

Does God have “Complete Omniscience”?

Introduction

One of the beliefs that most Christians have is that God is “omniscient” - that is, that God knows *everything*. Some of the passages that are used to demonstrate this belief are as follows:

1 Samuel 2:3 (ESV):

³Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

Proverbs 5:20-21 (ESV):

²⁰Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
²¹For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD,
and he ponders all his paths.

Jeremiah 23:24 (ESV):

²⁴ Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

Job 31:1-4 (NIV):

¹ “I made a covenant with my eyes
not to look lustfully at a young woman.
² For what is our lot from God above,
our heritage from the Almighty on high?
³ Is it not ruin for the wicked,
disaster for those who do wrong?
⁴ Does he not see my ways
and count my every step?

Matthew 6:3-4 (ESV):

³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Hebrews 11:12-13 (ESV):

¹²For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The above passages definitely indicate to me that God knows about *every* event that has *ever* occurred. In addition, those passages indicate that God knows our “hearts” - i.e., our thoughts and desires.

However, there is an additional question to consider, about this overall doctrine of “omniscience”. The question is, does God already know about *every* event that *will* take place, **in the future**?

In particular, does God already know - with 100% accuracy - all of the decisions that people *will* make, in the future - before we actually *make* those decisions?

From my experience, the majority of Christian denominations *do* believe that God does already know about every event that will occur, in the future.

In this document, I will refer to that belief as the “**complete** omniscience” doctrine.

Passages that affirm complete omniscience

There are certainly some passages in Scripture, which appear to indicate that God *does* know every decision that people will make, ahead of time. Here are two such passages:

Genesis 25:21-23 (ESV):

²¹And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²²The children struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³And the LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger.”

Isaiah 44:24,28: (ESV):

²⁴Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
“I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself,

²⁸who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;
saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’
and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”

The passage in Genesis describes what will happen with Jacob and Esau, in the future - in particular, that Jacob will wind up “ruling” over Esau. Of course Jacob and Esau were still in their mother’s womb at the time. So, many churches state that this proves that God can foresee *everyone*’s actions, even before we are born.

The passage in Isaiah speaks about King Cyrus of Persia allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem, after the 70 year Babylonian captivity. Of course, that prophesy was made 150 years before Cyrus was even *born*! So, many churches believe that this proves that God has complete omniscience - because how else could God know what Cyrus would do, so far ahead of time?

Passages that deny complete omniscience

However, there are some other passages in Scripture, which appear to state that God does not know what decisions people will make ahead of time. Here are two of those passages:

Genesis 22:10-12 (ESV):

¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I."
¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Jeremiah 7:30-31 (ESV):

³⁰"For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the LORD. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. ³¹And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

The passage in Genesis relates how God told Abraham *not* to kill Isaac - because now He knows that Abraham fears God. This strongly indicates that God did not know - with absolute certainty - that Abraham *truly* feared God, until Abraham proved that fact, by being willing to sacrifice Isaac.

The passage in Jeremiah describes how God chastised the people of Israel, for their horrifically evil acts - including burning their own children to pagan gods. God tells them that not only did He not *command* those actions, but also that those actions did **not** even "come into His mind". This indicates that God *never expected* the Israelites to do anything that evil - and that, in turn, implies that God did **not know** about those actions ahead of time.

Is the entire future "pre-determined"?

It seems to me that the underlying question to answer, for this entire topic, is the following: Is the entire future "pre-determined"? In other words, has God already foreseen *every* decision that we *will* make - so that *all* of our decisions are "foregone conclusions"?

If the answer to the above question is "yes", then that means that there is **absolutely nothing** that anyone can do, to affect the future. In other words, every single decision that we *will* make in the future is "fixed in place" - so that we *must* make those decisions, when we reach the appropriate points in the future.

Think about that for a moment - if complete omniscience is true, then *every single event* in your life is already "written in stone". For example, if God has complete omniscience, and if He has foreseen that you are going to put on white socks when you get up tomorrow morning, then you *must* put on white socks tomorrow morning - because if you put on black socks, then that would violate God's complete omniscience.

Here is a more serious example. If complete omniscience is true, and if God has foreseen that you will murder a small child three weeks from now, then you *must* murder that child three weeks from now - in order to avoid violating God's complete omniscience.

On another note, if complete omniscience is true - so that our actions can **never** affect the future - then that raises another question: Why should anyone bother to *pray*? After all, one of the primary reasons for prayer is to try to cause the future to turn out *different* that it would have *otherwise* - but the complete omniscience doctrine states that *nothing* that we do can *ever* affect the future.

