

Theology Proper:
A Biblical Systematic Discussion about God

INTRODUCTION:

It would be a good guess to say that everyone who has lived to an age of reason has thought about the idea of God. Even the atheist has thought about the idea of God enough to conclude that there is no God, consider Psalm 53:1. Since the idea of there being a God might be said to be a universal experience, we might further conclude that everyone, to some extent, is a theologian (i.e., has contemplated and come to some conclusions about God). Further, this 'universal' contemplation about a divine being leads to some necessary conclusions regarding the importance of a proper study about God.

A. First, our understanding about God directly affects our belief about everything else.

- Our understanding about God affects the way we view the order of the universe.

Does the universe exist by an inexplicable random series of events? Or did some higher, sentient power create the universe according to a plan whose details and purpose remains certain yet vague? The answer to these and similar questions impact the way we view the universe and our role within it.

- Our understanding about God affects the way we understand our place in the world.

Moving a little closer to home, our view about God impacts the way we see ourselves in this world. Are we animals among the animals fighting for survival? Or are we responsible beings with the sense of morality that impresses us to treat our world and those living within it with a sense of dignity?

- Our understanding about God affects how we relate to things around us.

Finally, how we view God and our place in this world also impacts how we relate to others within our sphere of existence. Is life about me? Or is there a higher sense of purpose prompting me to treat those within my immediate sphere of influence with a sense of importance? Our view about God, or lack of any such divine reality, conditions our thoughts, words, and behavior.

B. Second, our beliefs, affected by our view about God, provide the framework for our every action.

- Whether we care to admit it or not, all of us live by faith.

Each person has a set of cognitive and experiential beliefs that effect every thought, emotion, word, and act. Our lives play out upon a vast array of perceptions that may or may not be known to us, make sense, or exist with any coherency. Furthermore, all of these "beliefs" are received throughout our lifetimes from sources outside ourselves. We build the framework and mechanism for our understanding and actions from what we deem trustworthy or sensical sources. Without any formal logical process we accept our worldview on the basis of faith, trust. Our faith is placed in a collection of data received through someone else and our experiences confirm or challenge what we think and feel. With our belief system intact, we relate to the world around us making action choices based on the way we think things really are.

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- Additionally, our view about God, His nature and character, is foundational to the way we think things really are.

Regardless of our formal theological posture we have ideas about God placed somewhere within our worldview. Questions such as “Are we here by chance, divine choice, as pawns in a larger game, or privy to a divine purpose that transcends our time and space?” have been answered or set aside with varying degree of relevancy. The faith-life we have settled upon is directly affected by our view about God.

D. Our understanding about God provides the foundation for proper Christian Spiritual living.

God has revealed Himself so that we might know Him. This knowledge is different than religious tradition. Knowing God is personal, from within, through a spiritual new birth, John 3:3-7. It is through knowing God that we confirm

- That we are here by design. We are not a mistake; nor are we unnecessary. Our lives matter. And while sin and death have wreaked havoc upon humanity, God, who made us in His image and likeness, seeks to rescue us from this eternal judgment.
- that the struggles we face in the Christian life are part of God’s plan to prepare us for a new heaven and earth. For “though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,” 2 Corinthians 4:16-17. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us,” Romans 8:18.
- and, that God’s character and works provide the anchor for persevering through this life to the glory of God. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is relational and seeks to save us. In so being, God has provided every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, Ephesians 1:3, for “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness,” 2 Peter 1:3.

Concluding thoughts

The Bible tells us that while we might think of the possibility of God through intuition, tradition, and human reason, we cannot know God personal through these means, Psalm 53:1-3; Acts 17:16-23; 1 Corinthians 1:21. We gain personal knowledge about God because God reveals Himself to us, Matthew 16:15-16. God wants us to know Him, John 1:14-18. And so God has revealed Himself to us in Christ Jesus through the special revelation known as the Bible. Knowing God is of utmost importance. Knowing God makes sense out of the universe, this world system, our relationships, and the Christian life.

I. The Existence of God: We Know God Exists Because He has Revealed Himself to Mankind.

A. There are Many False Views about God and His Existence.

As the scriptures testify, humanity has “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of the birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures,” Romans 1:23. It is no wonder that mankind has invented a variety of philosophical ideas about God. Below are a few ideas that have been with us for a while.

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1. Views about God shaped by ideas of transcendence

a. Atheism

Atheists openly and positively deny the existence of there being a god. Materialists (those who believe that only matter exists/ nothing spirit) would be a category of atheist. By faith atheists must ignore intuition, reason, human history, and special revelation. Finally, a true atheist would have to claim 'all knowledge' in that they claim to know that there is no God.

b. Agnosticism

Agnostics (without knowledge) assert that there is insufficient knowledge/ evidence to affirm the existence of God. Agnostics must ignore creation, history, and special revelation.

c. Deism

Deists assert that a transcendental god (a god who is far off) created the universe complete with all laws and mechanisms that allow the universe to run by itself. After this creation, this god abandoned the universe. While acknowledging creation, a deist must ignore human history and special revelation.

d. Neo-orthodoxy (Karl Barth and neo-Barthian theology)

God cannot be known (He is far off/other) apart from God's self-revelation in the Son by the Spirit. The Bible becomes the Word of God only as the Son reveals Himself through the text to selected readers at selected times.

2. Views about God shaped by ideas of immanence

a. Polytheism

Polytheism holds the belief in the existence of many gods.

b. Pantheism/ Panentheism

Pantheism asserts that the universe and God are one and the same. Everything is god/ a part of god, and that god is everything. Panentheism is the belief that God is in every part of the universe and extends beyond space and time.

c. Classic liberalism

Classic liberalism insists that God is within everyone and is at work everywhere. God can be known through man's sense reason/ego and can be experienced through a sense of "absolute dependence," which can be understood as the presence of God. Shliermacher, often called the 'father of modern liberalism' developed this idea of absolute dependence in an attempt to bridge the Kantian gap between noumenal and phenomenal reasoning.

d. Paul Tillich

Tillich's ideas about God were popular in the 1900's. For Tillich, God is not a being, rather, God is being (i.e., the ground of being). All things exist, whereas God is, and is the basis of, the

Transcendence emphasizes the idea that God is 'far off,' or independent and, perhaps, indifferent to the created universe.

Immanence, derived from the Latin in *manere* "to remain within", refers to philosophical and metaphysical theories of the divine as existing and acting within the mind or the world. This concept may often coexist with ideas of transcendence.

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existence of everything. God is the principle of 'being' of everything that exists. A personal God does not exist.

e. Process Theism

Process theism suggests that as creation is in constant movement so also God is so related to creation in that he is a part of the process of movement apparent in all existence. Thus, God is developing along with creation. Time and God move forward and develop together.

f. Open Theism

Open theists believe that the Bible reveals God as being limited in time, space, knowledge and power by the libertarian free will granted to mankind at creation. God self-limited by His own creation-relationship with mankind; thus, God is learning and personally developing as humanity exercises its freedom to become.

B. Attempts to Prove the Existence of God Fall Short.

Because of the spiritual condition of humanity, the universe may or may not appear to present an overwhelming demand for the belief in the existence of God.¹ That said, it would be wise to overview the various arguments generally used to "prove" God's existence.

1. The **Cosmological** argument

Simply stated the cosmological argument argues, "Every effect has a cause. The universe is the great effect; therefore, God, greater than the universe, must be the sufficient cause. Since the universe exists, so also must God.

Arguments for the existence

of God: The five 'proofs' for God's existence are attempts to correct faulty reasoning that eliminates God from its worldview. Since these arguments assume God, none ultimately "prove" God's existence, i.e., the specific God revealed in Scripture.

2. **Teleological** argument

The teleological argument (from the Greek word *teleios*) insists that the universe has an intention design/purpose, therefore there must be a designer. The Designer, greater than the universe, must be God.

3. **Moral** argument

The moral argument reasons God's existence from the idea that everyone has a moral compass. This argument states that humans are intelligent, moral beings, therefore, this morality must originate from a greater sourced, the

Creator. This argument may be understood as the moral 'cause and effect' proof for God.

4. **Ontological** argument

First articulated by Anslem (medieval scholastic era AD 1200), the ontological argument states that because the mind of man possesses the idea of a perfect, absolute being, such a being must exist.

¹Postulate the notion of God, His character, person, and work as set forth in the Bible and all the arguments from creation, history, and life seem reasonable. On the other hand, postulate His absence, and these arguments are unable to 'prove' the existence of God. In fact, anything that could prove the existence of God would run the risk of being greater than God, since these proofs, it might be argued, would be outside His control, making them greater than God Himself.

5. Religious argument

Finally, the religious argument states that because humanity has an intuitive conviction toward religion, God must exist.

Conclusion: While these and other arguments have merit allowing for the notion of God acceptance as a ‘basic belief,’ these arguments do not prove the existence of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.

