

## Introduction

Recently, Pastor Kate has been walking us through Job's experience of God. Job feels abandoned and betrayed, and never gets any real answers. In the end, the most he can say is that God is beyond him.

Today, I want to take a brief side path and examine a radically different way of experiencing of God. And yet, as we will see, this other way of experiencing God also leads to the conclusion that God is incomprehensible.

Our passage today is Psalm 139:1–18, one of the “Thirteen Scriptures” our congregation chose last year. These scriptures are meant to be “texts that define, nurture, challenge, and lead us.” And I suspect that most would put Psalm 139 in the “nurturing” category. In it, we learn that God knows everything about you, just like Clarence knows everything about George Bailey. And we also hear that God is always with you. As Julio Iglesias's son, the famous philosopher Enrique Iglesias said, “you can run, you can hide, but you can't escape [God's] love.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than being comforted, however, my primary response to Psalm 139 is excitement spawned by fear — the kind you get when you're on a roller coaster headed into a drop. At first, the psalm appears to be a systematic theology treatise on the divine attributes. It tells us that God is omnipresent; God is everywhere you could possibly go. It says God is omniscient; God knows everything you do. And it claims that God is provident, which is part of omnipotence; God not only made you, but protects and leads you wherever you go.

The concepts of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are philosophical. They are logical consequences of facts I think we can logically prove about God. My fear begins, however, when I start to wonder whether we are equipped to handle those concepts. If you

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Enrique Iglesias, “Escape,” *Escape* (Interscope, 2001), written by Kara DioGuardi, Enrique Iglesias, Steve Morales, and David Siegel.

haven't read Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*,<sup>2</sup> or if you *have* read Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Psalm 139 can become a powerful argument in favor of atheism.

### **A Problem with Omniscience**

Take verse 4, for example. God knows everything the psalmist says before he says it. Then, in verse 16, we learn that God knew the psalmist's entire life beforehand. This is "divine foreknowledge," a part of God's omniscience. And at first it seems pretty cool.

The problem is that God's knowing what you're going to do and say before you do or say it means you have no ability to do otherwise. After all, if God knows today that I'm going to eat oatmeal for breakfast tomorrow, I will have choice when tomorrow morning rolls around. After all, if I get to Monday morning and yogurt instead, or nothing at all, that would mean God didn't know on Sunday what I was going to eat on Monday. But God makes no mistakes, as the philosopher Lady Gaga tells us in her treatise, "Born This Way."<sup>3</sup> And God can't both know what's going to happen and not know what's going to happen.

If God knows the future, in other words, there's no changing it. And if the future can't be changed, it would seem that humans have no free will, no ability to make choices, and no responsibility for what they do. But that would mean it makes no sense for God to give instructions, punishments, or rewards. If God's omniscience includes knowing the future, the entirety of human history was set in stone before humans ever showed up — including every war, genocide, and pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> See specifically Book V: [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm#Page\\_225](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm#Page_225)

<sup>3</sup> Lady Gaga, "Born This Way," *Born This Way* (Streamline/Kon Live/Interscope, 2010), lyrics by Stefani Germanotta and Jeppe Laursen.

## A Problem with Omnipotence

It's not just God's foreknowledge that's problematic, however. Consider the *leadup* to verse 16's declaration that God knows your entire life before you live it. In those verses, we find that God is not just passively involved in the disasters of human life. The Psalmist says that God is the one who actively created him in his mother's womb.

To see the difficulty, it might be helpful to return to the words of the aforementioned Lady Gaga. Her Ladyship writes: "I'm beautiful in my way / cuz God makes no mistakes / I'm on the right track baby / I was born this way."<sup>4</sup> What are we to make, then, of everyone who is born broken? I have to take prescription sertraline because I was born with a genetic predisposition to depression that I *thought* I inherited from my father's side of the family. But according to Lady Gaga's gloss on Psalm 139, that's not how things work. *God* made me with dysfunctional neurons that can't maintain adequate levels of the required neurotransmitters. I also assumed my lifelong struggle with weight was due to the genetics I inherited from my mother's side of the family. But on the Gagagian reading of Psalm 139, God is the one who predisposed me to obesity.

My birth defects and genetic disorders are minor compared to those that millions of people live with, of course. And they are even *more* minor compared to the disorders that have turned out to be fatal for so many of our fellow humans. But Psalm 139 implies that none of these are accidental. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. God knit those crippling and sometimes deadly flaws into us from the very beginning.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## A Problem with Omnipresence

So far, we've been discussing problems that arise from Psalm 139's discussion of God's omniscience and providence. But providence is a part of God's omnipotence. So that's two of the three divine "omni" attributes. Before we examine solutions to these difficulties, however, we need to look at a third problem that arises from a mixture of God's omnipotence and omnipresence.

In verses 7 to 10, the Psalmist claims not only that God is with him wherever he goes, but that God is there, protecting and guiding him. If this was written by David, then these claims might make sense. David lived a charmed life, which implies divine protection. But could we make similar claims for anyone other than David? What was God doing when God was there with each of the 598 people American police have killed this year? What comfort would it be to tell the 130,000 Americans who have died of COVID, "God is with you right now"? And who would have the audacity to add, "And God is *protecting* you right now."

If we read this passage not as a set of assertions about God's relationship with David, but as universal claims about God's relationship with every human being, in other words, Psalm 139 would be gaslighting. Psalm 139 would be saying, "I know it *seems* like you're being choked to death by a police officer or a respiratory illness, but *actually* God is here with you, protecting you. You can't believe what your eyes see. You have to have faith in things unseen."

