

LESSON 33

How Does Prophecy Work?

Last week we began our special lesson on prophecy in the Bible as an interlude between Chapters 10 and 11. And we started by placing a tent peg firmly into the ground — God has given us free will.

We then considered whether God sometimes overrides that free will, and we began by looking at the most frequently cited evidence for the proposition that he does — the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Romans 9:18 tells us that God hardens whom he wills. Doesn't that mean that God overrides our free will whenever he wills? To answer that question, we need to dig down a bit more into the text.

How does God harden someone's heart?

First, this hardening, when it occurs in the Bible, is part of God's judicial work — it is directed only at those who have refused to do God's will and are actively working against him.

The result of this hardening is that people become increasingly insensitive to God's word. The hardened person moves further and further away from God. How is this accomplished? God deliberately forces a person to repeatedly make choices even though he knows that the person will repeatedly make the wrong choices.

In Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:4; 14:8; 14:17, God says that he hardened Pharaoh's heart. What does that mean?

First, was God the *only* cause of Pharaoh's hardened heart? No. In Exodus 8:32, 9:34, and 1 Samuel 6:6 we see that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Further, in Exodus

7:22, it is implied that Pharaoh's magicians also contributed to the hardness of his heart.

What did God do to harden Pharaoh's heart? God hardened his heart by making demands that Pharaoh rejected. We also contribute to the hardening of men's hearts when we teach people the gospel and they reject the message. Every choice we make either brings us closer to God or takes us further away from God. And our heart becomes increasingly hardened each time we make that latter choice.

This is not just an ancient phenomenon. Those who listen to gospel sermons each week yet reject the invitation become increasingly hardened. Who causes that hardening? It is a team effort. The person involved causes it, we cause it, and God causes it — just as with Pharaoh.

How did the magicians harden Pharaoh's heart? They imitated some of the plagues and made Pharaoh think that the plagues were not God's doing. Likewise the world contributes to the hardening that occurs today when the world denies that God exists or tells us that we do not need God.

Matthew 13:22 — *He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.*

Without God's demands we cannot harden our hearts against him. When God makes a demand he gives us a choice; we can accept his demand or harden our heart against his demand.

In either case, the choice is ours — but God's approach to us initiated the choice and hence it is right to say (if we reject him) that he hardened our heart. But we also hardened our heart, the world hardened our heart, and those who proclaimed the word to us also hardened our heart.

Does God harden the hearts of believers? Absolutely not! In 2 Corinthians 3:12-16, Paul says that the unbelieving Jews are hardened when they read the old law apart

from Christ, but when they turn to Christ the hardness is removed. In Hebrews 3:13, we read that we are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and in Hebrews 3:15 and 4:7, we are instructed not to harden our own hearts.

Is there something mysterious in God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart? Does God harden people today? Are the Jews being restrained from believing because God has hardened their hearts and will not let them believe? No, to all three questions.

We harden our hearts when we choose the world over God, and we become increasingly hardened every time we make that choice. God's only contribution to the hardness of our heart is the demands he makes upon us. Without his demands there would be no hardness of heart against him. When Pharaoh rejected God, God did not back off. Instead, God increased the demands that he was making on Pharaoh. In that sense, God hardened Pharaoh's heart even further. God's part in the hardening was to force Pharaoh to make a choice; Pharaoh's part was to make the wrong choice.

God knew that Pharaoh would rebel against his requests and, by God's continued asking, Pharaoh was driven deeper into rebellion. Yet the choice was his at each step, and at each step God demonstrated his power to the world.

Another example we should consider is that of Peter. Jesus told him shortly before the fact that he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed — and he did. Did Peter have the free will to do otherwise? How was Peter's will free if what he was going to do had been determined before he was presented with the choice of whether to do it?

Perhaps the answer is just that Jesus knew Peter perfectly. Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew Peter. God has perfect knowledge of all things that are knowable, and that means God has perfect knowledge of us.

