

We Believe in God

LESSON
FOUR

God's Plan and Works Discussion Forum



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We Believe in God

Lesson Four: God's Plan and Works

Discussion Forum

With

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Dr. Bruce Baugus
Dr. Rick Boyd
Dr. D. A. Carson
Dr. William Edgar
Dr. Bruce L. Fields
Dr. Benjamin Gladd
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Dr. Scott Redd
Dr. Ramesh Richard
Dr. Philip Ryken
Dr. Tim Sansbury
Rev. George Shamblin
Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry
Dr. Carl R. Trueman
Dr. Sanders L. Willson
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

Question 1:

What is divine immanence?

Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Divine immanence, I begin with the understanding that God is Spirit. The Lord Jesus' words from John 4:24, giving some indication of the nature of God's existence... But being Spirit, he is able to be everywhere. And, you know, Psalm 139, for example, reaffirms this, particularly in, I think, verses 7-10. You know, God just being everywhere: "Can I depart from your Spirit?" and the like... I find John Frame's terminology helpful in maintaining a proper understanding of immanence. God is with us, but he not with us to the degree or to the extent that we can collapse him into all that there is, whereby we say God is everything and everything is God. Frame's term is "covenant solidarity." The idea that God is with us in solidarity, he is present, he is a constant companion, a comforter, strengthener, these kinds of things, but the covenant dimension would also bring into the realm of understanding that he *is*. He remains who he is and is this relational God, but near us, but also maintaining all that he is. With us, but he still sets the tone for things. So, God is everywhere, but we don't want to collapse it into a kind of monistic understanding, and I find Frame's terminology and conceptual framework a very, very helpful one.

Dr. Rick Boyd

A very difficult concept for us to understand, we can't fully grasp it, in fact very much like transcendence would be, is the immanence of God and the fact that God can be everywhere. Because he is transcendent ... he's not a part of creation; he created everything. He is also able to be everywhere, not just everywhere, but at every time. He is immanent. He is... You can't escape him. Psalm 139 talks about that very thing, the psalmist wanting to run, and there's nowhere to hide from the Spirit of God. God is everywhere and at every time. That's who he is.

Question 2: **What is divine transcendence?**

Dr. Philip Ryken

When theologians talk about the transcendence of God, they are speaking about how high and exalted and lofty and lifted up God is, how far above us he is. And this is a frequent theme in Scripture. I mean, “Who can ascend the hill of the Lord?” Or the language of the Psalms, which refers to the high and holy One? Or even the experience of someone like Moses who wanted to see God and couldn’t see God because that was too glorious for him. So, when we talk about the transcendence of God, we’re talking about all of the things that make God exalted and lofty and far above us.

Dr. Scott Manor

Divine transcendence is the concept that God is beyond our full understanding, something that goes outside of what we’re able to fully comprehend. In a lot of people’s minds there’s the sense that transcendence means that he sort of transcends in the sense of he’s “up there,” that he’s out there, that he’s above us somewhere. I think that the true meaning of transcendence isn’t so much that he’s above us looking down on us, but that he transcends our own ability to think about him properly because he’s outside of our cognitive abilities, the way that we think about things. And so, certain theologians have used terms like “qualitatively distinct,” infinitely so, infinitely qualitatively distinct from us. And so, in that sense, “transcendence” is not so much that he’s up there, up in the sky looking down on us, but that he’s able to go beyond what we’re able to think of in terms of who God is.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd

Divine transcendence is God’s “otherness.” I can best illustrate this probably by using the book of Revelation. In Revelation, God only speaks a couple times. It’s pretty remarkable. Here you have this apocalypse, this vision, series of visions, but God doesn’t speak. And so here you have these visions of just the throne and descriptions of what that’s like, but God does not utter a word, or rarely does he utter a word. Conversely, here you have the Son of Man walking in the midst of the lampstands; you have immanence and you have transcendence, both sort of on the opposite ends of the spectrum. God is completely other than creation, and yet you have the Son of Man who is incarnate but yet who is victorious, and he is very much with the churches and knows them intimately and walks among them. In fact, he’s even called the “Son of Man” — very immanent.

Question 3:

Why is it important to balance both God's transcendence and his immanence in the doctrine of God?

Dr. Josh Moody

When we think of the immanence of God, as when we think of the transcendence of God, we need to first of all realize that we're referencing something that is related to who God is himself. However, when we're talking about the immanence of God, as opposed to when we're talking about the transcendence of God, we are describing God as not above and beyond everything in every aspect of his creation, but as God who is here, by his Spirit present. Now those two aspects of God, his transcendence and his immanence, are important to keep in balance and in coordinated conversation with each other theologically. It is possible to argue that right at the very nature of heresy is a tendency to either elevate one or the other. So, you could say that deists — who view God as distant and the unmoved mover, the one who began everything and started everything but not really involved — have over-elevated the transcendence of God; whereas, those who worship the god of rock and river and tree have misunderstood the immanence of God. Right in the nature of God is this mysterious reality that he is both above and beyond and yet here and present. And the right locus for this mysterious reality is, according to Scripture, I would say, ultimately the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit — God who is Father and yet who is Son and yet who is Spirit, three in one. And there are ways that we could talk about that reality, discuss it, describe it in scriptural terms, but in its essence, it is still a mystery. And so, with this doctrine of who God is, both his transcendence and his immanence, it should lead us to worship, with the transcendence to awe, with the immanence to wonder, that this God who is so great also loves me and us.

