

Does God Plan the Future? God's Omniscience Revealed in the OT Covenants

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Introduction

The “openness of God theology” denies the absolute sovereignty of God. As such it redefines the identity and nature of God, and has much in common with other humanist expressions of Christianity, like Pelagianism and Arminianism.

There are several motivations behind the current “openness of God” movement. One dominant concern is the effort to excuse God’s involvement in calamity and corruption in the world. The age-old question is, if God is almighty and loving, how can He allow suffering?¹ Openness theologians respond that God is not sovereign over the complex combinations in His creation and that He is just as surprised at calamities as we are. Therefore He cannot be responsible for the tragedies in our lives.

It comes back to the age-old question why there is evil in the world. Openness proponents reason that if God is not responsible for primary and secondary causes, then He can be acquitted in man’s [frivolous] lawsuits that charge Him with needless pain and suffering. Related to this concern is the core belief of openness theology, that the future is open to God. Neither the future nor the means of getting there are pre-determined, but rather are in a state of constant flux. The flow of history for individuals and for civilization is a kaleidoscope of possibilities because individuals allegedly are sovereign in decision-making. This particular element of the movement simply re-asserts the autonomy of man.

Sadly, man’s autonomy is a tenet of Pelagianism that is not far removed from naturalistic paganism. What the Bible calls “will worship”² recently was manifested at the Parliament of the World’s Religions when the Wiccans promoted their ethic, “As it harm none, do what ye will.”³ In other words, you are the master of your own fate and may do what is right in your own eyes as long as your decisions do not harm others. Pagans have no higher authority than their own will, and proponents of openness theology, while recognizing the incumbency of following God’s revealed will, believe that their own wills are inviolable and unmovable from outside themselves. Both of the above issues are best answered by classic Christian theology. In giving consistent, biblical answers to the problem of evil and to the question of the freedom of the human will, theological giants like Jonathan Edwards respond, “let God be God.”⁴ There is no contradiction to God’s being simultaneously almighty, all-loving, and perfect in goodness.

There are innumerable biblical proofs and patterns revealing the absolute sovereignty of God over time and creation. We shall consider several from the Old Testament.

God's Covenant Promises

Christians have God's solemn word that all of His promises to us are "yea and amen"⁵ in Christ Jesus. These promises are more than a "divine hopeful" because they are the revelation of His eternal plan. They are God's sovereign determination projected into the world.

God, of course, has limitless resources to ensure the ultimate execution of His purposes, and the openness theologians recognize this. His omnipotence, however, is not enough for them to admit God's providential control over all His creatures and all their actions. While they tend to agree with classic theologians that God will achieve His purposes in the eschaton, they are reluctant to grant that God predetermines the events leading to His final objective. Contrary to this thinking, there are explicit predictions within the covenant that indicate God not only sees the future, but He has arranged the future in the unfolding of His promises.

Following are just a few short-term promises that ratify the unconditional nature of the covenants.

Abrahamic Covenant

In the Abrahamic covenant God gives Abraham several promises and offers other glimpses of the future for him and his posterity. Even though God tells Abraham to claim the territory of the promised land (Gen 13:17), Abraham actually never exercised stewardship over it as evidenced by his receiving bread from its inhabitants (Gen 14:18) and his buying a grave plot for his wife (Gen 23:4). In fact, more than 75 years before the event, God informs Abraham that he will die⁶ at a good old age and that his innumerable descendants, (yet to be seen by Abraham who has no children at all), will possess the promised land (Gen 15:15, 18).

Another specific prediction of the future offered to Abraham (Gen 15:13, 14) is that his posterity (1) will multiply while it is in a foreign land, (2) where they will be afflicted, (3) for a definite time span of 400 years.

These are future details that God had predetermined and revealed beforehand. Despite Jacob's later resistance to taking his family into Egypt during a Palestinian famine, God's design revealed to Abraham was not frustrated. For God had sent Jacob's son Joseph into Egypt to prepare the way for the incubation of Jacob's clan into a great nation. Joseph's wicked brothers thought they alone had sent him into Egypt when they sold him into slavery, but Joseph later knew that God had brought him there "to save much people alive."⁷

Davidic Covenant

Both the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are unconditional. The promises must come to pass for Abraham and David. They may not have seen the realization of the promises in their lifetimes,⁸ but it is no difficulty for God to raise the dead to life in order to receive that which was promised.⁹

God promised David that, unlike King Saul's throne, the dynastic rule over the theocratic kingdom would never be taken from his line:

“My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So I will establish his descendants forever.”¹⁰

In the light of this sweeping, unconditional promise, consider this covenant curse that falls on the last Judean king in the Davidic line,¹¹ Jehoiachin. In the face of official apostasy, Jeremiah predicts God's future:

“Write this man down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah.”¹²

Jehoiachin was carried captive to Babylon and the Davidic line ended until the coming of the Messianic King.

This curse did not vitiate the original promise to David. Rather, God in His unfathomable wisdom could bless David and Solomon's seed with an everlasting throne while ripping it from Jehoichin as the rightful heir. A comparison of Christ's genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 sheds light on this conundrum and also upon one reason for His virgin birth. Jesus was the true son of David as the physical son of Mary (Luke 3), as well as the legal Claimant to the throne through his step-father, Joseph, who was in the line of Jehoiachin. God clearly sees even difficult futures.

