

## God's Middle Knowledge

Let's think about two vexing questions in theology. (1) How can God hold people accountable for their response to Jesus if those people have never even heard of Jesus? What about babies who die, how can they be held accountable? Is it fair (or just) for God to condemn people who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel? And (2), how is it possible to reconcile God's necessary election for salvation with human freedom to choose? Theologians have attempted to answer these two questions since at least the Reformation, without much success. Calvinism (Augustinism) and Arminianism (semi-Pelagianism), are the only two solutions to these problems on offer in evangelical theology. But they both give unsatisfactory answers. I'm going to discuss here a new way that theologians increasingly are considering to answer these two questions.

The solution, many theologians now argue, depends on understanding "middle" knowledge. God is omniscient. He knows everything that *could* happen in His cosmos. God also knows everything that *will* happen in His cosmos. But there's a third kind of knowledge that God must have, and it's called "middle" because it's between the first two kinds. God knows everything that *would* happen *if* certain circumstances or conditions were true. Those circumstances or conditions aren't true, but they could be; they're called counterfactuals.

Middle knowledge is in the Bible. In Matthew 11:21-24, Jesus says, "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. . . And you, Capernaum . . . If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day." As God, Jesus knew counterfactuals. The judgment of those cities, Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, will be based on what God knows those people would have done if conditions or situations (e.g., Jesus' miracles) had been different.

So the hoped for answer to Question 1 is fairly easy: God knows how every person in the world would respond if those persons had the opportunity to hear the Gospel (but they don't actually hear it). God knows if they would respond with faith, or not. And He judges them accordingly. God's justice prevails. Unfortunately, this solution fails in one very important respect, *viz*, it doesn't account for the need for individuals to actually live out their moral choices in this time-and-space world. It raises the more difficult question, Why does God even need a physical creation? But otherwise, it's a satisfactory, if inadequate, answer.

The supposed solution to Question 2, how to reconcile God's sovereign election with human freedom using God's middle knowledge, is complicated. First, let's observe several truths in Scripture. Let's use the Gospel of John for this. (1) God clearly desires all His beloved humans to be saved. As evidence for this, I'll give these two examples, John 6:40 as well as 3:16-17. Many other verses elsewhere in Scripture could be cited. And in Scripture, (2) we see that God has given humanity the freedom to choose salvation, or to reject it. So, for example, John 3:18-21, 36. These verses make no sense whatsoever except that everyone has the ability to come to Jesus for salvation. This is why, in this era of the Son, God holds all humans responsible for their response to the Gospel. And yet, (3) it also is clear that for anyone to come to Jesus, grace is needed. That's because our sin nature fully prevents us from responding with faith and love to Jesus. Thus, Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (In this verse, the Greek word translated "draws" really means "drags," the word implies compelling force). Calvinism heavily stresses this last truth, because of the Augustinian doctrine of total depravity, to the nearly complete neglect of the first two truths. Arminians heavily stress the first two truths to the nearly complete neglect of the third. One more truth: God knows that human freedom and the existence of sin means that it is impossible for all to be saved. Arminians say that God knows in advance who will be saved; Calvinists say that God deliberately chooses in advance who will be saved. In John, we see that God knows who will be saved (6:37-39, 44, 64-65; 15:16-19).

The first three truths are not necessarily irreconcilable if we posit middle knowledge. God's knowledge of all counterfactuals allowed Him to choose from among an infinite number of possibilities the one best world to create, one in which humans would have moral freedom to choose or reject salvation AND in which His great purposes would be fulfilled.

It seems reasonable to assume the following: Each person can come to Jesus for salvation or disobey Him, and those who do come to Jesus were drawn by the Father; but those who reject Jesus are not drawn by the Father— but they *could have* responded to Jesus with faith. The ones who don't come to Jesus did not want to in the first place. They exercised their moral freedom in this choice, and God knew in advance their decision.

God does not *cause* a person to come to Jesus. Causation is not involved in this theological scheme. Whether a person comes to Jesus or does not come to Jesus for salvation is entirely their own choice and not because of having been drawn, or not drawn. Once again: If a person DOES come to Jesus, that person was drawn, and if he does not, that person was not drawn.

An illustration: If a friend were to take me to Bill Mack's for ice cream, he knows me well enough that I'd want the butter pecan flavor. He knows what I would choose if I were given the choice [middle knowledge]. He invites me, and we go. And I freely order butter pecan ice cream. I exercise freedom of choice. My friend created the circumstance for the choice, but he did not *cause* me to choose butter pecan. If my friend had NOT taken me there, I'd have ordered butter pecan but the condition to do that didn't exist, so no ice cream.

Thus, God grants the condition for salvation by "drawing." God grants sufficient grace for salvation for everyone. Those who reject Jesus have no one to blame for their destiny but themselves. God's justice cannot be impugned.

This "middle knowledge" explanation is a satisfactory way to reconcile God's sovereignty with human freedom. But it can be challenged. (i) The explanation neglects the problem Augustine raised in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, *viz*, our forbidding sin nature. But the claim that our sin nature totally prevents everyone from freely responding to God may not be true. Total depravity is a theological assumption. It is not a Scriptural truth. The verses cited above indicating that humans have the freedom to choose militates against this Calvinist doctrine. Calvinists overload John 6:44 with the full weight of their particular theology. (ii) At least one theologian opposes middle knowledge with the claim that God cannot know counterfactuals. He argues that it's impossible to "know" something (in a biblical sense) that doesn't really exist. Others dispute the assertion, saying God's omniscience is exhaustive, that is, infinite, and that the word "know" in Scripture has a wider meaning than just to intimately experience someone or something.

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A study of theology is essential to knowing God. God's awesome omniscience is but one example of His infinite greatness. This ultra- mega-great Being, our Creator God, has graciously invited us into an intimate relationship with Himself. Our commitment to Him needs to be appropriate to His greatness. It needs to be radically transforming, so we reflect His greatness.

The Gospel is Jesus. Salvation is knowing and loving Jesus. We encounter Jesus in the Word, and we are drawn into ever deeper fellowship by obediently serving Him. In sovereignty, God has ordained that we who have already responded to Jesus share what we know with others so that they too may respond appropriately. A study of theology must result in reproduction, that is, bearing fruit for God, or the exercise is in vain. The study of theology also results in increasing love for God. Blessings.