Of course, in many places, Scripture implies that prayer *does* have the ability to *affect future events*. For example:

1 Timothy 1:2 (NASB):

¹First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,

²for kings and all who are in authority, **so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.**

In other words, if we pray, then that will allow us to have a *more* tranquil and quiet life, than we *would* have had if we had *not* prayed. That is, our prayers can *change the outcome* of future events.

In addition, consider this verse:

James 5:16 (NASB):

¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another **so that you may be healed.** The effective prayer of a righteous man **can accomplish much.**

The above passage *also* indicates that in some cases, our prayers can *change the outcome* of future events.

So, let's see if Scripture gives us any clues, as to whether the *entire* future is "written in stone" or not:

Exodus 32:7-14 (ESV):

⁷And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

¹⁴And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

2 Kings 20:1-6 (ESV):

¹ In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.’”

²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, ³“Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵“Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, ⁶and I will add fifteen years to your life.

Jonah 3:1-10 (ESV):

¹Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

All three of the above passages indicate to me that the *entire* future is **not** “pre-determined” - because in each of those cases, the outcomes of future events turned out **different** than God initially said they would!

In other words, in all three of those cases, future events had “not been decided yet”. That is, the outcomes of those events were still “changeable”, at the time that God made his pronouncements - and the outcomes *remained* changeable, *until* the affected people made their decisions.

As a result, it appears at least *some* future events have not been determined yet. In other words, the outcomes of some future events can still *change*, based upon the decisions that people make, at that time.

In fact, Scripture *explicitly* tells us that many future events have **not** been determined yet:

Jeremiah 18:1-10 (ESV):

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and

he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

⁷If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

The above passage tells me that the entire future is **not** “fixed in place”. Instead, many events - especially events involving God’s relationship with humans - have *not been determined yet*.

So, since some events have not been determined yet, that tells me that God does *not* already know the outcome of those events. In other words, in order for God to foresee an event with 100% accuracy, that event *must* have a definite, pre-determined outcome - and the passages listed above strongly imply that some events do not have pre-determined outcomes yet.

Two Alternate Doctrines

There are certainly some passages in Scripture, that appear to indicate that God has complete omniscience. However, there are some other passages that definitely indicate that God does *not* have complete omniscience.

In addition, there are many, *many* passages in Scripture which indicate that *some* events in the future are not pre-determined - and if a future event is not pre-determined, then it is *not possible* to know - with absolute certainty - the outcome of that event ahead of time.

So, from all of the above information, it certainly appears to me that God does not have complete omniscience. In particular, it appears that God does not already know about *every* decision, that *every* person, will *ever* make, in the future.

Of course, if God does not have complete omniscience, then the question becomes: How could God make **any** prophesies about people’s *future* actions? In other words, how could God make any statements about people’s future decisions, unless He has complete omniscience?

As noted above, God certainly *can* read our “hearts” – i.e., our current thoughts and desires. As a result, God can certainly determine what the actions of a **currently living** person are likely to be (whether He has complete omniscience or not) – since He can see the “heart condition” of any living individual.

For example, in Deuteronomy 31:16, God told Moses that the Israelites will turn away from Him, and worship pagan gods. God was able to determine this, because He was able to read the Israelites’ hearts. (Not only that, but the Israelites had *already* turned away from God, when they had worshipped the golden calf – and as we all know, past behavior is a very reliable predictor of future behavior...)

There is one much more *difficult* issue to deal with, though. In some cases, God makes prophesies about people’s future behavior, when the people in question have *not even been born* yet! For example, as noted above, God prophesied that King Cyrus of Persia would allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem - and that prophesy was made 150 years before Cyrus was even born!

So, if God does *not* have complete omniscience, then the question is: How could He possibly make *any* prophecies, about the behavior of people who are not even *born* yet?

There are two main doctrines that I know about (other than complete omniscience), which try to answer the above question:

1. The “Voluntary Ignorance” doctrine: This doctrine states that God *can* see all of our future decisions if He **wants** to, but sometimes He **chooses** *not* to do so. In other words, God *could* have complete omniscience if He wanted to; but many times He decides to keep himself “ignorant” of future events.

This doctrine explains the Cyrus prophesy this way: God *chose* to see the future decisions of Cyrus - and that is why God could make a prophesy about him. However, God chose *not* to see the future decisions of Abraham - and that is why God did *not* know that Abraham feared God, *until* Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac.

The problem with the “voluntary ignorance” doctrine is that it means that the entire future is actually pre-determined! This is because in order for God to perfectly foresee a future event, that event must be pre-determined - and this doctrine states that God has the ability to perfectly foresee any future event.

