

From Acorn to Oak
Who is God, and what is he like? Part 13: All Knowing
Rev. Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

R.Z. Sheppard, reviewing a book a while back in *Time*, quotes a woman in one of the volume's stories as saying, "I didn't want to shock God," while admitting she "made love" in a synagogue. As I read what she said, I couldn't help but think her statement reveals more about human hubris than the character of God, for she is not thinking of God as he has revealed himself in the Bible. Shock indicates an awareness that has come by surprise. God knows human nature; he is never shocked by what people do. Grieved? Yes. (Ephesians 4:30) Angry? Yes. (Exodus 4:14, Mark 3:5) Surprised? No. God not only knew about that sexual encounter when it was going on but also from before the earth was formed.

God is all knowing.

That God alone knows all things, or is omniscient, is well documented in Holy Writ. "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything," the Apostle John writes in his first letter (3:20) and in his quote of Peter regarding Christ, "Lord, you know all things." (John 21:17) Other Scripture adds more: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13) King Solomon prayed, "you alone know the hearts of all men." (1 Kings 8:39)

From the beginning God, who is beyond space and time limits, knows all things, past, present, and future as well as all that even has possibility. From a human perspective what God sees in the future is foreknowledge, but his perspective permits him to view all things simultaneously. While he has decreed from before time that certain events will occur, his complete knowledge of everything does not preclude human freedom and responsibility. (Ephesians 3:9-11)

Isaiah quotes God as saying, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." (46:10) Our limited and finite knowledge and understanding should always acknowledge God's unlimited and infinite knowledge and understanding. As Isaiah adds, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (55:8-9) That's perfectly logical.

Compare Paul's observation of the difference between God's and human beings' understanding:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has

ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the
glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36 NIV)

In this doxology of Paul's at the end of Romans 11 we hear echoes of God's corrective words to Job:

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.
"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you
understand." (Job 38:2-4)

"Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing
mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud
snorting?" (Job 39:19-20)

God has a special relationship with his covenant people whom he knows in the most personal manner. He knows us so well that he is aware of what we will do before we do it, even before we think of it. David sings in Psalm 139, "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD." (Vss. 1-4) The Hebrew word in verse one translated "know" is *yda`*—a deeply experiential knowing within a most intimate covenant relationship, the one God has with believers in Christ.

The thought that God is all knowing terrifies many people. They fear this aspect of God, being aware that he knows about all our sins, even those we've done in secret. Yet it need not be so for us who are in Christ. That God knows all our secrets and everything we've ever done, including all we've ever thought, is a spiritually healthy reality and good. What is a great fear for those outside of Christ is a great blessing, including comfort, for those in Christ whom he has forgiven and who walk with him daily.

We remember that God has revealed himself as essentially love. Further, since he is true love, he is also just and righteous, as we considered in an earlier article in this series. It is also true that Scripture teaches that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9:10) Nevertheless, this fear of God is different from terror, as we'll see in a future article on that subject. When sinful people encounter God who is most holy, their ruin is painfully apparent. (Isaiah 6:3-5) But those of us in Christ have been credited with his righteousness. How comforting is the Heidelberg Catechism's confession in the answer to Question 60! "Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments...nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me."

Therefore, we never have to be concerned that there is some wickedness we've committed that he doesn't know about that would threaten our salvation if it ever came to

his attention. He already knows about it. In fact, he knew about it eons before we ever did it, and he forgives us in Christ! He still loves us, even though he knows all our sins. We don't have to worry that he may someday find out something bad about us that he didn't know and then won't love us anymore. God's omniscience thus gives great joy to our understanding of our forgiveness in Christ. He knows all about us and he still loves and forgives us!

Yet this understanding is not an end in itself. Truly, let the awareness of his omniscience not cause undue dread, and let us always rejoice in it, but let us keep us on track in recognition of our accountability to and our calling from him to be holy. (Leviticus 19:2) We are blessed to be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:29)

Many people have asked me, "Doesn't God's foreknowledge limit our freedom? Isn't everything thereby all cast in stone?" My response begins with exploring the meaning of God's foreknowing, which involves this intimate covenant relational knowing of the person he has created. As is usually the case, a father-child analogy on the human plane is helpful. When our children were young, if I put two bowls on the coffee table in our family room at snack time, one filled with ice cream, and the other a more healthy one filled with turnips, I could tell you which each would choose and be correct 10 times out of 10, even though each had perfect freedom to take whichever bowl he or she would like. How much more does our omniscient God, know us and what we will do in all circumstances?