Dr. Bruce L. Fields

The way I would understand divine transcendence in terms of a basic statement would be God's ability to maintain his own existence, his own excellence apart from the created realm. He's not dependent upon creation; he's not dependent upon any element of creation for the maintenance of his own existence. But at the same time, in acknowledging what transcendence is, it can sometimes be misunderstood or misapplied, stressing, for example, too much of his total otherness, to detach God from all that there is and to say things like "he's unknowable" or "there's no language that we can use to describe him," which to a certain extent has a certain degree of truth, but it's how you apply it. I think that a helpful term that I've uncovered over the years that nicely brings some things together is a term used by John Frame to talk about God's transcendence, divine transcendence. It's his "covenant headship." "Headship" implies God is, God remains, he maintains himself in all that he is, independent of all that there is in creation, but "covenant" brings in the reality that this God nonetheless chooses to engage in relationships. He is the initiator; he is the inviter; he is the governor of the relationships; he does not reduce himself to dependence upon the people he is in relation with or whatever he is in relation is. He

maintains who he is, thus he maintains his headship, but he chooses to engage in relationships.

Question 4: **Must God's eternal plan also be immutable?**

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

God's eternal plan must be immutable for a number of reasons. One, God himself is eternal and unchanging, and therefore any plan that arises out of his nature must also partake of being unchangeable. Secondly, the prophecies of the Old Testament; God cannot deliver on his promises if he doesn't already know and control the way that history is flowing. If God changes his mind, then his promises in the Old Testament are hollow promises. Thirdly, that leads to a distinct pastoral point. The immutability of God and the immutability of God's purposes is a vital pastoral doctrine, because it's only if we know that God's plan is absolutely reliable, it's only if we know that God does not change, that he will always fight for his people, that he will always fulfill his promises for his people, it's only if we know that that we can actually preach the gospel with confidence or apply it from one believer to another. So, I would say for biblical, theological and pastoral reasons, God's plan must be immutable.

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

It's important to understand the plan of God needs to be immutable because it's linked inherently to his character — his trustworthiness, his faithfulness. If God's plan is kind of hanging in the balance or contingent... There are theologians who try to teach the openness of God. This idea that God somehow, he doesn't know the future, he can kind of guess it well, but that's, he's in time, he's bound by time, and, therefore, he does not actually have the ability to know *exactly* what's going to happen next. That's a fascinating, I might call it heresy, because it clearly speaks against the concept that God is infinite. He is eternal; he is the author of time. This is suggested in Jude, at the end of Jude where it says, "before all time, now [in time] and forever" — in the eternal time sense — that there are eternal purposes and plans that God is working out in time, our time, but that God stands beyond time. I remember C.S. Lewis describing it as God is like the page that the timeline sits on. He is not bound in time or stands in somehow a relation to time that is inescapable. So, in fact, God, though he intersects time, he intersects time at every time, simultaneously in this sense. We don't experience time that way, but God in his eternity experiences time at every point. So, obviously he has to know what is going to happen in the future. He knows what happened in the past. He knows what's happening now, and he knows how to work everything according to the purposes and plans of his counsel. So, he doesn't worry about things. God doesn't sit back and bite his fingernails over what might come next. He was never surprised that the coming of Christ and the unveiling of Jesus in flesh was somehow going to end up with him being crucified on a cross. That was, it seems catastrophic from a human perspective, but from God's divine

purpose and plan, it became the greatest event of history where God was able to take the most wicked thing that could ever possibly occur and make it into the most glorious and redemptive event for all time and space. So, the concept of God's immutable plan is so much tied to who he is and his ability, his authority, his omnipotent power to be able to achieve exactly what he purposes and plans to achieve in this time, in past time, and in the future.

Question 5:

How can we avoid fatalism if God has an eternal plan for his world?

Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.

The Bible does tell us that God has a plan, tells us God is sovereign. You see things like Ephesians 1:11 that talks about God doing everything according to the counsel of his will. For some people, that makes them think, "Wow, am I just a puppet?" I always say, "Hey, look at the back of your hand. Do you see any wires going into the back of your hands that says you're a puppet or a marionette?" No, you don't, and what you do also see is throughout the Bible, how does God treat human beings? He treats human beings like responsible persons, people for whom things that they do, if you will, you have to answer for what you do, in other words, not necessarily always in a bad way. But the point is that there is a responsibility, saying that, the things that we do, there is significance to it, those things matter, we're not just like pieces on some game board being moved around by some divine puppeteer. So I think that's very important for one thing. Second, we are to ask ourselves, what is the purpose of God telling us about having a plan for everything? The purpose about having a plan is not so that God handcuffs us and says, "Okay, just sit around and just let my plan go forth," it's kind of like you being moved around again like a puppet. No, it's there so that we are comforted by the fact that whatever's going on in the world, particularly things that are out of our control, perhaps horrible things, it reminds us that no matter how bad things are, God really is in control of history and we can be comforted by that. The other thing is when it's talked about in terms of salvation, the point is not then for us to sit around and say, "God will save the people that he's going to save, and it'll just happen without me doing anything." No. The point is, is that he's telling us, "Look, God has a plan, you're a participant in this plan. Aren't you glad you're a participant in that plan?" That's the reason for it, not for making us feel like our lives are meaningless or that we are puppets... There's one other very important dimension about this, which is the fact that, you know, the Bible does not give us any neat resolution to the tension between God being the one that plans everything and God also being the one that asks us to do things or commands us to do things and holds us responsible for how we respond to what he asks us to do or how we obey or disobey those commands. So, what's important to recognize is that you've got that tension, it's unresolved, but God tells us over and over again about how his ways are not our ways. So this is one of those ways that we see the difference between God and how he does things and the ways that we do things. It's something that reminds us of our limitations as human beings... The Bible never says anywhere that we are puppets. It

says we're responsible beings and reminds us about God being sovereign, primarily for our comfort and also so that we can praise him when we recognize that we're part of his great plan.