Psalm 139:1-6 — *O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou com-*

passest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.

So, yes, perhaps the answer is that Peter had free will, and yes, Jesus knew with certainty how Peter would act in a certain situation before Peter was ever placed in that situation. And notice I said that Jesus knew with *certainty* what Peter would do, not just with some high probability. I think we will all agree that divine prophecy can't come down to probabilities. There can be and is no margin for error in divine prophecy. Prophecy is not a weather report. ("There's a 90% chance of denial tomorrow.") We should think of this as another tent peg. Why? Because even one error would place the prophet under the condemnation of all false prophets:

Deuteronomy 18:22 — *When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.*

These are difficult questions, and we will not be able to answer them all because not all answers have been revealed to us. At some point, we will have to trust God, who loves us and who always does what is right and what is just. (Some more tent pegs!) But before reaching that point we should carefully study what has been revealed to us on this subject, and much has been revealed.

Here in a nutshell is our question when it comes to prophecy. God tells us that a certain event will occur at a certain time — how does God know that the event will occur? Does he know it because he can travel freely through time, and thus he can look forward at what we will do even before we do it, and, in a sense, God is just reporting the event to us? Or does God know that the event will occur because God is

going to cause it to occur? Either way we have a possible issue with free will — how do we have free will if what we will do and say and think is already known before we do or say or think it? And how do we have free will if God overrides that free will to cause certain events (such as Peter’s denial) to occur?

These are difficult questions, and we are not the only people grappling with them. The September 27, 2014, issue of *New Scientist* includes an article on page 11 entitled “A belief in free will is a tough one to shake.” It says that some believe that free will is incompatible with neuroscience. They argue that demonstrating the predictability of our brain should reveal the illusory nature of free will and lead people to reject it. That is, eventually science will be able to perfectly predict every action and every thought from a set of initial conditions — and then we will all know that free will is just an illusion. (This is all coming from the same scientists who can’t accurately predict whether it will rain tomorrow!)

Just from the Scriptures we have already looked at, we know that free will is no illusion. It is real, and we have it. But how can we reconcile our free will with the prophecy of God?

In Ecclesiastes 9:11, Solomon tells us that “time and chance happeneth to them all.” We know that Ecclesiastes was written from the perspective of one under the sun, and certainly from that perspective it does appear that time and chance happen to all. We move through time as we leave the past and enter the future. While we know partially what will happen in the future, most of it is unknown and unknowable to us. And as for chance, we live in a world dominated by possibilities rather than certainties. In fact, apart from death and taxes, cynics suggest there are no certainties.

In our study of prophecy, we need to explore the relation of time and chance, not to man, but to God. What is the relation of God to time? Does God experience anything by chance? As we think about this topic, we are quickly confronted with many questions.

Proverbs 16:33 — *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*

Does that verse mean that God knows the outcome of a coin flip before the flip? Or does it tell us that God determines the outcome of each coin flip so that it comes up a certain way? Does anything in the universe actually occur by chance, or is every event, no matter how seemingly minor, part of a preordained plan of God? Does God know our actions and thoughts before we do them or think them? If so, how long in advance does he know these things? Did he know them before we were even born? Did God know Adam and Eve would sin before he even created them? Was it a certainty or just a possibility? Is it even possible for God to experience a possibility rather than a certainty? Is it possible for God to create beings with free will and simultaneously know beforehand every action and every thought that those free will beings will ever experience?

And most importantly, what does the Bible tell us about free will and God's foreknowledge? Does the Bible ever depict God as changing his mind? Does God ever speak about the future in term of possibilities rather than certainties? Is God ever disappointed about how things turn out? Does God ever experience regret? Does God ever experience surprise? Does God ever have any new experiences? Does God ever risk anything? Can you even experience risk, regret, or surprise if you already know how everything will turn out?