C. God is known on His terms.

God has limited humanity’s ability to prove divine existence, Ecclesiastes 3:11; 1 Corinthians 1:21. Any absolute proof would, of necessity, control God, and, in some ways, be greater than God. Thus, God has embedded in His plan how we might know Him.

1. God has revealed His existence and perfections through **creation**

a. The created universe reveals the existence and nature of God, Psalm 19:1-3.

- Creation reveals God’s goodness and strength, Psalm 65:4-13

- Creation reveals God’s regal majesty, Psalm 104

- Creation reveals God’s lovingkindness, Psalm 147:7-11

- Creation reveals God’s faithfulness/truth, Psalm 146:6

- Creation reveals God’s glory (i.e., all of whom God is and all His works), Psalm 148.

- Creation reveals God’s wisdom, Proverbs 8:22-31

- Creation, God’s creative word, which continues to reveal God’s existence and nature renders humankind culpable before God, Romans 1:20.

- Because of sin, however, humankind fails to properly understand God’s creative word, Romans 1:18-22; Ephesians 4:17-19.

“From the creation of the world
His invisible attributes, that is,
His eternal power and divine
nature, have been clearly seen,
being understood through what
He has made. As a result people
are without excuse”
Romans 1:20

2. God has revealed His existence and perfections through **history/providence**, Psalm 107.

While all history reveals God’s existence and perfections, redemption history, God’s providential redemptive narrative through humanity, speaks of God’s presence and His greatness. Psalm 107 provides several illustrations of God’s intervening on behalf of distressed humanity. Below are a few sources that, with one exception, apart from Scripture, provide examples of God’s presence and care.

- Without mentioning God, the book of Esther depicts God’s providential presence and care.
- The exploits of the Maccabees present God’s presence and care.
- The writings of Josephus records God’s providential presence and care.
- The testimony of believers throughout the Church Age reflects God’s presence and care.

3. God has revealed His existence and perfections through the **Incarnation**, John 1:14-18.

God is true spirit, immaterial, and invisible, John 4:24; 1 Timothy 1:17. No one has seen God at any time, John 1:18. To substantiate and explain His existence, presence, and character, the second

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“Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. These last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things.”
Hebrews 1:1-2

Person of the invisible God, God the Son, the Eternal Word, became flesh (human) and humanity saw His glory, John 1:14. The ultimate revelation of God continues to be God the Son becoming a human being and disclosing the Father to humanity, John 14:9.

4. God has revealed His existence and perfections through **His people**, John 17:20-21.²

Throughout the course of human history God has kept a people for himself as a visible witness to God's existence and presence, consider Romans 11:4. From Adam to Noah, to Abraham, Joseph,

the nation of Israel, Christ, and those who have followed Christ, God's people have testified in word and deed to the presence of God's redemptive grace. Today, God's people remain as the place where God still dwells on earth.

5. God has revealed His existence and perfections through **His word**, the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

While all the mentioned means of God's self-revelation are adequate for human response and culpability, Romans 1:20, only the inspired (God-breathed, 2 Timothy 3:16) text we call the Bible provides a precise measuring device (canon) as to the truth. The Scripture, God's Word, through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit produces faith, Romans 10:17, leading to life, John 5:39. While we can misappropriate and misuse God's written Word, the Scriptures provide God's adequate explanation regarding the other abiding sources of God's self-revelation. Word of God is the mirror, 1 Corinthians 13:12, by which we behold the revelation of God in Christ, consider 2 Cor 3:18. God reveals Himself in the world and details this revelation by the written Word. And it is through the written and Living Word that God reveals His existence, true nature, and desire for humanity.

D. Though God has revealed Himself to humanity, our knowledge of God is limited, 1 Corinthians 13:9,12.

1. We are limited by our own nature.

We cannot fully comprehend God. Our knowledge of Him is necessarily incomplete. Our finite minds cannot fully receive the fullness of God. Further, sin distorts the knowledge we might have, unless we are otherwise acted upon by God.

2. We are limited by our own experience.

Our knowledge of God can and should go beyond human reason (due to special revelation). Our knowledge of God cannot, however, be complete, Psalm 139:17. Each of us are experientially limited in our pursuit of the knowledge of God (and His plan), Ecclesiastes 3:11.

3. Limited knowledge does not mean incorrect knowledge, consider John 14:21, 26; Ephesians 3:3-5.

²One might read *The Pilgrim Church*, by E.H. Broadbent, Oxford City Press, 2012 and *How Christianity Changed the World*, by Alvin J. Schmidt, Zondervan, 2004, for a detailed presentation about the witness of God's people.

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God has decreed the means for self-communication. Nature, providence, the incarnation, and God's people, serve as constant witnesses. Beyond these means God has also planned that human language and the human mind would represent the divinely appointed avenue for receiving and understanding divine revelation. While the understanding of God's revelation has not resulted in knowledge univocal to the reality of God, certainly man's knowledge of God can be accurately analogous to what God is truly like. God Word is truth, John 17:17, and this truth cannot be 'nullified,' John 10:35.

E. Conclusion: Biblical Theism

Rejecting the various philosophical imaginations about God we are compelled to restrict ourselves to God's own words about Himself. That said, we move forward understanding that in our finite capacities we approach God and our ideas about God (even from Scripture) with sincere humility. We recognize that God is both immanent (personal) and transcendent (wholly other). Further, God is both unknowable (incomprehensible) and knowable (making Himself known through natural and special revelation). Yet because God has revealed and explained Himself through Scripture, He has invited us to know Him and so it is by His invitation and His words that we will continue our study.

Biblical theism is simply the belief that God, as revealed in the Bible, exists as He has revealed Himself to be.

II. The Names of God: We Know About God by His Names

A. "I am," Exodus 3:14-15

Moses, upon being conscripted by God to set Israel free from Egypt, asks God His name so that he might tell the Israelites the name of the God who sent him. God's response was simple yet profound, "And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM... tell them I AM has sent me.'" The 'name' I AM captures using the simple 'to be' verb *hayah* the essence of God's self-existence, aseity, timelessness, transcendence, and yet His accessibility to all things created.

B. The name YHWH (pronounced Yahweh) and its compounds.

1. The root name YHWH ...

YHWH occurs 6823x's and is usually translated LORD or GOD. YHWH emphasizes the **self-existence** of God.³ YHWH is the **relationship name**. Covenants are made in the name of YHWH. YHWH carries **three characteristics**: 1) holiness, Leviticus 11:44,45; 2) judgment of sin, Genesis 6:3-7; Exodus 34:6,7; and 3) love for the salvation of sinners, Genesis 3:8,21; Exodus 3:1-10; Isaiah 53:1,5,6,10.

2. The compound names with YHWH

YHWH Jireh – "The LORD will provide. "

Jireh --- "to see to it" Genesis 22:8,14. As the LORD provided the sacrifice for Abraham, YHWH has provided the sacrifice for the human race, John 1:29.

YHWH Maccaddeshcem – "The LORD your sanctifier"

³ The word YHWH appears best explained to come from the Hebrew verb "to be," HAYAH. Note the idea conveyed in Revelation 1:8.

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This title occurs in Exodus 31:13. The LORD continues to set His people apart in this age: Hebrews 10: 10-14.

YHWH Nissi – “The LORD my banner”

Nissi – “gleam;” Exodus 17:15 – victorious in battle. Today, we are more than conquerors through Christ, Romans 8:37.

YHWH Raah – “The LORD my Shepherd”

The LORD is the One who leads (the oriental model) His people. In Christ we have this leadership. Consider: John 10:11- Good shepherd; Hebrews 13:20- great shepherd; 1 Peter 5:4 – chief shepherd; 1 Peter 2:25 – shepherd and overseer of our soul.

YHWH Shalom – “The LORD is peace”

Shalom carries the idea of harmony, peace, reconciliation, wholeness (Deut. 27:6), fullness (Gen. 15:16), and restitution (Ex. 21:34). In fact, the entire idea of Israel’s salvation is embodied in shalom. YHWH shalom – consider Psalm 29:11; Isaiah 9:6, and especially Isaiah 52:7.

YHWH Sabaoth – “The LORD of Hosts (armies)”

The Hebrew *Sabaoth* carries the meaning ‘to assemble.’ This title for God occurs in times of greatest need/crisis. The Hebrew term *sabaoth* is derived from the verb *tsaba* ‘to go to war.’ The nouns in this root *tsaba* refer to army service, troops, warrior. The LORD is the LORD of the armies (of heaven). Our Captain of the Hosts (see Joshua 5:13-15) Jesus descended to the lower parts of the earth (the incarnation) to win the battle against sin and death. As a result Christ could lead us as His victory parade, see Ephesians 4:7-10.

YHWH Tsidkenu – “The LORD our righteousness” Jeremiah 23:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30

Righteousness refers to God’s standard of perfection, rightness, moral good. The name speaks of the restoration of believers to the perfection/moral rightness of God’s character. Now, apart from the Law God’s righteousness has been revealed through the faithfulness of Christ, Romans 3:21. Christ’s faithfulness was demonstrated in His obedience to the Father (His voluntary death) which reversed the curse of sin and death thus enabling the gift of eternal life, Romans 5:18-21.