Dr. D. A. Carson

I think there are at least two things that help us conceptualize these matters in a fashion faithful to Scripture. One is that although the Bible depicts God as standing sovereign over all things, behind all things, in some ways controlling all things, yet the Scriptures equally insist that he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically... Another way of putting it is that there are two huge principles that always remain true in Scripture, and you've got to believe both of them at the same time. One is God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty doesn't mitigate human responsibility. In other words, we're not simply machines. And the second principle is human beings are morally responsible creatures, that is, we believe, we disbelieve, we obey, we disobey, we choose, and those choices are morally significant, but such moral accountability never makes God absolutely contingent. And you've got to believe both of those at the same time. There are many, many passages that speak to that. If you hold that both of those principles are contingent, you hold that they are compatible, so the position is often called "compatibilism," and that, it seems to me, is one of the axioms of Scripture that surface again and again.

Question 6:

How should believers evaluate the teachings of open theology?

Dr. Grant R. Osborne

Basically open theology is a radical Arminian position. By what I mean by that is Arminianism says that we make choices and that God has given us the power of choice and that choices are part of how we experience God. The problem is, open theism says that God has given us radical choice, and that God has even restricted his own knowledge and in a sense his own infallibility by refusing to fiddle with our choices. In that, the problem is that open theism, therefore, makes our choices the final arbiter in our salvation and even in our relationships with God, and that becomes very dangerous. God is absolutely sovereign, and that is a position that Arminians as well as Calvinists hold. That is a position that is absolutely clear in Scripture; God is completely sovereign ... and our choice does not subvert his will.

Dr. William Edgar

There's a movement that had some force a few years ago called "open theism," and their problem was — and you sympathize with this — how could we be significant, and how could we be responsible if God not only determines everything but knows everything ahead? So, they began to chip away at God's knowledge of the future. And of course, in the bargain they destroyed real comfort because who wants a God who can't help and know things. What they should have done is to say that while God knows the future, he also is good and secures us into that future in a way that the

future is not an unknown, a scary place to go. The future is what God wants it to be. Jesus told his disciples, you know, when he goes away, God will provide a house for them, or “many mansions,” where there will be places and rooms for everyone. So, he said that, not because he was hoping that was true, but because he knew it was true. It was true. It’s going to be true because of his death and resurrection. And that kind of knowledge of the future is tremendously comforting. They may have had to go through suffering in the meantime — they all did, many of them were martyred — but they were going to that mansion. So, the fact that God knows the future is philosophically true, it’s tied to his being, he plans it, but it’s also true pastorally. It’s a great comfort to know that he knows the future and that, whatever I’m going through now, his promises will come true.

Question 7: **How is it possible for God to know the future?**

Dr. Sanders L. Willson

There’s only one way that a being can know the future, and that is that he decrees and governs the future, or I suppose that the one who does govern the future reveals the future. So, prophets can know the future because the one in control of history reveals it to them. That’s the only way anybody can possibly know the future; it has to come from the hands of the one who makes the future. So, the fact that God knows the future tells you that he orders the future. So, those who want to think of God as just knowing something ahead but not ordering it I think really need to rethink that. That suggests there’s another god who’s ordering the future and that the God we worship is only finding out about the future rather than ordering it. So the only way he can know it is because he brings it to pass.

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

When we think about the future and God’s knowledge, often it’s tempting for us to think of it in terms of the way we think about the future. We look at the future and we think, well, we don’t know what’s going to happen even in the next few minutes, so how does God think about, or predict, or know what will happen in the future? But in many ways you’re asking the wrong question because you’re coming at it from a human perspective. We are finite and in time. We have a beginning and there’s a sense in which our lives will come to an end and we’ll have a new kind of existence in eternity, but ultimately, God’s knowledge is comprehensive, not just in the fact that he knows everything that happened and everything that’s happening, he knows everything in the future because his knowledge is eternal, and his knowledge is total and comprehensive. We may talk about it in this way, that when we live in time we tend to think of things like a timeline, that we’re on a line where events are unfolding. But God is not on the timeline in the sense that we understand it... It’s really quite hard to imagine that when we begin to try to think of it from our perspective. But God knowing the future is the fact that he knows because he’s already, in a sense, there. And we have a hard time grasping that, because we don’t live with that kind of

infinite knowledge; we don't have that kind of comprehensive capacity that God in his infinitude possesses.

Dr. Richard Lints

God knows the past, the present and the future, because God is God, a way of saying that God's present experience is not bounded by time. God knows the future for at least two reasons. One that he creates everything that is, and in his creativeness knows what will take place. Secondly, God's omniscience asks of us to believe, affirm that the future events are true even now or not, and if God knows everything, God knows whether those future events in our experience are true or not. Now, to speak more concretely about God's knowledge of the future is to speak about our trust that God's designs for the future will come to pass. So it is, at the end of the day, a trust we have, an assurance we have that the future will work according to God's design, God's plan, and therein lies our hope.

