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The Omniscience of God

Roger K. Terry

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As Latter-day Saints, we believe in an omniscient, or all-knowing, God. We also believe that Jesus Christ has attained a similarly exalted degree of glory and intelligence. The Lord Himself and His prophets and apostles declare this doctrine unequivocally: “Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, . . . the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes” (D&C 38:1–2). President Spencer W. Kimball says, “God is omniscient. There are no corners so dark, no deserts so uninhabited, no canyons so remote, no automobiles so hidden, no homes so tight and shut in but that the all-seeing One can penetrate and observe.”¹ Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote, “Few doctrines, save those pertaining to the reality of the existence of God, are more basic than the truth that God is omniscient.”²

These statements of fact inevitably lead to two fundamental questions: What exactly does omniscience mean? Why should we concern ourselves with it? Let us look at these two questions in reverse order.

Why Should We Concern Ourselves with God’s Omniscience?

Isn’t it enough to merely accept the fact that God knows everything? Isn’t questioning it just a waste of time, an intellectual game, the needless pursuit of a tangent? No, it isn’t. “And this is life eternal,” said the Savior in His great Intercessory Prayer, “that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Knowing God and His Beloved Son certainly includes knowing as much as possible about Their attributes, Their perfections, and the kind of life They live.

In *Lectures on Faith*, the contents of which were approved by and presented under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith, we read the following: “Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, the idea that he actually exists. Second, *a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes*. Third, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to his will.”³ Why is a correct idea of God’s character, perfections, and attributes necessary? “Without the idea of the existence of these attributes in the Deity, men could not exercise faith in him for life and salvation, seeing that without the knowledge of all things God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures. For it is the knowledge which he has of all things from the beginning to the end that enables him to give that understanding to his creatures by which they are made partakers of eternal life. And if it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men that God has all knowledge, it would be impossible for them to exercise faith in him.”⁴ In short, if we misunderstand what is meant by omniscience, our faith in God will be incomplete, and our understanding of our own eternal potential will perhaps be incorrect.

What Does Omniscience Mean?

Some Church members harbor erroneous beliefs about God’s omniscience. I hear evidence of these false ideas from time to time in talks, lessons, and comments. Basically, all of these beliefs proclaim in one way or another that God does not actually know “all things,” that He is somehow limited. Some people, for instance, believe that He gathers some information from angels who go out ministering and then report back to Him. Others believe God knows “all that is now known” in the universe, and that there is knowledge yet to be discovered that God does not yet know. Still others believe that God knows only the larger picture or the main events in our lives but does not concern Himself with the tiny, insignificant details.

One rather subtle misconception has to do with God’s knowledge of the future. For instance, I once thought God’s grasp of the future was a predictive sort of knowledge. In other words, God knows what I will do next Wednesday at 4:23 p.m. because through our lengthy pre-mortal association and His observation of me in mortality, He knows me perfectly, He knows everyone else perfectly, and He knows how the elements will respond to the various forces that act upon them. Because of this vast reservoir of knowledge, He can account for all variability and randomness and can predict perfectly what I will do. This theory

has obvious limitations, the most significant being that it is not true. God does not predict the future. In some way we cannot fathom, He actually sees it. He even tells us so. As quoted above, “All things are present before [His] eyes.”

I also believe we sometimes underestimate God’s knowledge simply because we do not take Him at His word. We do not really think seriously about what “all things” means. We somehow assume His view of the universe is sort of like ours—only a bit more expansive. Perhaps we cannot really begin to understand His omniscience until we take a closer look at our own limited perspective and realize He is not limited at all.

Past, Present, and Future

In Doctrine and Covenants 93:24, we read, “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come”—that is, knowledge of past, present, and future. God possesses a fulness of truth, so we may say to ourselves, “He’s one up on us because we know only past and present.” But such thinking is rather presumptuous and self-congratulatory. I think I can make a good argument for the fact that God is more than “one up on us” and that, indeed, we do not really know the past or the present, let alone the future.

We do not know the past? Yes, we have memory, but memory is quite different from *knowing* the past. Memory is limited by two facts. First, it is incredibly unreliable. I believe I have a better-than-average memory, although it tends to be a bit selective; but when I look now and then in one of my old journals, I find that what I wrote at the time does not always correspond with the way I remember certain events. Something has happened in the intervening years, and my mind has altered its perception of what actually happened. The second limiting factor is that we do not know the present, and if we do not know the present, then our memory is filled with bits and pieces of something other than reality.

We do not know the present? No, we do not. Anyone who has ever talked with another human being should know that no two people see the world in just the same way. That is why we have disagreements. We see things differently. Each person has a unique perspective on what goes on around him or her, and that perspective is limited by one of the constraints placed on all mortals: we can focus on only one thing at a time. Our view of the present is colored by what we choose to bring to the foreground of thought, and our perception can be shaded by anything from what we ate for breakfast to whether we are in love. Beyond this, our perception of life is filtered by our most cherished beliefs and prejudices, some of which we do not even recognize.