As for Proverbs 16:33 ("The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD"), one commentator opens his discussion of that verse by flatly stating, "There is no such thing as chance." Really? Even though Ecclesiastes 9:11 tells us that time and chance happen to all? The lot that is referenced in Proverbs 16:33 was not part of a game of chance, but instead was used to predict the future. What that verse is telling us is that, although men may try to predict the future by casting lots, it is God who determines the future. They should look to God rather than to random chance. And that is a good message for us as we study these difficult issues.

How are we to go about answering these questions? To begin, we must confront the possibility that some of these questions may be unanswerable. If we have shown anything so far in this lesson, it is that coming up with difficult questions is easy. Coming up with answers takes more work! We dislike labeling any question unanswerable, but it may be that we are just not in a position to understand how God operates in relation to time.

A famous mathematics book is entitled *Flatland*, and it deals with creatures that inhabit a two-dimensional world having width and height, but no depth. In effect, they live on a sheet of paper. The book describes how such flat creatures would perceive creatures like ourselves who inhabit three spatial dimensions, and you quickly see how there would be some things about the three dimensional creatures that could never be explained to and understood by the two dimensional creatures.

Now, I am certainly not suggesting that God occupies extra spatial dimensions because we know that God is a spirit. But I am suggesting that we may be living in a *spiritual* flatland in which there are some things that can never be explained to us or understood by us, at least in this life. But not being able to understand *everything* does not mean we cannot understand *anything*. How can we attempt to answer these questions?

First, we could turn to **physics** to help us understand the relation between God and time.

Time, it has been said, is what keeps everything from happening at once. Is God wholly apart from time, or does God in some way experience time as he deals with mankind? We just studied about an angel who was delayed for three weeks. He experienced time, it would seem. We know from 2 Peter 3:8 that God does not experience time as we do, but does that mean God does not experience time at all? That verse suggests that God does experience time.

God reveals himself to us today in two ways — through his word and through his world. Our understanding of time and its relation to this physical universe has un-

dergone a revolution in the last century due to the work of Einstein and others. As they have investigated God's creation, they have helped us understand more about the nature of God. Isn't that exactly what Paul said would happen in Romans 1:20?

Second, we could turn to **philosophy**.

Many books have been written on the subject of time and its relation to God, and in fact I looked at several of them in preparing this lesson. This subject is deep, and there is no lack of material.

Finally, we could turn to the **Bible**, and (I hope, not surprisingly) that is the approach we will take here.

If we want to know more about God, then the first and best place to look for answers is in his word. And again, there is no lack of material. The Bible is full of descriptions about how God operates in this world. Whatever we conclude about the questions we listed earlier, if our conclusions about God do not match what we read about God in the Bible, then those conclusions are wrong — no matter how careful and logical we may think we have been.

A threshold question is whether any of this really matters, or is it merely of philosophical or academic interest? The short answer is that it matters very much. The issues we will consider in this lesson concern one of the most fundamental issues in all of religion — the question of God's relation to the world and the question of human freedom. If God knows all of our actions and thoughts in advance, then how can we be free? If God does not know all of our actions and thoughts in advance, then how can he be all-knowing? Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. What we think of God and how we respond to him are closely related.

A wrong view on this issue can lead to fatalism and resignation. Why should we proclaim the gospel to people who are already predestined to be saved or lost? How can our actions have any effect on something that was predetermined long before any of us were born?

Christian fatalism is not merely an innocuous doctrinal interpretation. Fatalism is a paralyzing disease. It infects its victims with complacency and apathy that immobilize their will to resist evil while eroding their determination to accomplish the great work of Christ.

A wrong view on this issue can lead to Calvinism. Here are John Calvin's views on some of the issues we are considering:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.

If ever there were an ungodly view of God, that is it — and yet that ungodly view is the predominate view in much of the denominational world.

