:10). When God willed to permit sin, He also preserved man's responsibility.

We can never blame God for our sin. In every act of sin, we should have avoided it and could have avoided it and we are always responsible for it.

An accused and convicted murderer in Scotland, where God's sovereign purposes were once strongly affirmed, said to the Judge, "I was predestined from all eternity to do it." To whom the Judge replied, "So be it, then I was predestined from all eternity to order you to be hanged by the neck, which I now do." Our Protestant forefathers have attempted to state the relationship of God to sin in His plan.

Philadelphia Confession of Faith (Baptist): God hath decreed in himself from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeable, all things whatsoever come to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor bath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears his wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing his decree.