Question 8:

How significant is the debate between differing views on the order of divine decrees?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

When systematic theologians talk about the order of the eternal decrees of God, they face at least two big problems. The first big problem is this: these are *eternal decrees*. And so we're not talking about something that God does in sequence or that God does one thing before another, before another, before another. Instead, the way it's usually described is that these are the logical connections among various things that God planned in all eternity to see unfold in history. But the problem that systematic theologians face when they talk this way is just how mysterious the concept of eternity is. What is eternity? Is eternity timelessness? Or is eternity endless time? I think the best way to talk about God as eternal is just simply to say that he is not limited by time. And so, if we go beyond that in our definition of eternity, that God is beyond time or not confined to time or not limited by time, if we go beyond that, then I think we're going beyond things that the Bible tells us. And so, when you talk about an order of something in eternity, you are dealing with something that is very, very mysterious. That's one of the big problems that systematic theologians have when they discuss all of these matters. But there's second issue that always needs to be kept in mind too. The reason these various views on the eternal decrees of God and their order occurred in the history of the church is because of secondary theological issues. People come to this question with agenda. They have certain beliefs that are important to them that they want to see reflected and protected in the way they talk about the eternal decrees of God. I mean, if you are a person, a Christian who believes that God loves everyone equally, for example, well then you're going to have to talk about the eternal decrees of God in a way that accommodates that. If you're a Christian that doesn't believe that God loves everybody equally, then you're going to shape your idea of the eternal decrees in ways that accommodate that. If you

believe that salvation is genuinely offered to everyone, then you're going to shape your view of the eternal decrees to accommodate that. If you don't believe that the salvation in Christ is offered to everyone genuinely, then you're going to shape your view of the eternal decrees because of that. There are these and many other sort of secondary theological issues that influence the way people create their list of the order of the decrees of God. And so, as you're dealing with this matter, we all need to be very humble. We need to realize that we're limited, that we're dealing with eternity that's very mysterious, and we also need to be humble in the sense that we're shaping our views on these things according to a host of other beliefs that we have that we're sometimes not even aware of.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

So, theologians are doing good work when they ask questions about hard things and when they push and probe and poke at the mysteries that God has left behind. And so, it's good for us to wonder about the order of the divine decrees and to wonder about, you know, what did God do first, and what did he do afterwards, because it helps to expose new questions and good things that we need to answer. But, in my opinion, this is one of those areas where the difference of opinion in the ways that neither or none of the answers work exposes the fact that we've pushed too far. And for me, in particular, I think it comes out of a lack of comprehension of what we're saying in other parts of our theology when we say that God is eternal and God is outside of our before and after, and he's not limited the way we are to "first I do that, and then I do this, and then I do the other thing," and that what we should be getting out of that discussion is realizing that we've reached one of those places where we've come to the end of what we're able to say about God. And since God has not chosen to say this about himself, when we push the argument to the point of division and frustration and fights, in my opinion, it's inappropriate behavior, it's an unwillingness, it's an arrogance, it's us not being willing to let go of the idea that we ought to be able to figure everything out.

Question 9:

What is divine foreknowledge?

Dr. Philip Ryken

Part of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is God's foreknowledge, his knowledge of things in advance before they even happen. And this is one of the great mysteries of the character of God. To me this is one of the things that really causes us to worship God for who he is, to realize here's a God who knows the end from the beginning. But when we use the term "foreknowledge" in its biblical sense, it's not just that God knows in advance what's going to happen, but he actually has an intention and a purpose. And foreknowledge, typically, in the Bible is used in the context of our salvation. Who are the people that God foreknows? It's the people that he has a saving plan that he would redeem us in Jesus Christ. And so, the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, I think, is a doctrine that leads to worship just because it

shows how amazing the mind of God is, but it's also a doctrine that leads to humility and gratitude, that God has a loving purpose for us in Jesus Christ that goes back before the beginning of time.

Dr. Josh Moody

When we talk about God foreknowing, or the divine foreknowledge, we are discussing two elements primarily. One would be what the word itself means. So, what we're saying is God has foreknown, that is, he has known beforehand, and we are saying that God knows everything. Now, biblically, we're not only saying that he foreknows everything; I would argue we're also saying that he is in control of everything, past, present, and future as the sovereign Lord over every aspect. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but that he knows it, as Jesus put it. And so he is completely in control... The other aspect we're talking about is the concept of knowledge as intimacy. So, when Paul talks about how God has known us, the knowledge that he seems to be referring to comes from the Old Testament understanding of knowledge, which is really intimacy, even husband and wife kind of intimacy. So we mustn't keep those two things at a distance from each other. And a lot of the controversy over exactly what does God foreknow and how does he predict it, leaves aside the other element which is that God's foreknowledge of us is the knowledge of a lover. It's that kind of knowledge — from “since from before the creation of the world he has known us” — and so we're not just a twinkle in his eye if we're his child, we're his loved, known entity from eternity past to eternity future.

Rev. George Shamblin

In the New Testament we come across different words that will describe what God does in the future as we know it. One of those words is “foreknowledge.” There's no question whatsoever that God foreknows everything that's going to happen in the future... He's not bound by the bookends of time, as we know it. So God definitely foreknows the future because he's already there... Not only does God foreknow, the Scripture is going to tell us in, like, Ephesians 1, that God predestines, we could even say *predetermines* things that happen in the future... So foreknowledge, the New Testament absolutely talks about, but it's taken a step further. Not only does he foreknow, but he predetermines, predestines everything that will happen.