C. The names *El*, *Elah*, *Elohim* and their compounds

1. The root names *El*, *Elah*, and *Elohim*.

*El*⁴ – occurs 250x’s and carries the idea of strength.

*Elohim*⁵ – occurs 2500x’s and is considered the creatorial⁶ title. While this word may also be used of earthly rulers and angelic beings (‘the sons of God’, consider Psalm 8:5 w. Hebrews 2:7), the context must be considered to determine these variations.

⁴ There are many names that use *El* as a part of the compound word. These names reveal something of the nature of God, e.g. God is Father, Numbers 1:9 (*Eliab*); God knows, 2 Samuel 5:16 (*Eliada*); God hides, 2 Samuel 23:32 (*Eliabba*); others include God is help; God is kinsman; God is fine gold; God has protected; God sets up; God is an oath; God is salvation, 2 Samuel 5:15 (*Elishua*).

⁵ The noun is plural (some take this as an inference of the Trinity. *Elohim* is used, at times, with plural verbs and adjectives: Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 13:2; Deuteronomy 6:4. Consider also Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8. These plurals have been referred to as intensifications or absolutizations of exclusivity. Some take these as plurals of majesty. There are, however, no other instances of a plural of majesty. The root of this word cannot be attested to in ANE literature outside the OT.

⁶ *Elohim* is used 32x’s in Genesis chapter one.

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Elah – occurs 60x's. The name *Elah* is derived from a word that means, "to swear." Thus "the Strong one who swears." Cp. Daniel 2:20.

2. The compound names with *El*, *Elah*, and *Elohim*.

El Elyon – "the most High God," Genesis 14:17, literally, "the Strongest Strong One." *El Elyon* exercises His authority in Heaven, Isaiah 14:13,14, and in earth, Psalm 91:9-12. This name is specially used in Daniel 3:26; 4:17-37; 5:18-21; 7:18-27 to comfort the people of God during their exile and rebuke the kings of Babylon.

El Roi – "the Strong One who sees," Genesis 16:13. This name brings comfort as God sees the trouble of His people, and, brings a warning as God sees the hypocrisy.

El Shaddai – "Almighty God," Genesis 49:25; Psalm 22:9. This name comforts God's people, assures of fruitfulness, Genesis 28:3, and warns of chastening, Ruth 1:20.

El Olam – "Everlasting God," Isaiah 40:28; Psalm 90:2. God is everlasting and inexhaustible.

D. The name Adonai

- *Adonai* is translated "Lord" (using small case letters).
- The emphasis of *adonai* is that of a Master/servant relationship.
- The master has the right to expect absolute obedience, Exodus 4:10-12; Joshua 5:14; 7:8-11; Isaiah 6:8-11.
- The servant has the right to expect direction for his service and provisions for his needs, Philippians 4:19.

Summary:
God's names reveal that God is the strong Creator who lovingly and faithfully relates to His creation as a benevolent Master relating to His servants (father to His children).

III. The Works of God: We Know About God Because of His Works

God's works are continuous, consider John 5:17; Ephesians 1:11; Colossians 1:17. To discuss the possibilities of knowing God through His works would be endless. Because of that impossible task we will single out three categories that reveal important aspects of God's character.

A. God's Decree

The idea of God's decree(s) is discussed in detail in many fine theologies.⁷ For our purposes we will provide a skeletal outline with some discussion (see also Appendix A).

Decree: "[God's] eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."
(*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*).

1. Definition of the decree

The idea of a divine decree simple relates the reality that whatever God 'does' has been done according to His plan, His will, His purpose. Nothing, according to the Bible, Ephesians 1:11, occurs apart from God's purpose/plan. All things were made by Him and for His will, Revelation 5:11.

⁷ To name just a couple of these works see, Erickson, Millard J.. *Christian Theology*, Second edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998. pp. 371—91; Feinberg, John S.. *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001. pp. 501-36; Frame, John M.. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. pp. 313-39.

2. Biblical proof of a decree

Consider some of the biblical evidence that God has planned/decreed.

- Psalm 115:3 --- While not specifically indicating a plan Psalm 115:3 tells us that from heaven God does **as He pleases**. God is free from any constraints except His will.
- Isaiah 46:9-10 --- Building upon Psalm 115:3 Isaiah relates to us that God pleases to do has been planned, **the end from the beginning**. God's plan has always had a definite purpose.
- Considering Ephesians 1:4; Isaiah 46:10; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Timothy 1:9 we learn that God's decree was made **before the foundation of the world**.
- God's decree is according to **His good pleasure**, Daniel 4:35.
- All things exist for **God's purposes**, Revelation 4:11
- God's plan is **effectual**, Acts 2:23. More than a proposal, God's decree is the first cause of the universe and its history.
- God's decree is **unconditioned** by anything/anyone outside God, Psalm 115:3; Romans 9:14-18.
- Ephesians 1:11-12 tells us that God's decree is **to God's own glory**, and that God works His counsel/plan/will, to include **all things**. Nothing occurs that is not according to His purpose/plan.
- Ephesians 3:11 declares that God's eternal purpose was accomplished **through Christ**.
- 2 Timothy 1:9 adds that God's purpose through Christ for creation, and specifically mankind, **focuses upon salvation**, namely, the regeneration of a dying universe, consider Romans 8:18-21; 11:32.
- Deuteronomy 29:29; Proverbs 20:24 informs us that while we may know certain things about God and His plan, God's decree **remains mysterious** (secret).
- Interestingly, God works His eternal purpose **through all things created (angelic beings, humanity, natural phenomena)**, Psalm 82; 2 Chronicles 18:18-22; Romans 9:11-21; Acts 2:23; Psalm 148:8.
- Psalm 33:11; Proverbs 19:21 assure us that God's decree **will not fail**.

"In Him we were also made His inheritance, predestined according to the purpose of the One who works out everything in agreement with the decision of His will."
Ephesians 1:11.

3. The focus of God's plan

While a discussion about the logical order of God's decree might seem excessive and, therefore, unnecessary, discussing issues involved with laparianism may inform our understanding about the role of creaturely freedoms (or lack thereof), the necessary reality of evil, and God's objectives with creation. In discovering God's objectives, we also deepen our understanding about God. Historically, in theological discussions, the focus has always been God's redemptive concerns regarding humanity and their fall into sin. Discussions tend to focus upon where the elect fit in God's logical order. The three primary categories which have emerged are:

- **Supralapsarianism** (above the fall), that is, God chose those to be saved before anything else was planned.
- **Infralapsarianism** (after the fall), that is, God chose those to be saved after creation and the fall into sin. The final aspect of the decree was to provide for salvation through Christ.
- **Sublapsarianism** (beneath/after the fall) maintains that God chose to create, to include the fall, to provide redemption, and then chose those who would be redeemed.

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While none of these views can be settled upon through any explicit statements in Scripture, it may seem best to settle this discussion by redefining the center of God's objectives. If one were to assume redemption as the means to an end rather than the end itself then we might be able to identify God's objective in the redemption narrative (redemption history) as God's glory revealed through Christ. The revelation of God's glory, all He is in His essential character which are reflected through His works, seems to be the beginning and the end purpose of creation. If this be the case, it appears that a Christocentric model would best be the focus for locating the means for the glory of God. A such, it is possible to demonstrate that the purpose of God's plan is the manifestation of His glory through incarnation of God the Son who would, through His Personal character and obedience to God, displays God's character and defines God's works. Through Christ the curse of sin and death is reversed, and the Son of Man becomes exalted as the Head of redeemed humanity, whose glory, the glory of the Father, would fill all in all on a new heaven and new earth. The decree about creation, the fall of humanity into sin, and the ultimate salvation of those who believe God about Christ, take a necessary but supporting role to the revelation of God's glory in the Person and work of Christ. With this hypothesis in mind, perhaps the logical order of God decree should be verbalized as follows.

- God the Son to become, through incarnation, the Son of God, who, through His obedience unto death, the resurrection and exaltation be Head of a redeemed humanity dwelling forever on a new heaven and new earth to the glory of God.
- Creation of the universe along with the sons of God and humanity
- The fall of angels and humanity into sin brining the curse of death to creation
- Salvation through Christ for every human being who turns to Christ in faith.