But, wait, you say. What about Proverbs 16:4? “The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” Doesn't that verse tell us that God made evil people just to fuel the fires of hell? No, of course not. We know that can't be what that verse means because we know that it is not God's will that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). What Proverbs 16:4 means is what God tells us elsewhere (Romans 9-11 for example) — that God can use men's evil for his own good purposes. That is, even evil people can be useful to God in carrying out his plans to bless the world. And I think that verse is also a warning — for some of us, our only purpose in life may be to serve as a warning to others.

A wrong view on this issue can cause us (inadvertently for some but purposefully for others) to lay charges of evil against God. A classic argument goes like this: If God is willing to prevent evil but not able to do so then he is not all powerful. If God is not willing to prevent evil then he is not all good. Thus, God is either not all powerful or not all good. The classic response to that argument is the free will defense.

God's will is that his creatures have free will. God cannot create free will creatures who cannot choose to do evil because to do so would be to create free will creatures without free will — a logical impossibility. Thus, the choice is between having free will creatures along with the possibility of evil or not having free will creatures — and God chose the former.

The free will defense is, of course, rendered ineffective if we do not have free will. If our actions and thoughts were known by God long before we were even born — if in fact they were part of his eternal decree as Calvin describes it — then God is responsible for all the evil in this world.

When you read denominational commentaries, you often see the phrase “die-hard Calvinist.” These so-called die-hards are not afraid to walk down the road to which Calvinism logically leads. They are not afraid to affirm that evil is part of God's plan and part of his will. They are not afraid to affirm that God creates most people simply to fuel the fires of hell — and that he individually knows and individually wills that they fuel those fires long before they are born.

In truth, all Calvinism is die-hard Calvinism. Those Calvinists who criticize the die-hard group are simply seeking to avoid the logical conclusions to which all Calvinism leads. The die-hards despite their grave errors have at least the merit of logical consistency.

A wrong view on this issue can hinder our prayer life. If God does not change and indeed cannot change, then for what reason do we pray? Why ask God to move a mountain if that mountain was destined to remain or to move long before we were ever born? What good does it ask to pray that someone will hear and obey the gospel if that person was created simply to fuel the fires of hell?

What are these issues really all about? These issues are NOT about the omniscience of God. Everyone agrees on both sides of this argument that God is omniscient. We sometimes say that God knows everything, but what we should really say is that God knows everything that is knowable. If there are things that are not knowable,

then by definition God does not know them. Perhaps nothing is unknowable, but if anything is unknowable, then, by definition, God does not know that unknowable thing. So, if certain future events are not knowable prior to their occurrence, then it does not contradict the omniscience of God to say that God does not know those unknowable future events.

These issues really involve a debate about the nature of the future. Does the future consist only of settled events (called the closed view) or does the future include unsettled events (called the open view)?

We must in our study avoid two pitfalls. First, we must recognize the danger of presumption. We tend to exaggerate our ability to understand God. We often insist that God conform to our ideas about him and about his creation. The second pitfall is that we sometimes tend to exaggerate our *inability* to understand God. Some people would avoid this study altogether because they argue God is beyond all human thought. The first pitfall leads to anthropomorphism — the view that God is just a glorified human being. The second pitfall leads to agnosticism — the view that we cannot know anything at all about God with complete certainty.

One topic we will refer to several times is the concept of free will. We have already shown from the Bible that we have free will, but what is free will? How is it defined? At the very least, freedom involves the absence of external compulsion. But we cannot stop there. Freedom requires more than the absence of coercion. It also requires the presence of genuine alternatives. I am free to drive any car to work when I get up in the morning — but I have only one car! Thus, that choice has really already been made for me. But if I had two cars, then I would have freedom to choose which car to drive each morning. An act is free precisely to the extent that it renders definite something otherwise indefinite.

Do we have free will? We answered that question at the beginning of our study. Many verses throughout the Bible directly call for men to make personal decisions.

Deuteronomy 30:19 — *I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.*

Joshua 24:15 — *Choose you this day whom ye will serve.*

But do I have free will or do I just *think* I have free will? Did God creation humans with free will or did he create humans who think they have free will but who really do not? Is our free will just an illusion?