Question 10:

Where do you stand on the debate over the role of God's foreknowledge in the salvation of sinners?

Dr. Grant R. Osborne

Obviously that is one of the more debated questions, whether foreknowledge is the basis of election or whether it is synonymous with election. And many of my colleagues and my friends who are more what we call Calvinistic, that is, they believe more in God's absolute predestination, believe that foreknowledge is a synonym for predestination. I believe that it is not. I believe that God's foreknowledge is what God

has known about history beforehand, that God created this world; he created this world knowing that this world was to fall into sin. And so, therefore, when God created this world, he created this world knowing that Christ would have to come and that mankind would be headed for eternal damnation unless Christ paid the price for them. The question is, whether in all of that God has determined ahead of time who is to be saved and who is not to be saved, or whether God gave choice to humanity ... so that within that standpoint, foreknowledge is God's knowledge of how people would respond to the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit and whether they would open their hearts. And it's very important to understand we do not save ourselves. We who are called Arminians, and I am one who would be called an Arminian, which means that we believe that there is choice and that God's election is based upon the Spirit's conviction, we do not believe that we save ourselves. Faith is not a work, and so faith is how we respond, then, to the Holy Spirit's presence in us, and, therefore, that is what God foreknows, namely, our response to the Holy Spirit. And then God produces his salvation in us.

Dr. D. A. Carson

It really is important to see that in the most crucial passage where foreknowledge is mentioned, namely Romans 8, the text does not say that God foreknows what will happen but foreknows us; he foreknows the people themselves. And most scholars who look at those things from within the Reformed heritage understand rightly, in my view, that this is akin to knowledge of human beings that you get between a husband and wife, between God and his people. God not only knows his people, he foreknows them because he's the God who actually is before all things and stands over time. He himself is outside the time, space continuum. So, he not only knows us but foreknows us. In that sense you cannot appeal, it seems to me, to the foreknowledge of God to ground for ordination in a kind of conditional dependence on human decision in which God has had no say.

Dr. Rick Boyd

Well, we know from the very beginning that freedom to choose is a part of God's very good creation. It came into being before sin ever entered in. So, he gives us complete freedom of choice. And yet, because of his transcendence, he's able to know what's going to happen, and we know that God's character, his very nature, is good. He is completely good. So, putting these pieces together, we understand that, because he's good and because he is God, he extends beyond creation — he's well beyond that — he is able to see the choices that we make and still order things to accomplish his ultimate will which is what he desires. So, God's will is accomplished in a way that is foreordained, even with the freedom we have to choose.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

As a Reformed theologian, I am very concerned to exclude all grounds of boasting in my salvation... And for this reason, Reformed theologians have consistently excluded the possibility that God's foreknowledge is based on foresight because of what it does to the decree, because of what it does to his act of foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass, making it conditioned upon me and which would mean that his choice of me in

Christ was conditioned upon him foreseeing what I do in terms of choosing him or accepting him or not. And I know that in me is no good thing, and I would have never received Christ if it wasn't for the fact that God himself, or nothing that's good in me, or nothing that I actually do or achieve of my own free will, left to my own devices, but rather it's by grace and by grace alone, and unaccountable or unexplainable grace from my perspective from beginning to end.

Question 11:

What is the value of the doctrine of God's eternal plan, counsel or decree for systematic theology?

Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.

The doctrine of God's eternal decree is essential to our understanding of systematic theology, because it is this doctrine that helps us define and explain the sovereignty of God, that God has decreed all things whatsoever come to pass. There is nothing that surprises God. These things happen because of God's decree. Of course, the subsets of that and the ways he works out his decree are through his works of creation and providence. And so the way he created the world, the attributes that he has given the world, and the way that he sustains the world and keeps it being what it is; the earth stays the earth, it keeps spinning in the same direction, all of these things stay the way they are by God's eternal decree. And in his works of providence, the way that God works within the lives of his people and within his creation in order to cause them to act in according to the way that they were made, and to fulfill his decrees, this is the way that we understand God exercising and executing his sovereignty in the world. And so, because of this, we believe that "all things work together for good to those that love him and are called according to his purposes." Why can we believe that? Because we believe in God's eternal decree. We can say that we know that all things are going to work out the way that we find them in Scripture. Why can we say that? Because we believe in God's eternal decree. God is not hoping to work the world out. God designed the world exactly as it is, and it is doing and being everything he intended it to do and to be to maximize his glory.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

When we're studying systematic theology, we are trying to give a full and accurate and systematic statement of all that the Bible teaches. One of the things that we find the Bible teaching is about God's eternal counsel or his divine decrees. And so, in systematic theology, if we're doing our job, and we're trying to give a good representation of what the Bible teaches on all these matters that God has revealed to us, we need to pay some attention to the divine decree. It turns out to be a very rich topic with lots of implications for our theology. So, there are many questions that we have to reference to God's eternal will and what he has determined and foreordained to come to pass. We could think about this in terms of election, for example, in soteriology. We could think about the apologetic usefulness of, and necessity of, dealing with the decree at some level when it comes to the problem of evil, and why

would God have permitted the fall of Adam and Eve into sin to begin with? No system of theology can avoid these questions, and Scripture itself points us to God's eternal counsel, that he has willed whatsoever comes to pass. And so, we have to grapple with that. Paying attention to the divine decree and the full scope and range of biblical teaching on it will help us to be able to give accurate, theologically correct, that is, answers to, as far as we're able to go, as far as what God has revealed to us and made known to us about these and many other issues that we can't help but have to face along the way.