4. Objections to the idea of the decree (see appendix B)

5. God's Perfections Exhibited through the decree

While there are many perfections about God understood through the idea of His decree, certain qualities stand out that may not be obvious through other works.

a. Aseity

Aseity speaks to God's self-existence and independence. God is the first and last. He exists in Himself. He is without need of anything and depends upon nothing for being. God is self-sufficient and exists independent from anything outside Himself.

b. Freedom

Freedom emphasizes God's independence with regard to choices and will. God is unconstrained. Nothing outside of His own will and good pleasure move God to do what He does. Certainly, Psalm 115:3, addresses God's free character and actions.

c. Sovereignty

The sovereignty refers to the nature of God that insists God is the supreme ruler over everything. Further, God exercises control and authority over everything. Hence, nothing occurs outside of His divine will and purpose. God alone is Lord of all (Sovereign Lord), Psalm 24:1-2; Romans 9:2. Furthermore, we make choices that determine our destiny according to God's plan, Psalm 139:16; Proverbs 16:9, which means that our lives are far greater than our finite imaginations,

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Proverbs 20:24, as all of life's circumstances (the good and the catastrophic) are a part of God's plan to accomplish His best for us, Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:17. Finally, our responses to life's circumstances matter (they are the primary means by which God accomplishes His plan), consider Acts 2:23; Phil 2:12-13.

d. Omniscience

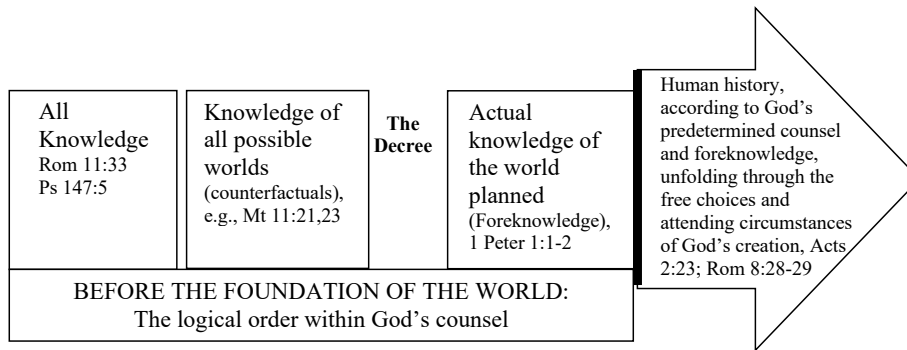
To understand the decree is to get a better grasp regarding God's omniscience (i.e., all knowing). Here we discover that God's knowledge is timeless (nonlinear) and multi-faceted. God never 'learns', nor does He process information to draw a new conclusion. In fact, all that is known and knowable proceeds from God. Secondly, God's knowledge is comprehensive (includes everything) and, by including everything, also includes all possibilities. Even those possibilities that will never happen, consider Matthew 11:21-23. Finally, every circumstance as well as the various responses each creature would have under different circumstances, was chosen with the knowledge that the free acts of His created beings and the variety of conditions inherent with the nature of creation would be one of the means by which God would accomplish His plan. This choosing of the actual universe is what the Bible calls God's foreknowledge, that is, actual causal knowledge (Acts 2:23) about people and events that will exist because God has chosen the plan in which they would become reality.

6. A Summary regarding God's plan/decreed and Our Discussion about God

In timeless eternity pass, unconditioned by anything outside Himself, according to His good pleasure, for His glory, and upon the basis of His comprehensive knowledge of all possibilities, God decreed a universe that includes and utilizes everything as a means to accomplish God's objectives. Accordingly, God's plan is being realized in time according to the choices, events, and specific divine interventions known and planned upon by God before time. This plan includes the good and the evil perpetrated by God's creation, all of which work together to accomplish God's ultimate objective, His glory demonstrated through the obedience of the Son redeeming those who in faith turn to God. The implications of this plan are beyond man's comprehension, Psalm 139:6; Proverbs 20:24. The specific details remain secret, Deuteronomy 29:29. And, though carried out by the free acts of His subjects foreknown in the mind of God, God's plan cannot fail, Psalm 33:11, the future is certain. Our choices, however, matter, as they are part of the fabric that accomplishes God's plan. Thus,

- The chosen course of human history (God's decree) best accomplishes God's purpose of displaying His glory through the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who is both God the Son and the Son of God.
- God's decree **includes** all the voluntary, free-will choices of sentient being (angelic and human) which immediately cause the precise circumstances (cp. Psalm 148:2-8) in which all future voluntary, free-will choices will be made.
- Thus, God's decree **guarantees** that the objectives of God's plan will come to pass as God intends **by means of** the voluntary, free choices of created beings within the circumstances of God's natural order, consider Romans 11:15, 25, 30-36.

Below is a linear diagram that helps illustrate a possible logical model of God's formulating His decree based upon His omniscience of a universe through which He could accomplish His objective, namely God's glory manifest in and through the Son of God.



7. A few important observations because of God's pre-determined plan

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First, by means of the world that God chose God has fashioned our hearts, Psalm 33:15. We are not a surprise to God. We are not a mistake. We are foreknown, Romans 8:29.

Secondly, history proceeded from and moves forward according to God's plan. As is the past so the future is certain.

Finally, while God has revealed certain aspects of His plan to us, the daily details of this plan are kept secret so that we might trust God and live by faith in the good pleasure of God's will, Deuteronomy 29:29; Proverbs 20:24.

B. Creation

Because God has created and sustains the universe, we discover God's majesty, wisdom, power, goodness, and faithfulness Genesis 1—2; Psalm 8:3-5; Psalm 24:1-2; Psalm 104:5; Psalm 148:5; Revelation 4:11

1. Inadequate ideas about the origin of the universe/ mankind

As one might anticipate, humanity has developed some of its own views about how this universe came to be.

a. Natural Evolution...

Natural evolution is an attempt to account for the physical world (humanity) without any supernatural possibility. The world in which we live is the result of chance through mechanisms such as natural selection, mutation and survival of the fittest.

b. Theistic Evolution...

Conceding the macro-evolutionary process, some believe that God began the universe by creating everything necessary for the universe to evolve, while intervening at appropriate times to perfect and complete the job.

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c. Progressive creationism...

Attempting to harmonize macro-evolution with the direct creation account in Genesis, some hold that creation came about in a series of creative acts, over an undetermined period, in which God created afresh (from scratch) those aspects of His plan that were necessary.

2. The Bible describes creation as a specific and deliberate act of God, Genesis 1; Exodus 20:11

a. The universe was created *Ex nihilo*... “Creation **from nothing**.” consider Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3.

- The normal reading of the Bible requires creation *ex nihilo* or, “from nothing.”
- An instant and mature creation: the entire universe possessed the observable features of maturity (apparent age) at the moment of creation.
- Worldwide flood: the catastrophe depicted in Genesis 6—9 provides the best explanation of fossil records, geological data, and evidenced changes in the animal kingdom.

The account of an instant and direct creation, coupled with a worldwide flood, best harmonizes the observable phenomena of the universe.

b. Certain specific objects were created through existing materials, Genesis 2:7.

Not every aspect of creation was made from nothing. The first man and woman were created from previously created materials.

3. God as Creator reveals Himself to be awesome in majesty, holiness, power, wisdom, and benevolence.

a. Creation reveals **God’s majesty**, Psalm 8:1-3; Psalm 19:1-2; 104:1-4; Romans 1:20.

God’s majesty is a theme throughout the Bible that calls upon people to recognize God’s intrinsic greatness and splendor. Creation, the vastness of the physical universe and the eternity of the unseen realm, speak of God’s greatness, His majestic character, Psalm 8:1-3; 19:1-2.

“How many living things You have made, O LORD! You have exhibited great skill in making all of them...”
Psalm 104:24

b. Creation reveals **God’s holiness**.

Holiness speaks of God’s separateness/otherness from all things created. He is before all things, and by His will all things exist, but God is not matter. Creation is not an extension of God. He is not part of creation, nor does creation affect His being.

c. Creation reveals **God’s power**, Psalm 65:6; 89:8-13; Isaiah 40:26.

Throughout God’s Word creation is associated with God’s strength and the power, Isaiah 40:26. He created and now sustains creation by His strength, Psalm 65:6-8.

d. Creation reveals **God’s wisdom**, Job 38—39; Psalm 104:24ff.; 147:4-5; Proverbs 8:22-31.

God is both intelligent and wise. The idea embedded in the concept of wisdom is “skillful living/action. The intricacies of creation, Job 38-39, God’s skill in structuring the function of creation Proverbs 8:22-31, all speak to God’s wisdom.

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e. Creation reveals God as **the source of life**, Genesis 2:7; Psalm 104:29-30; John 5:26.

All life exists because of God, Psalm 104:29-30.

f. Creation reveals **God's presence** (omnipresent), Psalm 33:11-12; 139:7-10

Creation proceeded from God. All the universe exists in, through, and by Him. The universe is always in God's presence, Acts 17:27-28.

g. Creation reveals **God's goodness**, Psalm 36:9; 65:9-13; 104.

"You crown the year with
your good blessings, and
You leave abundance in
Your wake"

Psalm 65:11

The Lord is good, Psalm 100:5. Creation has become the platform by which demonstrates His goodness daily, Psalm 104:24ff..