However, the problem of God's presence and God's negligence isn't something we can avoid simply by refusing to universalize the claims made by the psalmist. After all, the difficulty is created both by God's omnipresence and omnipotence. And I can give you philosophical proofs of both. Whenever something bad happens, I can prove to you that God was there. And

whenever something bad happens, I can prove to you that God could stop it. God can do anything, anything, anything. God can do anything but fail.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, even though God is always there and always could do something, God so often doesn't.

### **Summary and Transition**

So, we have three problems. First, Psalm 139 seems to say each human life, and all of human history, is predetermined by God's foreknowledge. Second, it seems to say that God deliberately makes people broken. And third, it seems to say that God is indifferent to human suffering, because God is there and could help, but doesn't. So, what's the solution?

Well, one thing we *could* say is that all this shows the very concept of God to be incoherent. After all, just the sorts of problems we have been analyzing here provide the foundation of the traditional argument for atheism.

Or, we might just say that this shows there's something wrong with philosophy. We need to stop thinking, and just have faith. God made us with brains, but we shouldn't use them.

I suggest instead that we take some direction from Job and the Psalmist. In chapter 42, Job says, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." And in verse 6, the Psalmist says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (NRSV).

And I know, these verses sound like the, "Just stop thinking" solution, but that's not it.

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<sup>5</sup> Ira Stanphill, "God Can Do Anything," (Singspiration Music/ASCAP/ Brentwood Benson Music Publishing Inc., 1946). I hope that info is correct! It's the best I could find:  
[https://hymnary.org/text/god\\_can\\_do\\_anything\\_anything\\_anything](https://hymnary.org/text/god_can_do_anything_anything_anything)

## **Complicating Omnipresence**

I said before that I think I can philosophically prove that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Those divine attributes follow logically from the something else I think philosophers can prove: that God is the infinite creator, source, or ground of the physical universe.

Take God's omnipresence, for example.

You and I are limited to being only in one place at a time, because we are spatial beings. We could not exist outside space, since our various organs need to have very particular spatial relationships to each other in order to function correctly. But if God is the creator of space, then space depends on God, not the other way around. That means God is beyond the limitations of space and place. God can act at whatever points in space God desires, whenever God desires. God can act omnipresently.

Notice, however, that this sort of omnipresence does not mean that God stands beside us, like a parent beside a child. Nor does it mean God surrounds us, like a parent hugging a child. Rather, it means that space and distance can form no barrier between God and us. God's status as creator does not put God everywhere in space, but rather puts God beyond space, spatial limitations, and spatial exclusions.

So, when I want to ask, why didn't God do something to protect a person who was killed by the police when God was right there, it's not altogether clear to me that I know what I'm asking.

## **Complicating Foreknowledge**

The problem of divine foreknowledge is undercut by similar considerations. If God is the creator of our universe—and if that includes both space *and* time—then time depends on God,

rather than the other way around. While you and I are limited to existing moment to moment, God has no such limitations. But it wouldn't make sense to say God fills time any more than to say that God fills space. Instead, we would have to say that God transcends both space and time, since they derive from God, rather than God deriving from them.

And that means while God knows our future, we can't say that God knows it *before* it happens. When I think about tomorrow, I am thinking in the present about the future. But if God is beyond time, then God's thinking about what I'm going to eat for breakfast on Monday is not a mental activity that is happening on Sunday. God's knowing what we're going to do tomorrow wouldn't happen at any particular point inside time at all. It wouldn't even happen at all points in time, or all at one time. God's knowing would happen outside of time, beyond time.

And that means that questions like, "Why didn't God stop this pandemic, when God knew about it ahead of time?" or "How can we have free will when God knows ahead of time what we are going to do?" are too incoherent to have an answer.

### **Complicating Omnipotence**

Finally, the problem of God's providence and omnipotence also becomes murky if God is the creator of time. The psalmist describes God's relationship to the formation of each human body in temporal terms. First, God sees your "unformed substance." Then, God knits your various parts together, a sequential process that takes nine months. And at the end, you are a complete human being that has been fearfully and wonderfully made.

But at best, such a description of God's creative work would have to be a metaphor if God is beyond time. God would not look ahead to how you should turn out, or toil from day to day to link the appropriate cells together. In fact, I have no idea how to describe the activity of

creation without loading it up with temporal terms that make no sense if God is the origin of time itself.

And I similarly had no idea what exactly I mean when I ask what could possibly motivate God to have made me so broken. When humans act, it's because we have a desire. That desire was there first, the action followed, and eventually we reach our goal. But this way of understanding motivated action, having reasons to behave in a particular way, or working to achieve something, makes no sense when you're describing a being who transcends time, for whom there is no setting future goals, or having a desire before acting.

In each of these cases, I find my frustration with God depends on thinking about God using temporal and spatial concepts that I don't actually believe apply to God. The words I use when I ask, "Why would God do this?" or "Why didn't God do that?" or "Given that God was there, how come God didn't act?" express a genuine frustration and a real anger. But when I try to think through what sort of answer I want, I find that I don't really understand what I was even saying.

## Conclusion

What can we say then about a God who transcends space and time? Not a whole lot. Like Job, the best we can do may be to say, "I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further" (Job 40:4b–5, NRSV). Or, with Wittgenstein, we might say, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."<sup>6</sup>

But we find ourselves in such a speechless state, not because we simply bow in faith to God's authority — or bow in fear to God's ability to make giant dinosaurs and sea dragons —

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<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications), prop. 7 (p. 108).



but because we have discovered through rational argument that there are questions it is impossible to answer because there are questions it is impossible to even ask coherently.

And what's more, our speechlessness need not be silent. St. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit groans in a way that is too deep for words when we do not know what to say (Romans 8:36). So, I don't see why we can't join in.