More Benefits for Us

God's characteristics are classified into two types. The first is called communicable characteristics, those attributes he has in macrocosm that he has given to us in microcosm. We see in humans something of a resemblance, a very limited manifestation of what in him is unlimited. In him the characteristic is infinite; in us it is finite. It is these communicable attributes of God that form part of what is called the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28) in us, which far separates us from the animals, including from the prehistoric animals which lived for a limited period of time that were superior to apes, and may have walked upright, such as the Neanderthals, but that did not bear God's image and that lived before God created us human beings who do bear his image.

The second is called incommunicable, i.e., those characteristics which are unique to God himself. One example of his incommunicable attributes is his being independent, which, in addition to his other incommunicable attributes, we'll examine in other essays.

God's knowledge is an example of a communicable characteristic: His knowledge is unlimited; he is all knowing, as we've been reflecting. However, he has made it possible for us to know things, and even to know much, which gives us great joy and significance; but what we know, as important as it is, is infinitesimal contrasted with God's knowledge. Our knowledge is considerable but not all encompassing, as is God's.

Since God is all knowing, we need never worry that he doesn't understand. We'll never have a problem he doesn't know about. His intimate relationship with us and constant

presence, as well as his personal experiences with humanity in and through his Son, Jesus the Christ, assure us that he knows what we are going through at every moment. He knows the injustices we experience that others don't see.

He knows the struggles we're having as we seek to walk the high road and yet slip into the gutter. Conscious of God's holiness and his requirement that we also be holy, as we try our best to avoid temptations, we sometimes give in where we are most vulnerable. "Does God know how hard I'm trying?" we wonder. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews answers, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (4:15-16)

God knows all our needs, so even at times when we don't know how to pray, he understands; in fact the Holy Spirit even intercedes for us! (Romans 8:26-27) Furthermore, God knows what we mean even before we express it (Psalm 139:3) when we try to articulate our concerns to him in prayer. He anticipates our needs and acts to help us, even in ways of which we are unaware!

Through countless means unknown to us he blesses us, for example providing a required resource through someone else, sometimes before the need arises in our consciousness, but which he in his omniscience knows is coming, and a long time before it occurs. I have experienced this huge blessing countless times.

My precious wife of 48 ½ years, Carol, died almost four years ago as I write these words. To this day, I have times of sadness each day; she is, and always will be, a vital part of me and of who I am. Indeed, I feel like I've, temporarily, lost the better half of me. Thanks be to our triune God, my loss is only temporary; I'll be with her again, next time forever! Yet, while my loss is limited to the time I have remaining here on earth, it is still very painful at times, especially when I think of all the "coulda, shoulda, woulda's," i.e., the times when I failed to do what I could have and should have done, which would have made her glad, even very glad, and which I would have done, if I knew then what I know now. I definitely would have done so.

At such times, including when the ache in my heart is exceedingly excruciating, God immediately brings to mind a comment Carol made during a tender moment one evening a couple of weeks before she died. She said, "You're a good husband." I cannot adequately and fully describe how comforting those words are to me during these times of sadness!! Further, when God brings this recollection of her words to my mind and heart, and so quickly, I right away thank God, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, (James 1:17) for this multidimensional blessing that instantly pulls me out of my sadness. It is clear that this monumental blessing comes from God's love and his being omniscient—knowing long ago how I would be feeling at times, and so he lead Carol to speak those anticipatory words of comfort while she was still with me!

And with a concomitant blessing! Carol also told a friend those same words, and when she told me that Carol had said those very words to her, God added to this great resource he provided to me! Only Carol's affirmation could help me overcome such sadness, and God not only gave that huge blessing to me but extended and reinforced it through Carol telling her friend.

When we receive such resources, let's not call them luck, but recognize God's Providence, expressions of his love and care, from the Giver of every good and perfect gift, this one as a result of his being all knowing, including through and beyond all time! Moreover, there is nothing he doesn't know how to do.

Since he knows all about us, including what we are experiencing, he won't ask or expect us to do something we cannot do. He won't make a decision without having all the facts. He is completely realistic.

But being all knowing and perfect, God doesn't commit the naturalistic fallacy; he doesn't conclude that what is is what should be. He helps us rise above ourselves as we are to new heights of holiness and higher humanity in his image that we can be. We'll examine how he does that in chapters to come.

When God forgives us, it is permanent; his pardon will not be retracted in the future. When he revealed through Jeremiah his plans for the new covenant in Christ, he said, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (31:34) The Hebrew concept of memory makes this statement striking. In the Hebrew mentality, something existed as long as it was remembered. Here God graphically says our sins, all of them including the most despicable, no longer exist!

Lastly, since he is omniscient, there is never going to be a time when he will discover something about us he does not already know. How comforting! While he knows us thoroughly, including all we've done that is ugly, he loves, forgives, and restores us in Christ, our greatest joy! Shalom.