4. A few important observations because God created the universe

"All of Your creatures wait for You to provide them with food on a regular basis. You give them food and they receive it; You open Your hand and they are satisfied with good"

Psalm 104:27-28

- God is separate/apart from creation. He is neither matter/substance, nor is He affected by anything outside Himself. Time, space, light, darkness, are all the same to Him, see Psalm 139. He is something "other." God is holy.
- God formed His creation to suit His purposes. Each piece is uniquely and wisely formed and set in its place and its time, Ecclesiastes 3:11. He does with these pieces as He sees fit, Consider Romans 9:20-21.
- All of God's creation is always before Him, Psalm 33:11-12; 139:7-10. We are never alone.
- God's good care for creation models how God wants us to treat those around us, Matthew 5:43-48.

First, God communicates with His creation. We learn specifically what God is like, how He thinks, and what is pleasing or displeasing to Him, Amos 3:7; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; Hebrews 1:1-2. Further, God relates personally to His creation. We learn that God is a living God with personality who knows us individually and who can be known, Psalm 63:1-3; John 17:3; Psalm 139 (see soteriology). Finally, God rescues His creation. We learn that God is gracious, loving, and kind, Psalm 27:13-14; Psalm 78; Psalm 103; Mark 10:45; Romans 10:13. As we discover God through creation, we discover the caring, impartial nature of God's goodness.

C. Salvation/ Redemption

The objective in God's decree is the glory of God through Christ. God has determined that His glory, His character and work, would be eternally displayed because God the Son became the obedient Son of God reversing the curse of sin and death which has corrupted creation, consider Ephesians 2:7. If this is the case one would anticipate that the work of salvation through Christ would display many of God's qualities.

1. An overview of God's redemptive plan

A quick overview of the various epochs unfolding God's plan of salvation reveals a number of God's perfections.

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- **Paradise and the Humanity's Fall/Failure** emphasize the **relational** nature intrinsic with God. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, exist eternally in divine relationship with one another. To express His relationality God creates beings with whom He intends to relate. Along with the creation of relational beings God includes a means to test the genuineness of the relationship with humanity. The test, man's failure, and the ensuing prohibitions and consequences upon creation set the stage for unfolding the drama of redemption.
- **The flood judgment upon humanity's sin** introduces God's **righteous judgment** and its inseparable connection to God's **saving love, mercy, and grace**, Genesis 6:8. Through the flood God displays His righteous justice. Through His display of righteous judgment God demonstrates that the grace inherent with divine love requires righteous judgment. This pattern will be repeated with Christ upon the cross.
- **The tower at Babel** represents both an act of divine **judgment** against humanity's self-authentication and independence from God as well as a demonstration of divine **mercy**, consider Acts 17:26-27. The divine intervention recorded in Genesis 11 prepares the way for God's promise to rescue the nations from eternal destruction through Abraham. Here God scatter humanity so that, as a result of the division many may seek after God.

The **promise of worldwide blessing** through Abraham solidifies the divine ongoing commitment to rescue creation through mercy and grace. By making a covenant with Abraham God commits Himself to demonstrate His **faithfulness** to all generations.

The Law given by God to Israel serves several purposes. Regarding salvation, the Law was given to instill in mankind a sense of impossibility leading to a need for divine grace. God's requirement for salvation demands a person keep the Law, Romans 2:13. Because of sin, this requirement, is impossible to achieve, Romans 3:19-20. Through the judgment under law and the ensuing hopelessness for any escape, however, God extends the grace of salvation unto eternal **life**, Romans 3:21-31; Galatians 3:24. Through the judgment of Law comes the mercy of grace.

The coming of Christ was the revelation of the invisible God in human form. With the visible life of Christ God manifested His **righteousness**, Romans 3:21-22. Through the death of Christ God manifested His **righteousness, justice**, Romans 3:25-26, and **love**, Romans 5:8. Among other things, John tells us that the Law came through Moses, but **grace and truth** came through Jesus Christ, John 1:17. Through Christ we see the manifestation of **God's power** through many signs and wonders. More importantly, however, we see the **omnipotence** of God through the resurrection

With the ascension of Christ came **the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit**, Acts 2. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit came life from the dead, spiritual regeneration, the new birth, Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5. Through God's **omnipotence** at the hands of the Holy Spirit the grace of God reigns through Christ unto Eternal Life demonstrating God's faithfulness to His plan and the promises made through Abraham. Finally, through the breath of the Spirit God provides the **truth**, His truth (truthfulness), in the form of the inspired text of Scripture.

2. God's self-revelation through redemption

The visible extent of God's glory, His character and work, culminate in the appearing of Jesus Christ. Along with the divine revelation in the form of Scripture, we discover the fullness of the Godhead, Jesus, Colossians 2:9-10. We discover the visible expression of God's **righteousness**

and justice. We are assured of His **faithfulness** to His intentions and His promises. We witness God's **omnipotence**, healing the sick raising the dead, and bringing those spiritually dead back to life as a new creation, Ephesians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17. More than this, we become the benefactors of God's **love, grace, and mercy** experiencing first-hand that God is **good**.

IV. God's testimony about Himself: God has revealed Himself in the Perfections of Essence and Character.

Usually, theologians discuss God's nature in terms of His attributes (here called perfections). These are qualities that are both stated explicitly (e.g., "gracious is the LORD, and righteous," Psalm 116:5) and implied through God's works (e.g., "the LORD watches over the simple;" Psalm 116:6). Theological writings have grouped God's attributes (perfections) into several different categories, using a variety of terms. God's perfections that describe His essence are often called His "amoral," "incommunicable," or ontological attributes. Perfections that describe His character are often called God's "moral," or "communicable," attributes. For our purposes we will refer to God's essential perfections; God's perfections of "greatness," and God's perfections of "goodness." Additionally, it should be noted that while God's perfections are discussed individually, God is not divided. God is not anyone of His perfections. Rather, God is who He is and He is all His perfections all the time. Finally, certain activities of God, while essential through expressions of His nature, are not strictly attributes, e.g., sovereignty, wrath, mercy, grace, are necessary expressions of righteousness and/or goodness and love.

A. The perfections of God's essence⁸

Perfections of essence attempt to describe God as is, without reference to His activities or moral qualities.

1. God is the **perfection of spirit** (immaterial): God as He relates to matter

Definition: *God's essential 'substance' is spirit (from the Hebrew and Greek words which may mean 'wind' or 'breath').*

Consider:

- God is **invisible**. John 1:18; Exodus 33:20; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 1:17.
- God is immaterial and incorporeal (i.e. lacking material form or substance). God is **not matter** and is **not held to matter**. God's indefinable essence speaks to His "otherness," often associated with "holiness." God is essence is not matter of material.

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."
John 4:24
(cp. w. Luke 24:39)

2. God is the **perfection of life**: God as He relates to consciousness

Definition: *God possesses and is the source for all life. He is the living God and His life proceeds from Himself.*

Consider:

- God is **living**. Jeremiah 10:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; John 5:26.
- God is the **source of all life**, Psalm 36:9; Jer 17:13

⁸ The idea of essence refers to the different qualities describing the divine immateriality.

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- God has **personhood**: intelligence, 1 Samuel 2:3; self-determination/will, Ephesians 1:11; emotion, Isaiah 62:5. Being a Person God is relational. This relatability sits at the heart of eternal life, John 17:3.

3. God is the **perfection of self-existence/independence**: God as He relates to freedom

Definition: *God is independent (free) of creation and is completely self-contained without need of anything.* Also referred to as aseity.

Consider:

- Exodus 3:14 --- The name "I AM" indicates "The self-existent One."
- Acts 17:25 --- God has no need of anything; God is not dependent upon anything.
- God is **complete** apart from anything outside Himself.
- God's existence is **grounded in Himself**. God does not need us, or the rest of creation, for anything. It is God's nature TO BE. As a result, God's actions are completely independent from any outside persuasions, cp. 1 Corinthians 2:16.

4. The perfection of infinity: God as He relates to time, space, knowledge, power

Definition: *God is wholly without limits as it relates to anything concerning His essence and character.*

"Yahweh is great and is highly praised;
His greatness is unsearchable."
Psalm 145:3

Consider:

- Regarding greatness, God is incomprehensible, Psalm 145:3.
- Regarding time, God has no limits, Psalm 90:2.
- Regarding space, God has no limits (does not take up space), 1 Kings 8:27.
- Regarding knowledge, God is without limits, Psalm 147:5
- Only God can limit God but these limitations are not related to His essence, rather His actions (e.g., His nature, His promises, Titus 1:2)

Other perfections mentioned in contemporary theological literature include Simplicity (God is not divided, has no parts); sovereignty (God rules over all and is governed by no one/nothing else).

B. The perfections of God's greatness (non-moral, incommunicable attributes)

God's perfections of greatness describe God's qualities that express how He relates to His creation apart from any moral implications.

1. God is everywhere (omnipresent). God's greatness in relationship to space.

God's perfections of greatness tell us about how God compares and relates to His created universe without any definite sense of good or evil.