The Big Picture

It is important to understand God's providence as the patriarch Joseph did. God not only works the good things together for the “good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose,”¹³ but He wonderfully works the evil and tragic things together for good. This is because the God of providence cannot be surprised by evil actions; rather He superintends and overrules them for the good of the believer. Joseph comforted his sinful brothers with this gospel truth: “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”¹⁴

From the first sin to the greatest sin in history, God sovereignly disposes His will. Regarding the murder of the sinless Son of God, Scripture reveals that this heinous crime was “according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.”¹⁵ Ever since man's rebellion in Adam, the Almighty has used, nay, has “chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and . . . the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.”¹⁶

So it is that God promised His Deliverer through the Seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. In working out the divine plan of redemption, He promised that kings would come from barren Sarah. Other weak and despised vessels were elevated by God from privation and contempt to prominence. Examples of Leah, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth all illustrate the supernal principle that

“the first shall be last, and the last first.” This is so God’s purposes worked out in their lives might be by grace and not by the will of man.

As the sacred writers looked back over the outworking of God’s purposes in the lives of these women, they saw more clearly what God had seen from the beginning. In his genealogy of Christ, Matthew consciously highlighted only four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. These women had less than glorious pedigrees or reputations. Yet God calls them and overrules their actions in the outworking of His irrefutable design that was grounded in the promise of grace given to Adam and Eve—the Deliverer would come as the seed of the woman.

The book of Ruth also seems to have a sense of destiny flowing from Genesis 3:15. But this sense is not conveyed in the lives of Ruth and Naomi so much as in the book’s flashbacks to Tamar.¹⁷ Many believe that the book of Ruth was written as an apology for David’s and, perhaps Solomon’s, kingship. Neither king was the natural first choice for king, considering that lastborn David displaced King Saul, and that Solomon, born late in the royal pecking order of a questionable union, had to survive a popular coup. For the first audience, the story of Ruth, the ancestress of David and Solomon, illustrated how God elevated this despised woman from obscurity to a mother in Israel. The allusions to Tamar and second choice Perez reinforce the message that God’s ways are not always man’s ways. If God can bless and redeem a Moabitess, He certainly can promote obscure Judean men to the throne in order that none can say they succeeded apart from God.

We now see God’s fuller purpose for the connection between Ruth and Tamar. Both of these spurned women were destined to be in the line of the Messiah. While Rahab and Bathsheba are not mentioned in the book of Ruth, their presence might be implied in the closing genealogy. Rahab’s husband is listed as a progenitor of Boaz, and David, upon whom the genealogy terminates, is the husband of Bathsheba. All of these women were divinely chosen in the outworking of the first promise of grace in Genesis 3:15.

Conclusion

The focus of this short article has been upon the execution of some of God’s covenant promises, showing that His accomplishment of short-term objectives deliberately builds toward the consummation of His plan. God knows not only where He is going, but where His people are going and how they will get there along the way. Through the ages He has been gathering the elect as a chosen people for his planned kingdom while He turns the wicked to destruction in order to magnify the glory of His justice, wisdom, and power.

More Old Testament illustrations of God’s knowing the future and predisposing His designs could be given, especially in the matter of His control of creation in shaping the hearts of those at war with him. Events in the lives of Jonah, Elijah, Job, and Joshua come to mind.

The biblical record makes one thing sure: God’s providence is always in motion, not in a responsive way, but in a guiding and providing way that works all things together for those who

are called according to His purpose. We must agree with the Bible that God controls men—men do not control God.

Fallen human nature buttressed by smug theological ignorance will never on its own bow before the majesty of God's holiness, power, and omniscience. The openness of God teaching gives aid and comfort to such humanists who insist on human autonomy. This dangerous trend is just the latest manifestation in a long history of philosophers and churchmen trying to diminish God's majesty and authority. May openness theology see a short future at the hand of the great God of the Bible Who holds the future.

¹ Gregory A. Boyd (*Is God to Blame? Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil; God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*), seriously reassessed his personal view of God's sovereignty after the tragic loss of a daughter in an automobile accident.

² KJV of Col 2:23.

³ Cited in the Fall 2004 "Special Report" of the American Council of Christian Churches that covered the Fourth Parliament of the World's Religions held in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2004.

⁴ Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others have also addressed these questions biblically. For further reading, see Jonathan Edwards' works, *The Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*.

⁵ 2 Cor 1:20.

⁶ Matt 22:31, 32 and Luke 13:28 indicate that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be in the future kingdom. The resurrection of the patriarchs ensures that they will personally receive the covenantal promises that they never saw in their lifetimes.

⁷ Gen 50:20.

⁸ See Heb 11:13. Similarly, God promises a "crown of life" to all believers, but this reward is not immediate in this lifetime (Jas 1:12).

⁹ Heb 11:39, 40.

¹⁰ Psa 89:28, 29. See also 2 Sam 7:15, 16 and 1 Kgs 2:45; 9:5.

¹¹ While Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah follows him as the very last king in Judah, Jehoiachin was the last king in the Davidic line of succession.

¹² Jer 22:30.

¹³ Rom 8:28.

¹⁴ Gen 50:20.

¹⁵ Acts 1:23.

¹⁶ 1Cor 1:27, 28.

¹⁷ Ruth 4:12, 18.