How can free will be an illusion when hell is not? We are help accountable for our decisions — how can that be the case if our free will is merely an illusion? Do we prosecute an actor for playing a criminal in a movie? How can God prosecute us if we are simply actors in a movie that he wrote long ago?

Two Viewpoints: The Closed View and the Open View

The closed view of God or the closed view of the future says that the future consists exclusively of things that are settled. Under the closed view, the definiteness of every event — the fact that it will occur this way and not any other way — eternally precedes the actual occurrence of the event. The future contains no possibilities but rather only certainties. It may look to us like the future contains possibilities, but that is only because of our limited knowledge.

Under the closed view, God is unchanging in every respect. Not only his nature and his character, but also his will, his knowledge, and his experience are unchanging. They are what they are from all eternity, and thus God's knowledge of the future is unchanging — God can learn nothing new because to do so would mean that he had changed.

Quick Question: If God can never learn anything new, then why in Genesis 22:12 did the Angel of the Lord tell Abraham “for *now* I know that thou fearest God”? Did God know beforehand how Abraham would respond to that test? If so, why did his

Angel use the word “now”? (We will look at additional such examples later in this lesson.)

Under the closed view, whatever takes place in history, from events of great significance to the buzzing of a fly, must take place exactly as God eternally foreknew it would take place. Under this view, the reason we do not know the future is not that it cannot be known but rather because we are not in a position to witness it.

Eugene Portalie: In one unchangeable glance God contemplates every being, every truth, every possible real object. This knowledge is an eternal intuition before which the past and the future are as real as the present, but each for that portion of time in which it really exists. God encompasses all time and therefore can know the future as infallibly as he knows the present.

Our task is to determine whether that view of God coincides with how God is described in his word. I think what we will find is that the God of the Bible is not a being who experiences the whole of reality in the isolation of a single timeless perception. We will not find a God who is a detached observer. We will not find a God who is unmoved and unmovable by the course of human history. Instead, we will find a God who responds to events as they occur. We will find a God who sometimes rejoices, who sometimes sorrows, who is sometimes surprised, and who sometimes wishes things had turned out very differently from how they turned out.

Do any scriptures support the closed view of God? Many proponents point to the following passages:

Isaiah 46:9-10 — *I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done.*

Isaiah 48:3-5 — *I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass... I*

have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I shewed it thee.

Psalms 139:16 — *Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.*

They also point to the many examples of God's foreknowledge in the Bible.

- Josiah and Cyrus were described and even named prior to their births (1 Kings 13:2-3; 2 Kings 22:1; 23:15-16; Isaiah 44:28).
- Peter was told he would deny Christ three times, and was told how he would die (Matthew 26:34; John 21:18-19).
- Jesus knew from the first that Judas would betray him (John 6:64).
- Jeremiah and Paul were set apart prior to their births (Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15-16).

Daniel includes remarkable detailed prophecies in Daniel 11 about what would occur in the six hundred years between his time and the first century. And, of course, there are many other detailed prophecies in the Bible, including many about the life and death of Jesus and the establishment of his church.

But these verses are not sufficient to establish that the closed view is the correct view. If we reject the closed view that does not mean we believe that nothing in history is foreknown by God. The Bible very clearly teaches just the opposite — there are future events that we know with certainty will occur because God has told us so. The closed view, however, goes far beyond that. Under the closed view, not just *some* things but rather *everything* that happens is foreknown by God — and that proposition cannot be established by showing only that some things are foreknown by God.

The passage above from Isaiah 46 is a good example of the difference. Immediately after telling us in verse 10 that he declares the end from the beginning, God tells us that he will fulfill his intentions. God knows that certain things will occur because he knows his intention to bring those things about. Verse 11 is even more emphatic: “I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.” What these verses tell us is something we already knew — the future is settled to whatever extent God decides to settle it.