Definition: *All creation is before God at all times. All of God is everywhere all the time.*

- Regardless of where we may be **God is there**, Psalm 139:7-10; Matthew 28:20 --- As God, Jesus is **with every one** of His followers; John 14:17--- The Holy Spirit is **present** in every believer all the time.
- God is present in space, not matter (though God does not take any space, i.e., God is non-spatial). His presence speaks to His relationship with creation, NOT His location. God is the

A Discussion About God

cause/Creator of space, therefore God is **not** subject to, or limited by space, consider Acts 17:28. Omnipresence stresses the nearness and relatedness God has with His creation.

2. God knows everything (omniscient). God's greatness is relationship to knowledge.

Definition: *God knows all things actual and potential*

- God **never learns** but rather is the source of all that is truly knowable.
- God's knowledge is **not subject** to further reason or outside counsel.
- God knows all other possibilities, cp. Matthew 11:20-24; 1 Samuel 23:10-13.
- God knows everything about us, even our thoughts and words before they occur, Psalm 139:1-4
- Because God's wisdom and knowledge are infinite God's judgments are unsearchable (i.e., incomprehensible) and God's ways are unfathomable (i.e., inscrutable), Romans 11:33
- Consider also: The mind of God is also the mind of Christ, 1 Corinthians 2:16. The Holy Spirit knows what God knows, 1 Corinthians 2:11.

Problem: What about passages that indicate God has learned something, or, upon discovering certain facts, changes His mind e.g., Genesis 6:5-7; Genesis 22:12; 1 Samuel 15:10?

Solution:

- The nature and purpose of epic narrative genre (epic story).
- These passages represent true statements about God's relationship (pleasure, displeasure, wrath, etc) to the changing situation of humanity. God relates to us according to our time and space, and experiential knowledge while still knowing past and future as now.
- Therefore, the "changes" in God's temporal relatedness with creation maintains His objectives as His will was determined before the foundation of the world, cp. Isaiah 46:9-10.

3. God is all-powerful (omnipotent). God's greatness as it relates to power/strength.

Definition: *God is able to do all things consistent with His nature, character, and will.*

- God is **the Almighty**, who **made** and **purposed** and **sustains** all things, Revelation 4:8,11. The Son **upholds** (bears or carries; grammatically this word is a pres. act. ptc) **all things** by the word of His power, cp. Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; By **His power**, Jesus Christ subjects all things to Himself, Philippians 3:21.
- God's power speaks to His ability to rule/govern and creation's relationship of submission.
- God's power is demonstrated in creation, the resurrection, and the new creation (both spiritual man and the new heaven/new earth), Isaiah 40:21-28; Ephesians 1:17-20; 2 Peter 3:1-13.

4. God is unchangeable (immutable). God's greatness with reference to change/progression.

Definition: *There is no change in God's character, nature, mind, or will (objective or subjective will).*

Malachi 3:6 states plainly that God **never changes**. See also Psalm 102:27. Hebrews 1:8-13 tells us that the Son remains the same. Thus, God **never varies** in His character or purpose, James 1:17.

- God never grows, develops, improves, evolves, or gets older.
- God has and does change His methods. An unchangeable God must change His dealings with changeable man.

5. The perfection of **eternality**. God's greatness as it relates to time.

Definition: *As the author and ruler of time God is above time and cannot be measured by time.*

Isaiah 57:15 --- God dwells/lives forever. God exists **from everlasting to everlasting**, Psalm 90:1-2. Hebrews 1:12 attributes the same quality of timelessness to the Son. Finally, the Holy Spirit is eternal (though some take this passage to be a reference to Jesus' human spirit), Hebrews 9:14.

- The perfection of eternality is God's infinite greatness as it relates to time.
- God is not conditioned by time.
- God is timeless in His own being (there is no progression or development in His character)
- God relates to all time with equal vividness.
- God relates to events in time and then acts in time.
- While discussions about time/timelessness seem endless (no pun intended), perhaps it is best to understand eternity as endless with a time relative to itself measured by the 'movement' of the Godhead with Himself.

C. God's perfections of goodness (moral, communicable attributes)

"For the LORD is good, and His love is eternal; His faithfulness endures through all generations."
Psalm 100:5

God's perfections of goodness are often referred to as His communicable attributes in that the faithful believer is expected to experience these qualities as the Holy Spirit transforms them into the image of Christ.

Perfections of goodness are those attributes that describe God's moral relationship to His creation. While the Christian is never asked to imitate God's attributes of greatness, God does intend that the redeemed are transformed to His moral perfections.

1. God is **holy**.

Definition: *God is separate (different; other) from and untainted by anything and everything created.*

Isaiah 6:3 --- God is perfect in holiness. God's holiness is that which defines everything else about God. Jesus is called holy, Acts 4:30. The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is holy, Acts 5:3.

- Holiness is sometimes referred to as crown of all God's attributes.
- God's holiness is active. His holiness incites all that He does.
- God's holiness is intrinsic. His holiness is not preserved by God's segregation from others.

2. God is **true/truthful**.

Definition: *God is genuine in character and all His words, deeds and purposes are completely free from deceit and falsehood*

John 17:3 God is both real (genuine) and true. Jesus Christ is the Truth, John 14:6. The Holy Spirit is defined by truth, John 14:17.

- God always acts in accord with reality.
- God is reliable in His revelation.
- God advances and confirms that which is true.

3. God is **righteous**.

Definition: *God is completely "correct," fair, just, and right in character, words, and works.*

God is righteous. God loves righteousness, Psalm 11:7. Jesus is also called the Righteous One, 1 John 2:1.

- Righteousness is God's rightness in character and action.
- Righteousness corresponds to God's holiness in action.
- Righteousness refers to "all that God demands and approves and is ultimately found in Christ Himself." C. I. Scofield.
- Righteousness describes the determining factor/quality in man's relationship with God, (consider justification).

4. God is **faithful**.

Definition: *God is wholly reliable, steadfast, dependable, and trustworthy in everything He is, says, and does.*

God is wholly reliable, 1 Corinthians 1:9. Jesus is wholly reliable, Revelation 3:14. The Holy Spirit produces faithfulness in the Christian, Galatians 5:22.

- Faithfulness is the guarantee behind God's promises, i.e., God will always do what He has said.
- Faithfulness is the ground for our confidence in God.

5. God is **good**.

Definition: *God's inherent character is benevolence toward His creation.*

- Benevolence is the desire, ability, and practice of doing good for others.
- The goodness of God is without any moral impurity.

Psalm 100:5 – God is morally beautiful in His character and benevolent toward His creation, consider Psalm 65:9-13; 145:8-16.

6. God is **love**.

Definition: *God purposes and acts are for the eternal good of the object being loved without any self-motivation.*

- 1 John 4:7-10 – God is so identified with the quality of love that the Bible calls God love.
- Love is the perfection of God that eternally moves God to self-communication.
- Love is a structure of His being.
- God's love is purely objective (He fully knows His creatures and yet loves them).
- God loves unconditionally.
- Love is the primary motive for all that God has decreed and for all that God does.
- God's love responds to human need with grace and mercy. Grace and mercy are not strictly attributes as they require something/ someone outside of God in order that they be expressed.
- Messiah's commandment to His followers is that they love one another the way He has loved them, John 13:34-35.

V. The Persons of the Godhead: God has revealed Himself as Trinity (three Persons/ one God).

The mystery of the Godhead certainly includes the idea of the Trinity. That God (singular) is three distinct Persons who are co-equal and co-eternal defies the mind. The Trinity is not anything that anyone would make up if they could, nor is the doctrine of the Trinity anything a person could make up if they would.

A. False views of the Trinity

1. Denials of the trinity include *Sabellianism* and *Arianism*.

a. Sabellianism (modalism)

Definition of Sabellianism: One God reveals Himself in three different “modes.” God reveals Himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Background of Sabellianism: Little is known about Sabellius (c. 200) except through the writings of Tertullian and Hippolytus.

Problem with Sabellianism: The doctrine of the trinity holds that there are three eternal, co-equal persons of the Godhead. Consider Mark 1:9-11. At Jesus’ baptism God the Father speaks to the Son while the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus.

b. Arianism

Definition of Arianism: God the Father, alone, is eternal. The Son was first created out of nothing. Afterward, Christ created the universe.

Background of Arianism: Arianism receives its name from Arius who was a presbyter in Alexandria, c. 325.

Problem with Arianism: The Bible teaches three co-equal and co-eternal Persons. God did not create God. Consider John 1:1.

2. Misconceptions concerning the trinity include adoptionism and *tri-theism*

a. Adoptionism

Definition: Christ’s life and achievements warranted Christ being adopted into the Godhead. Thus, Jesus Christ became God.

Problem: The Bible teaches that God does not change. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (one true God) did not progress or evolve. Compare John 1:1

b. Tri-theism

Definition: The misunderstanding that there are three Gods, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Problem: The Bible teaches that there is one God, Deuteronomy 6:4.

B. The correct view of the Trinity

1. Defining the Trinity

- The Bible everywhere attests that there is only one true God, Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 4:10.