So, in order for this doctrine to be viable, every single event - and every human decision - must actually be pre-determined. Of course, as mentioned above, there are *many* passages in Scripture which state that at least *some* future events are not pre-determined.

2. The “Divine Prompting” doctrine: This doctrine states that God **cannot** see all of our future decisions, because many of the events in the future are *not* pre-determined. However, in *some* cases God “prompts” people to do things - and that prompting results in His prophecies about people being fulfilled.

This doctrine explains the Cyrus prophesy this way: God “prompted” Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, after the 70 year captivity. In other words, God “put that idea” into Cyrus’ mind - and that, in turn, resulted in Cyrus allowing the Jews to return. So, since God knew that He, himself, was going to “prompt” Cyrus, that explains why God was able to make the prophesy about Cyrus.

The problem with the “divine prompting” doctrine is that it seems to violate our free will. Basically, if God “prompted” Cyrus to allow the Jews to return, then doesn’t that mean that God “took away” Cyrus’ free will - at least with regard to that one decision?

So, in order for this doctrine to be viable, it must be that at least in *some* cases, God “overrides” people’s free will.

Which doctrine has more Scriptural support?

The “voluntary ignorance” and “divine prompting” doctrines both provide explanations for the Cyrus prophesy - *without* claiming that God has complete omniscience. So, the question is, which of those two doctrines appears to have more Scriptural support?

Take a look at some additional information about the Cyrus prophesy:

Isaiah 45:1-6 (ESV):

¹Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed:
²"I will go before you
and level the exalted places,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
³ I will give you the treasures of darkness
and the hoards in secret places,
that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
⁴For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I name you, though you do not know me.
⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.

The above passage is a prophesy, which describes God's future relationship with Cyrus. First, Cyrus is referred to as God's "anointed" - that is, a person whom God has *chosen*.

In addition, that passage describes God "calling" Cyrus, "speaking" to Cyrus, "equipping" Cyrus, and even "grasping Cyrus by the right hand" - *so that* Cyrus will **do God's will**.

That certainly appears to indicate that God is "prompting" Cyrus!

Of course, that still leaves us with a question - If God did "prompt" Cyrus - so that Cyrus would release the Jews - then didn't that violate Cyrus' free will?

I certainly believe that God gave people free will - that is, He gave us the ability to make our own decisions. However, in a few, *very* rare cases, it appears that God "overrides" people's free will. Consider these two passages:

Deuteronomy 3:23-27 (ESV):

²³"And I [Moses] pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, ²⁴"O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? ²⁵"Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon." ²⁶But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, ²⁷"Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again." ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan.

Acts 16:6-10 (ESV):

⁶And they [Paul and Timothy] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

The passage in Deuteronomy tells us that Moses *wanted* to enter the promised land; but God *prevented* him from doing so. Of course, the main reason why God did not permit Moses to enter Canaan is because Moses had previously disobeyed God. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Moses *wanted* to enter Canaan, but God "overrode" Moses' free will decision.

The passage in Acts states that Paul *wanted* to enter Asia, and he *wanted* to enter Bithynia - but in both cases, God (or Jesus) *prevented* him from doing so. As a result, in both of those cases, God "overrode" Paul's free will decisions - in order to *cause* Paul to go to Macedonia.

So, it occurs to me that the situation with Cyrus may have been similar to the above examples. Basically, God's "prompting" ensured that Cyrus *would* allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem - even if Cyrus did *not* originally *want* to release the Jews. That, in turn, explains why God was able to make the prophesy about Cyrus - 150 years before Cyrus was born!

Conclusion

Needless to say, the question of "how much of the future can God foresee" is an *extremely* complex topic. Here are the three main doctrines that I know about, which try to answer that question:

Complete Omniscience: God already has *perfect* knowledge, about **every** event that *will* occur in the future.

Voluntary Ignorance: God *has the ability* to know about every event that will occur in the future - but in many cases, God *chooses not* to know about future events. This explains why some passages in Scripture state that God did *not* know about some events, ahead of time.

Divine Prompting: God does **not** know about *every* event that will occur in the future - because many events in the future have *not been determined yet*. In other words, there are *some* future events that God *cannot* perfectly foresee - because those events do *not* have definite outcomes yet. However, in some (rare) cases, God "prompts" people to do things - and that prompting results in people doing God's will. This explains why God can make prophesies about people's *future* actions - even *before* people are born.

Overall, it appears to me that the "divine prompting" doctrine has more Scriptural support than the other two doctrines. Of course, that is just my own, imperfect understanding.