Question 12:

Why is God's glory so pervasive in the Bible?

Dr. Ramesh Richard

God's glory is pervasive in Scripture because it is the fundamental reality of God himself in what we can attribute and ascribe to him. In Scripture, God's glory is integrative, it's crowning. It is also that which pervades every fiber of cosmic reality... But his glory is reverberating throughout all creation, throughout all humanity, through every microbe that can be examined by a microscope, and every distant star that can be looked at through a telescope, most of which we haven't found out yet... And so, the entire spiritual life, our relationship to God is governed by this final integrative teleology of God's glory, the weight of God in personal life and human existence.

Dr. Scott Redd

When the Bible talks about the whole earth being filled with the glory of God, it's really talking about the endpoint of its story. The divine story is not a tragedy; it's a comedy. And the way that we know that is because one day the whole earth will be filled with God's radiance. It will fill it in every nook and cranny so that, according to the symbolic imagery of the book of Revelation, there won't even need to be a sun because God's glory will light, it will radiate throughout all of the cosmos. We see that plan introduced in Genesis 1 where God creates man and woman in his image, and then he goes and tells them to fill the earth and subdue it, showing us that even all the way back in Genesis 1, God's plan was not merely to fill the garden but to fill the whole earth with his image, a worshiping image, reflecting back to him his glory. We see it take place in the call of the Psalter for not merely the nation of Israel but all nations, all kings, to worship the Lord. That's a global vision that we see all the way back in the Old Testament. And then, of course, the *modus operandi* for the gospel, which will be the Great Commission — the going out and proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ to the whole world, making disciples amongst the nations — is the means by which we have been given to fill the earth with God's glory now. In our lives today, we are called to go proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ all over the face of the earth. But again, we should take deep hope. This story is a comedy, and it will end with God's glory, his radiance lighting the whole world.

Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.

Glory is a theme that runs throughout the whole of Scripture. When God appears, he appears in his *kavod*, he appears in his glory. How do we know that God dwelled in the first temple? Well, the glory cloud, the pillar cloud would fill the temple. *Shekinah* is a post-biblical term, but nevertheless, we understand where God is, his glory is, his presence is. It's in the temple. In Ezekiel we have a vision of the glory leaving the temple to say, "That's it." God says, "I'm moving out. I'm done." Well, when the second temple was built, we didn't see God reoccupy the glory, but interestingly, in Luke 2 we have this amazing scene when Jesus is born, we see the glory of God in the sky over the shepherds. And what's Luke saying? He's saying, what we've been waiting for since the time of Ezekiel is the re-manifestation of glory. In all unlikely places, this glory, the presence of God that we haven't seen for centuries, appears to some shepherds in the field. John 1 puts it this way: "We have seen the glory of the one and only Son." And that glory, that presence, is concentrated and embodied in Jesus.

Question 13:**What do theologians mean by the providence of God?****Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler**

The doctrine of providence is important because there is a strong tendency in the contemporary, scientific, modernistic mind to think of God as kind of like in the classic William Paley sense, a watchmaker, that essentially God kind of winds up everything. He makes it all, and he puts it all together and then he just kind of sets the clock running, and then it just goes on its own. And that is a classic error in relatively recent doctrines of God called Deism, the idea that God is not really integrally involved in creation. He is simply the source of creation, and he is the one who is kind of got it going, set it in motion, and now it just kind of does its own thing. But the doctrine of providence makes it very clear that God is not just kind of sitting back, or on vacation, or out having a lunch break, that his role in creation is integral and constant and continual, and he is involved in every aspect of sustaining and of overseeing and of moving and crafting and molding creation toward the purposes and plans that he has for it.

Rev. Clete Hux

Most theologians, when they talk about the providence of God, typically in a nutshell, they're really talking about God governing all things from start to finish and sustaining all things by his will and power.

Question 14:**What do theologians mean when they say that God often operates through second causes?****Rev. Dan Hendley**

When theologians speak about God operating through, or using second causes, they just mean to say that God is the ultimate cause of all that occurs, but that there are additional causes that he may use. For example, God ordained that Jesus would be crucified, but to make that happen he used the betrayal of Judas Iscariot; he used the Jewish leaders who asked for Christ to be put to death; he used the cowardice of Pontius Pilate. All of those things that resulted in God's great plan of redemption being executed at Calvary with the atoning death of Jesus. So God planned it all. Peter comes in the book of Acts and he says, "What God had predetermined you carried out by the hands of godless men." So God was ultimately responsible for the great act of redemption that the atonement at Calvary would involve, but so were various human beings that contributed to that; they were secondary causes. I like to think of secondary causes, if I can use an illustration of billiards or pool in which a person will hold a cue stick, they will hit the cue ball, which will hit another ball, which will knock the eight ball into the corner pocket. How did the eight ball get into the corner pocket? What was responsible? Well, you can point to the cue ball and say that was responsible, you can point to the cue stick and say that was responsible, or you can point to the pool player who is holding the cue stick. In that illustration, maybe the player is the first cause and the other things are all secondary causes... So he's the ultimate cause of everything, but typically most often he uses other forces — human choices, natural forces as well — to bring to pass that which he has ordained.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Theologians will talk about how God, he works through means, and he works through secondary causes, for example, and this is a very important category for a number of reasons. For one thing, it allows us to talk about God's performative will and God's permissive will. There are some things that God does do directly, and there are other things that God permits to his free creatures to do. He has equally ordained both of those things so that nothing that is happening is happening outside or contrary to his decretive will. And yet, it doesn't mean that he is directly performing all things. For example, God is not the author of sin, but he has decreed to permit sin — free creatures to act in evil and sinful and fallen ways. He has permitted that for a purpose. His purpose is entirely good, and his act of decreeing that is something he has performed, and yet he is not the direct doer of that evil... Now, this extends even more broadly. The world is full of actual entities that exist, and creatures, like human beings, for example, have spontaneity of will and have the ability to be able to act and do, and those are meaningful actions, that we are responsible for and accountable for, and yet, they are means that God is employing. But there's also properties that many other things have that they act in certain ways and along certain lines and have the ability to cause other events to come to pass, and God works through all of those means in a variety of ways in order to accomplish all of his purpose in this world.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