Definition: The doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal and co-equal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence.

- The Bible everywhere implies or explicitly states that there are three and no more than three Persons who are called God.

- These three Persons are the same in their essence (substance), John 10:30 (the gender used for the word “one” is neuter. This emphasizes essence rather than identity. Jesus and the Father are not the same Person, rather they are of the same essence); 14:16 (“another Helper...the word “another” usually communicates “another of the same kind”...hence the Holy Spirit is of the same kind/essence as the Son who, as stated in John 10:30, is the same essence as the Father).

- These three Persons are distinct in their subsistence (roles). While of the same essence the Father plans, the Son mediates, and the Spirit administrates.

2. Biblical Evidence for three Persons in the Godhead

a. Three persons are recognized as God.

John 6:27 --- The Father is recognized as God.

Hebrews 1:8 – The Son is recognized as God.

Acts 5:3-4 – The Holy Spirit is recognized as God.

b. Three persons are described as God.

E.g., Choosing the perfection of holiness to illustrate

Matthew 6:9 – The Father is called Holy.

Acts 3:3:14 – The Son is called Holy.

Ephesians 4:30 – The Spirit is called Holy.

c. Three persons do the work only God can do.

E.g.,

Revelation 4:11 – The Father created all things.

Colossians 1:15,16 – The Son created all things.

Genesis 1:2 – The Holy Spirit created all things.

d. Three persons given credit for acts and qualities that can only be true of God.

The Father has life within Himself, John 5:26

The Son is the Life, John 11:25; 14:6

The Spirit gives life, Titus 3:5

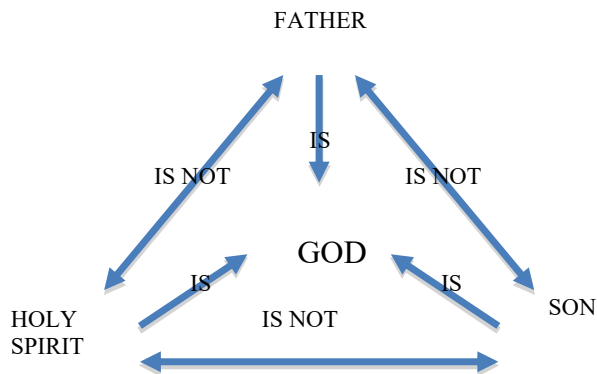
e. Three Persons are associated with each other on equal terms

Matthew 28:19 – Three Persons with whom the believer identifies.

2 Corinthians 13:14 – Three Persons involved with the life of the Christian.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love
of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be
with all of you.”
2 Corinthians 13:14.

Below is a simple diagram
illustrating the uniqueness of the Trinity



f. Through the incarnation of the Son the Father and the Holy Spirit are also revealed.

Before God the Son became the Son of God (a human being) God had not revealed Himself as three Persons, John 1:18. The Old Testament talked about the Spirit of the LORD (God), but never mentioned the Holy Spirit as a separate Person. Similarly, there are occasions when a mysterious Person, e.g., The Angel of the LORD/ Captain of the Hosts, appeared and acted as God on God's behalf, but He is never identified. Only after the Word became flesh, John 1:14, did we begin to understand the complexities of God.

C. The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

1. The unique revelation of the one, true God

The Bible clearly reveals God as One (Deuteronomy 6:4) and as three distinct Persons. From the statement “Let Us make man in Our image,” (Gen 1:26) to the revelation of the Son in Messiah Jesus (Heb 1:1-2, 8, 13), the God revealed in the Bible is unique, inexplicable, and, as such, Trinitarianism remains testimony to the veracity of the existence of the God of the Bible.

2. The meaning and model of mankind made in the image of God

a. Unity, John 17:22-23

The Trinity emphasizes unity (oneness). God is three Persons, however there is only one God. Jesus said as much in John 17. Mankind, made in the image of God, is one race. All races, both genders, and all societal distinctions are set aside. As God is One so we are led by the Spirit to

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fulfill the Messiah's Law. As the Spirit gathers a regenerated humanity, we are being made one in the Spirit, and we are preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Ephesians 4:3.

b. Community (relational)

To reflect the image of God mankind ought to respond in relational community. God exists as a fellowship. He made man in His image as a fellowship (the community of Adam and Eve; the community of people). Further, as the Spirit leads followers of Christ to live as Christ commanded, we are to be relational. Living redemptively is living relationally. Living relationally can only be achieved as the Spirit lives in us, through us, as us.

Appendices

Appendix A

The divine decree/plan defines the relationship God has with His creation. Through the centuries theologians have debated and created various models as to how God's sovereignty and humanity's freedom work together. Below are three models.

Model No. One: Open Theism:⁹

1) God (Self-limited; Self-progressing) has limited Himself to the free choices of created beings. Thus,

- God is dynamic (in contrast to immutable and impassible).
- God is changeable in knowledge and actions.
- God is temporal (God moves with time).
- God is all-knowing (God knows everything that can be known up to and including any given point in time).¹⁰
- God's sovereignty/providence may be understood as God having the power to create any possible world and having the ability to anticipate the obstructions free creatures can "throw His way." Thus, sovereignty may be defined as the activity of God working out His plan in the sphere of history. While the goals of the plan are unchangeable the outworking of these goals is flexible and responsive to what happens, hence the idea of open.

2) Man (libertarian freewill) has the power of contrary choice

- Each human is like God in that they reflect God's own creative agency in being able to make plans and carry them out.
- Every human is free and capable to respond to God in love.
- Every human is a sinner who has deliberately rejected God's plan
- Creaturely freedom has its limitations: other people affect our choices; the past affects our choices; our choices, however, are not the result of anything apart from ourselves.
- Love or sin are actions for which there are no prior conditions that render them certain.
- The future lies open before us and we can choose whether to make the journey with God.
- If history is known for certain from eternity, then freedom is an illusion.

3) God's relationship to the world: God relates to His creatures in real time from only the information and circumstances that His history provides.

- God acts temporally (not timelessly), e.g., Gen 6:5-6; 11:5-7.

⁹ Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986). Pinnock's arguments are used as the representation of open theism.

¹⁰ Ibid., 157. Concerning prophecy Pinnock writes, "What about predictive prophecy? Doesn't it prove that God knows everything about the future? No, it does not. A very high percentage of prophecy can be accounted for by one of three factors: the announcement ahead of time of what God intends to do, conditional prophecies which leave the outcome open, and predictions based upon God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and the present." Ibid. 157-58.

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- God is not independent from the world but depends upon the world for information about the world, e.g., Gen 22:12.
- God relates to things as they happen. God works sequentially in a temporal process. Reality is open (not closed/determined).

4) Solving the God-in-the-world dilemma

- Evil in the world is solely a result of free-creatures' choices (whether Satan's or man's). Evil was not a part of God's plan. God has been adjusting His actions to accomplish His purposes as human history unfolds.
- Prayer is the necessary and effective interaction between humanity and God. Along with many other benefits¹¹, prayer informs God of our intentions prompting God, who responds according to His character and purposes, to our circumstances on the basis of the unfolding progress of human history.

Model No. Two: Simple Foreknowledge

1) God (Self-limiting but possessing comprehensive knowledge about the future)

- Timeless/eternal: God relates to time in several different paradigms. Above time; relative time; both above and relative to time
- Unchangeable: God is immutable in both character and plan.
- Omniscient: God knows everything past, present, and future. Variations exist within this model, namely diminished foreknowledge (no knowledge of future contingencies) and augmented foreknowledge (knowledge of future contingencies).
- God's sovereignty/providence pertains to God's preserving and governing all creation. This sovereign providence includes: activity, namely, sustaining, maintaining, upholding, protecting, caring for and providing for His creation; scope, universal; means, His power, wisdom, mercy, omnipresence, and foreknowledge; purpose, to share His glory with His creatures for His eternal glory. Hence, "God's providence is His continuous activity of preserving and governing the whole of creation by His wisdom and goodness and power, for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose and for the glory of His name."¹²

2) Man (nuanced libertarian freewill)

Man is relatively independent. Man is free to act without his acts predetermined by God and without the simultaneous coercion of God, e.g., natural processes. Thus, relative independence means that man is allowed to exercise his power of free choice without interference, coercion, or foreordination by God in the regular course of things (under God's general providence), (191).

Freedom should be defined:

- Within the limitations of God's sovereignty (i.e., He is free to intervene should He choose to do so), our finiteness, and our self-inflicted sinfulness prevents complete independence.
- There remains, however, the ability to choose between opposites (192). This is the power of contrary choice. This ability is not harmonized with foreknowledge, only assumed as necessary.

¹¹Terrance Teissen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 101-13.

¹²Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 14. Page numbers under "Simple Foreknowledge" embedded in the text reflect citations from this work.