When we consider that our view of the present includes only a minuscule slice of infinite space and that our view of that tiny slice is far from comprehensive, perhaps we can gain some appreciation of how truly insignificant our perspective is compared with God's. I think we can safely say that God experiences life far differently than we do. In fact, we cannot even imagine what reality must look like to Him. He sees the sparrow fall, numbers the hairs of our heads, and knows all our thoughts and feelings—at every instant. We do not really understand the meaning of the word *omniscient*. How could we without having experienced it? We find it incredible that God can know the future, but even more incredible is the notion that He can know everything at the present moment—everything. There is no limit to His awareness of the universe. At any given instant, God knows not only everything that is happening but also everything that has ever happened and everything that will happen, for eternities without end. That is eternal life—the fact that God experiences and comprehends an eternity in any given instant. Eternal life, then, is not merely a life of endless duration; it is a particular quality of life that is eternal or infinite in its very nature.

Speaking of God's omniscience, Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains: "He has all wisdom, all knowledge, and all understanding; he is the All-Wise One, the All-Knowing One. There is no truth he does not know, no wisdom hidden from his view, no laws or powers or facts for him to discover in some distant eternity. His wisdom and knowledge are absolute and have neither bounds nor limitations. He knows all things now; he is not progressing in knowledge; he is not discovering new truths; there are no higher spheres than the one in which he now walks. His mind is infinite; his knowledge comprehends all things, and he is in fact the source and author of all truth."⁵

The Mortal Test

Time, as we know it, is strictly a mortal phenomenon and is necessary for the test we came here to experience. For us, time is one-dimensional, and it runs unimpeded from past to future. The fact that time is one-dimensional for us explains our inability to know past, present, and future. This restriction limits us to focusing on only one thing at a time; and, as mentioned above, this condition severely restricts our perspective of what is going on around us in mortality.

God is obviously not so limited. His mind is able to grasp an infinite amount of information at any instant. He can watch a million sparrows fall simultaneously on a million worlds, number the hairs on all the heads in the universe, count the stars in the sky, hear and answer

the prayers of all His children, and still have an infinite awareness of everything else yesterday, today, and forever. Does He know what the blood pressure of the president of the United States will be at exactly five minutes after midnight on October 1, 2020? Does He know where a grain of sand that is now blowing across the Sahara Desert will be in exactly ten hours, fifty minutes, and fourteen seconds? Does He know at this instant what my grandchild who is not yet born will be praying for on her sixteenth birthday? If we take Him at His word, the answer can only be yes. God experiences no surprises. This is what it means to be omniscient, and it is far beyond our limited mortal comprehension. But because He is omniscient, we can have perfect faith in Him.

We might well ask, given what we do know about God's awareness of His creations, why we, His children, are so limited. Hugh Nibley suggests an answer: "But why this crippling limitation on our thoughts if we are God's children? It is precisely this limitation which is the essence of our mortal existence. If every choice I make expresses a preference; if the world I build up is the world I really love and want, then with every choice I am judging myself, proclaiming all the day long to God, angels and my fellowmen where my real values lie, where my treasure is, the things to which I give supreme importance. Hence, in this life every moment provides a perfect and foolproof test of your real character, making this life a time of testing and probation."⁶

It is our one-dimensional experience with time that provides our test. We must constantly choose what we will think about. Sometimes we do not choose at all, or so we suppose. We let our minds wander, but this is a choice also. If we had complete comprehension of reality, as God has, it would negate the purpose of our mortal probation. In fact, a mind that encompasses and comprehends all things at all times is simply incapable of wandering. Where could it go? Apparently, to prove we can be trusted with such an infinite and all-encompassing view, we must demonstrate that we can learn to be focused and consecrated and strictly obedient in an environment where our choice of what to think about is complicated by a multitude of enticing alternatives and made truly meaningful by the necessity we often face of choosing not just between good and evil but also between good and good.

In spite of these mortal limitations, now and then God gives certain mortals a partial glimpse of His perspective, and their accounts are both enlightening and inviting, enticing us on toward an eternal perspective, an existence not trammled by the necessary restrictions of mortality. These views are glorious and give us hope that we may one day partake of that same glory. Moses, for instance, was shown the earth, "even all

of it, and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God. And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not; . . . and their numbers were great, even numberless as the sand upon the sea shore” (Moses 1:27–28). This view teaches us not only that God is able to reveal to us such unlimited visions but also that within us we already have the potential, when the mortal veil is lifted, to enjoy such exalted views. We truly do have within us the seeds of eternal life.