So, in the area of how God acts, there's a lot of things that all tie up together, and as I have tried to talk about this with students, I find that the crucifixion is one of the very best events that brings in God's eternal decree, his eternal plan, his works in history, and his use of secondary causes. And it even helps us to be able to look at the idea of God's eternal decree being for things that are evil events, and yet, God being innocent in them. But when we talk specifically about secondary causes, in the eternal decree of God, Christ was going to the cross for the sins of his people, and yet Christ did not go and walk himself up onto the cross. He gave himself over into the hands of a huge number of secondary causes, and one of the main ones was Judas. Judas, by his own will and his own desire, acting as a secondary cause, chose, for the purpose of getting pieces of silver to put into his hands, to turn his God and Savior and presumably his friend over to the Romans and to the Jews to be able to be crucified. So, Judas is acting on his own. He's an independent cause, he's a secondary cause of Christ going onto the cross, and yet the primary cause, the reason for it, is because God himself had ordained from all eternity that Christ would go onto the cross for the sins of his people and for their redemption.

Dr. Samuel Lamerson

One of the questions that we sometimes ask ourselves is, how can God use evil beings or countries or armies to work out good things, and that is that God often operates through what theologians call "secondary causes." So, for example, he might use a wicked army to defeat Israel and teach Israel a lesson about depending upon God rather than depending upon their own weapons and chariots. He uses Judas, for example. The Evil One enters into Judas in the Gospel of John. The only place in the entire Bible where Satan himself enters into someone is there in John when Judas goes to betray Christ. Judas goes to betray Christ as a result of the Evil One entering into him. That's clearly an evil and a terrible act, and yet God uses that evil and terrible act to get Christ crucified to create the greatest act in the world, and that is the act of the redemption of God's people. And so we see then God using secondary, and sometimes even evil causes to bring about his own will.

Question 15:

Is there any aspect of God's creation that is outside the realm of God's authority or sovereignty?

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

Well, I'd say that there is no part of God's creation that's outside of his authority... I mean, this is God's own doing. God cares for it. God provides for it. God sustains it through his word of power. It's sustained day by day. So, I wouldn't want to acknowledge there's anything beyond the realm of God's authority. He graciously allows us to operate within that realm with surprising freedom at times. But at the end of the day, everything is under the lordship of God; it's all his, even the bits that are

rebellious against him. They're still rebellious against his authority in the desire, of course, that God has that we will repent and turn back to him. But it's all God's creation, and it's all under his authority.

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

The concept of God's sovereignty or authority really suggests, and I think if you clearly think it through, it suggests that there really isn't anything outside of creation that is beyond his authority, that he is in terms of being truly sovereign, being truly the ruler and Lord of all, truly the Creator and Master and King... And if God is in fact the Creator of all things and the Sustainer and the One who is moving his eternal purposes and plans forward in time and space, there is no way that anything could fall outside of that realm. It doesn't mean that he does not give allowance in the sense that he knows that some choices will be made in certain directions and sins will be committed... There is a sense and an amazing mystery that we have to talk about in terms of God's ability to oversee and his ability to create and work out his purposes and plans for our lives in light of the fact that there are things that happen that seem to be beyond his control... But ultimately, we have to recognize that in God's greater wisdom and in his ability to know the end from the beginning, even the horrific events and choices of people, even the catastrophes that happen, the natural disasters, all of those things are being worked out according to his plans and purposes so that nothing falls outside of his knowing and his allowing so that he might ultimately be glorified in the end.

Question 16:

What power does Satan have in this world?

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

Well, Satan does have substantial power in this world, the power of a fallen angel. Not just the only fallen angel. There are other fallen angels; we call them the demons who are roving powerfully around the world. Sometimes Jesus describes him, he described him as the prince of the earth, and that's a powerful description. I think we also want to always remember it's on the angelic level. He's an angel, not God, not a divine being. So, it's a substantial power, a spiritual power, but not God's power. And so what we want to remember when we do think about the power of the devil and the demons, we don't want to trivialize that in any way or play it down. I mean, anyone who's seen anything like an exorcism knows this is really serious material we're talking about here. But we also remember it's not some sort of equal power to the power of God. God is the creator of the angels, even those that fell into this crisis that we now see them in. But the name of Jesus is above their names. And so, if we're thinking about that demonic power that is at work in the world, we've got to acknowledge that. In Anglican prayers we talk about the world, the flesh and the Devil. It's not just the Devil that we're up against but the world and all its fallenness and our own sinful frailties, but we want to recognize there is this demonic power at work which we need to take seriously, although not become too awed by, but when

we're dealing with that power remember the power the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus is more powerful even than the power of the prince of this world who has been defeated already by this Jesus Christ, and will, in the end, be banished to hell for which hell was created so that he could be properly put to the place where he belongs.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