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- The ability to choose without the choice being fixed or determined. This includes the absence of force, coercion, constraint, or hindrance, as well as, any condition or manipulating force that has limited a person's choice to just one (194).
- Thus, the relative independence of both nature and man himself means that the complex of circumstances in which most choices are made is the accumulated result of natural processes, the free acts of other people, and our own past choices.

3) God's relationship to the world

- Divine *self*-limitation: there is an inherent self-limitation to the creation of anything and thus, there is a self-limitation to the providential governing of this creation (188). Yet this limitation is not imposed by something or someone outside of God.
- God maintains complete control (control does not equate with causation or determination) of every creature in that He still has the ultimate word in everything (189). This control is understood in two distinct ways.

Direct control: this type of control would be miraculous intervention and, perhaps other allusions to God's control over the human will, Romans 9:18.

Indirect control: God exercises control over all things pertaining to human beings and their actions through His ability to influence their decisions, usually by means outside the creature's will (e.g., laws of nature, the Word of God, appeals to reason, circumstances).

4) Solving the God-in-the-world dilemma

- Evil in the world is the result of man's free choice. These choices were known by God ahead of time (before creation) and can be influenced by direct or indirect means. God is free to either permit or prevent humanity's planned choices (214).
- Prayer serves as the means of petitioning God to consider acting or not acting on behalf of the petitioner according to God's knowledge of all future events and the overall purpose intended by God.

Model No. Three: Augustinian/Calvinism

1) God (Unconditioned in both character and counsel)

- God has revealed Himself as unconditioned and free in both character and acts.
- God is the Creator of time, and, as such is above, beyond, and unconditioned by time.
- God is non-spatial. As the Creator of space, all things created are before Him at all times (omnipresent) since God is unrestricted by the finiteness of matter.
- Unrestricted by time and space, God knows all, past, present, and future, since all that which is knowable has proceeded through an act of God's will. God is the first cause (Aquinas), the Uncaused and Unmoved Mover.
- God's foreknowledge is based upon His comprehensive knowledge. It is exhaustive and determinative.

2) Man (compatibilist freewill)

- Man is free within the boundaries of those influences exacted by God's sovereign plan. This understanding is generally referred to as compatibilism (namely, humans exercise their freedom, in a manner compatible to the divine decree).

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- There are varying degrees understood regarding this compatibilist freedom. These degrees are usually summed up in the concept, *hard determinism* or *soft determinism*. Hard determinism “is mechanistic in its assumption that an event is completely the product of the preceding state so that the idea that the event brought about by someone’s will is completely illusory.”¹³ Soft determinism, while affirming that everything is determined by God, denies creaturely acts are mechanistic, rather there are nonconstraining causes sufficient to bring about an action but not able to force an act against the will of the one choosing.¹⁴
- Compatibilist freewill does not allow for the possibility of contrary choice. Compatibilist free-will allows, however, for contra causal acts (actions/acts not necessitated by any precedent) in that no cause or set of causes is sufficient to necessitate any particular choice on the agent’s part (27). The acting agent, however, cannot do other than what he chooses to do.

3) God’s relationship to the world

“God can decree all things and yet we can still act freely in the compatibilist’s sense of freedom. God can guarantee that his goals will be accomplished freely even when someone does not want to do the act, because the decree includes not only God’s chosen ends but also the means to such ends. Such means include whatever circumstances and factors are necessary to convince an individual (without constraint) that the act God has decreed is the act she or he wants to do. And, given the sufficient conditions, the person will do the act.”¹⁵

4) Solving the God-in-the-world dilemma

- Evil in the world is the result of man’s free choice, which choice was in accord with God’s decree (plan). Mankind freely (willingly) chose and these choices were deemed necessary to accomplish God’s plan. The decree (plan) included all the influences leading to the unconstrained choices (all human actions) whether good or evil.
- Prayer is the free-choice petition that may or may not be in accord with God’s plan. Those prayers that are in accord with God’s plan are answered. Those prayers not in accord with God’s plan are ignored.

Appendix B

There are a number of objections to the idea of a divine decree. Below we will unpack three major objections.

Objection No. 1: If God has planned everything then nobody is truly free. Also, how does God remain in charge (sovereign) while humanity makes voluntary free-will choices?

Solution:

First: Take into account the nature of “free-will.”

- Libertarian free will

Libertarians hold to a view of human free will, which disallows the causal determination of any

¹³ Teissen, *Providence and Prayer*, 366.

¹⁴ John S. Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 24-25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

moral action.¹⁶ In other words, a human is not free if any factor affecting his or her actions and decision-making process *determinately causes* an action.

- Compatibilist free will

“According to a form of determinism known as compatibilism, an action is free so long as there are antecedent conditions which decisively incline the agent's will in one way or another without constraining it. To act without constraint means to act in accordance with one's desires.”¹⁷

Second: Consider the “time-frame” in which our choices were made.

- By choosing the detailed plan, including every circumstance in every situation, God chose the free actions we make in those circumstances before the foundation of the world. God is sovereign over all details, and yet, He choose our free actions to accomplish God's plan. God's plan/ future is certain but our choices are essential to make it happen.

Objection No. 2: How does a holy, righteous, and good God make a plan that includes evil in order to accomplish this plan?

Solution:

First: Consider the implications of free will and a genuine “free” relationship between God and man

- Humans live their lives based on free (though influenced) spontaneity.
- Human history (and all the events of human history) results from mankind's choices.
- God's sovereign plan, and His control of that plan, is accomplished by and through the free choices of human beings, consider Gen 50:20.
- The evil (consequences of sin) and suffering inflicted upon the human race can be traced back immediately to man's free actions.

Second: God's plan requires a test of this relationship (the opportunity to accept or reject this relationship), Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-7.

Third: God's plan demands the continued freedom of humanity as the proving ground for a genuine relationship between God and man, thus ...

- God's unfolding plan (human history) is accomplished by means of humanity's free choices (influenced by divine conditions), cp. Act 2:23.
- The good and the bad/evil that subsequently occurs in life is immediately a result of man's actions carried forth in the context of natural and manmade circumstances.

¹⁶ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 290.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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Summary: An all-powerful, good God and necessary evil

- God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnibenevolent (all good).
- God has (in His infinite knowledge and understanding) chosen a plan (out of all possible plans) in which human beings (though not all), by virtue of their freedom of spontaneity, could choose a personal relationship with God. That is, certain humans would freely choose God by virtue of the influences upon their will within the ongoing context of their lives. Other humans would not choose God on the same basis of their freedom.
- Within the necessary factors influencing man's spontaneous choices, pain and suffering are necessary elements affecting the choices made by individuals that further the plan of God.
- While pain and suffering are a part of God's necessary good plan, neither pain, suffering, nor their immediate causes are perpetrated by God, but are a result of humanity's (and angelic) ongoing choices. The immediate cause for humanity's suffering and pain can be traced to man's willful rebellion against God's ideal (thus, sin against God becomes the immediate reason for disease, natural calamity, violence, oppression, et al.).
- God has incorporated the effects of sin into His plan to bring about certain lasting benefits for mankind.

Benefit one: The divine remedy for mankind's sin, suffering, and death through oppression and violence against God's one, truly innocent human being, Acts 2:22-24; Hebrews 2:9-18.

Benefit two: The spiritual and eternal betterment of all willing humans who experience God's planned suffering with a disposition of trust in God's overarching goodness toward them, Romans 5:3-5; 2 Cor 12:7-10; James 1:2-4.

Benefit three: The sharing in eternal glory of God's one truly innocent man, Jesus, on a new heaven and new earth without sin, oppression, and death, for anyone who trusts God's testimony about His Son, Romans 8:17; 2 Cor 4: 17-18; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Peter 5:10; Rev 21:1-4.

- We suffer because within the full scope of God's benevolence toward us, pain and suffering are an element necessary to redirect (draw) the free human to freely make God directed choices leading to the eternal and incomparable good for that individual.
- By virtue of the complexities of God's knowledge and plan, humanity is not in a "good position to assess with confidence the probability that God has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting [planning] the evils [and calamities] that occur."¹⁸ The issues that remain unresolved in this life

A biblical explanation for pain and suffering: God planned a world in which mankind, by the freedom of choice, abandoned God's ideal, so that by means of man's self-willed acts, God could accomplish both the rescue of mankind from the justice due man's atrocities and the restoration of creation from the consequences of man's moral failure leading to a greater union/relationship between God and man lasting through all eternity.

may become clear in God's presence, consider Deuteronomy 29:29; Proverbs 20:24; 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Objection No. 3: God's plan is so massive how can I ever know God's will for my life?

Solution:

- God's decreed will (God's objective will planned before the world's began) can only be known as far as Scripture reveals events yet to take place. The precise ramifications of daily details of this will cannot be known, consider Proverbs 20:24.
- God's subjective will (what He wants us to be and do, e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:18) can be known by knowing Scripture, prayer, godly counsel, and choosing properly in life's circumstances.

¹⁸ Feinberg, 542. Additionally, the authors add: "The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God; God's purpose is not restricted to this life but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life" Ibid., 544,47.