All Possible Futures

One fascinating aspect of God’s omniscience can be seen in President Wilford Woodruff’s remarks concerning the 1890 manifesto ending the practice of plural marriage. “The Lord showed me by vision and revelation,” said President Woodruff, “exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice.”⁷ He then described some of the consequences the Saints would have faced had they not ceased practicing plural marriage. From this experience, we can conclude that God knows not only what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen but also what *would* happen if we were to make different choices than the ones we actually make. And apparently He *knows* this in more than a theoretical manner. He can show others in vision what we might call an alternate future, one that never will exist, except as a possibility that is prevented by our use of agency.

And if God knows the alternate future that would occur because of one choice that is never made, He certainly knows all the possible futures based on all possible choices His children might make. Yes, this, too, is part of God’s omniscience. It must be, for it is indeed knowledge, and an omniscient God must possess all knowledge. Besides, if He did not know these possible futures that will never come to pass, how could He warn us of the consequences of our choices, as He warned President Woodruff? If the stories that appear in the *Ensign* are an accurate reflection of what Church members experience, the Lord has undoubtedly prevented numerous automobile accidents by having the Spirit prompt drivers to stop or slow down or change lanes—all because He knew what would have happened.⁸

All Wisdom

Thus far we have talked about God’s omniscience primarily in the sense that He sees everything and has all information present before Him. But all the knowledge in the universe would not make our Heav-

only Father a perfect or even helpful God without His other attributes, such as love, justice, mercy, goodness, patience, and kindness. One attribute in particular that enables Him to use His infinite knowledge to bless His children is His wisdom. Wisdom is actually an important aspect, or product, of God's knowledge. Wisdom, we might say, is knowing how to apply knowledge correctly. Thus, because He has perfect wisdom, God always knows which choice will create the greatest eternal good for His children. His wisdom prevents Him from ever misapplying His knowledge, as we imperfect mortals often do.

President Marion G. Romney, First Counselor in the First Presidency, wrote:

Since knowledge is an "acquaintance with, or clear perception of, facts"; and "wisdom is the capacity of judging soundly and dealing broadly with facts; especially in their practical" application "to life and conduct," it follows that wisdom, although more than, is nevertheless a product of, and is dependent upon knowledge.

The Book of Mormon specifically relates God's wisdom to his knowledge. Speaking of God's plan for the salvation of men, Lehi says, "All things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things" (2 Nephi 2:24). Thus, . . . God's perfect wisdom is a product of His knowledge of all things.⁹

Certainly, His wisdom is a product of His knowledge, but it is also a product of His goodness, for knowledge alone does not automatically produce wisdom. Lucifer had great knowledge, but that knowledge did not lead to wisdom. Indeed, Lucifer's unwise choices prevented him from attaining greater knowledge. It is God's perfect knowledge combined with His perfect goodness that makes His perfect wisdom a reality. And because God has perfect wisdom to apply His perfect knowledge, He is able to perform His work and enjoy the associated glory in bringing "to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

He Is Our Judge

Not only does God see and know everything in the physical universe but also He knows everything in the private inner universes of all His children. In some way that we cannot understand, He knows us. He sees through our eyes, feels our emotions, understands our motives, and comprehends our imperfect perception of our own circumstances. If it were not so, He would be unable, even unfit, to judge us. If He were merely an outside observer, He would not qualify. But He is not limited to merely viewing our actions. God knows our thoughts and attitudes and the intents of our hearts—as if they were His own. It is

because He does know us better than we know ourselves that He can judge us. And He judges us with wisdom and love.

Our Eternal Father is not a vindictive, cynical being who laughs at what He sees. He is a merciful, loving Father, whose infinite powers are focused on saving our souls without encroaching on our agency. And someday, if we choose well in this life and seek both goodness and wisdom, we will be able to be the same kind of loving, understanding parents to our spirit children.

Conclusion

Returning to the question addressed at the beginning of this article, why should we concern ourselves about our Eternal Father's omniscience? His goal for us—and our objective in coming to earth—is that we learn to become more like Him. But how can we do this if we do not know Him or understand His perfections and attributes?

“And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). “Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). “Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily, I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). Certainly, the more we know about our Savior and His Father, whose life and character Jesus perfectly reflected, the greater will be our reverence and love for Them and the more able and eager we will be to emulate Their character and follow Their teachings. **RE**

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 5.

2. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 6.

3. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 33; emphasis added.

4. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 77.

5. Bruce R. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 52–53.

6. Hugh Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 264.

7. “Excerpts from Three Addresses by President Wilford Woodruff regarding the Manifesto,” following Declaration 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

8. I am the editor of “Latter-day Saint Voices,” the department of the *Ensign* that features these stories. The *Ensign* receives many such stories that are never published. The Lord is very active in warning people about disasters that never

happen because these individuals listen to and follow the promptings they receive and thus prevent the very event the Lord is warning them about.

9. Marion G. Romney, "Converting Knowledge into Wisdom," *Ensign*, July 1983, 5.