The question of Satan's power in this world is a very interesting and perhaps somewhat tricky one. We all want to assert that God is sovereign; God is all-powerful, that nothing happens without God being in overall control. And yet, it's very clear that the world is not as it should be. Not only human beings do wicked things, but random evil things happen to people all the time — cancer, illness, what we used to call "acts of God," moments of terror and devastation that seem to have no rhyme or reason to them. It would seem to imply that there is a force of evil at work within the world. I think the book of Job is very helpful here. Job begins with these very mysterious courtroom scenes, the heavenly courtroom where — literally the word is "the Satan" — the Accuser appears before the Lord and is given power by God to wreak havoc upon Job's life. So the first thing I think we need to note about the power of Satan in this world is that Satan is real, his power is terrifying and very, very significant. But, of course, the book of Job doesn't end there. One of the things that's interesting about the heavenly courtroom scene, and indeed about the Lord's speeches right at the end of Job, is the Lord makes it very clear that Satan has no power that is not circumscribed by the power of God; Satan has no power that is not ultimately aced by the power of God. So, if we were to take an individual example and, say, look at death, something we all face. You know, when somebody dies there is a sense in which we see the evil havoc of Satan being wreaked upon their lives and seems to be all-powerful and supreme. And yet, we know that in Christ there's a resurrection that the Lord has been good to that principle laid out in Job that Satan and evil will ultimately have no power, which he has not circumscribed and overcome. So, to return to the question, what power does Satan have in this world? I would say that Satan has perhaps the second-most supreme power of anything in the created realm. He's awesomely powerful, he's to be taken with utmost seriousness, he is not to be underestimated at any cost, but we must also remember that for all of his supreme power, there is one even more powerful than Satan, the Lord God, and he has bound Satan in a decisive way so that Satan's power is restricted now. Even death cannot tear the saint away from the Lord. His power is restricted now and will be definitively crushed at the end of time.

Question 17:

What aspects of God's extraordinary providence can we call miracles?

Rev. Dan Hendley

The definition of a miracle is variously understood within the Christian church, and many people think of things that are highly unlikely as a miracle. Maybe I run into a friend I haven't seen for 20 years in a distant airport somewhere, and that may be an

act of God's providence, but I don't think it's properly understood to be a miracle. A miracle, in a more technical definition, is something that God works in the context of human history that is *contrary* to the natural order, such as a man rising from the dead or walking on water, or transforming water into wine, or healing a blind man by just touching him. These are things that violate natural laws, which God of course is free and perfectly capable of doing. And so, that's how I would define a miracle, and it testifies to the power of God and attests to those who represent him on the earth as prophets and certainly as Jesus was represented as the Son of God through the miracles that he did.

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

God's providential care of his creation is comprehensive, by which I mean nothing happens in God's world that isn't part of God's plan, not part of his eternal decrees or what would be accomplished in his world. But God accomplishes his plans in a variety of ways. He uses human choices, human decisions. He uses satanic actions. He uses what we would call natural events to accomplish his plan. But there are times when God supernaturally, non-normatively, exceptionally intervenes and does an act, which only God could do. We call those miracles. They are not the normative way that God works in his world. And it's not so much that they are spectacular but that they are non-normative, extraordinary, unexpected instances where God intervenes and acts in his world.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Through the centuries it's been popular, among some branches of the church anyway, to distinguish between what we might call "ordinary providence," the way God normally takes care of things in the world and supervises the unfolding of history — which is normally according to things like natural law and things like that — and to distinguish ordinary providence from "extraordinary providence," which would be when God does things in the world more directly, or beyond, above, without and against second causes or creaturely causes. And in common Christian parlance we would call many of those extraordinary providences miracles. Now, I don't have a problem with calling them miracles because I think the Bible actually calls these kinds of things miracles as well, but there is a thread of theological discussion that needs to be acknowledged. Many times theologians, systematic theologians will reserve the word "miracle" as a technical word to describe only the set of extraordinary providences of God that are used to authenticate and authorize some spokesman for God, like the miracles of Jesus being used to authorize him, to show that he is the Son of God, or the prophet Elijah and his various miracles proving or demonstrating that he was the prophet of God. And because we don't believe that special revelation continues now, a lot of theologians want to argue therefore we should not say there are any miracles now, because miracles, they argue, as a technical term, are actually only for authenticating signs for authoritative spokesmen or spokespeople for God. And that's okay. I mean you can understand so long as you don't go too far with that, that they're using the word miracle in a very special way, a very technical way to mean an authenticating sign. But in reality, the Bible doesn't use the miracle terms just for that... But even those who reserve the word miracle for

authenticating signs for God's spokesmen, and therefore say they don't occur anymore today, they know that God still does extraordinary things. He answers prayers, he heals the sick; he does things that you could not have predicted on the basis of natural law. And he does this many, many times in the life of believers and even in the lives of unbelievers... But above all, we have to say that there are still extraordinary providences occurring even in our day, and we have to be open to that and seeking for those things, because it's in those kinds of special providences, the unusual things that God does, that we find the greatest blessings and the greatest encouragements in the Christian faith.

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