

BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

BIBLE STUDY

Topical Bible Study Is Free Will Really Free?

Dr. Michael Oyedokun II, Pastor



IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Before the fall of Adam, man was **sinless** and **able not to sin**. For God “saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). **But he was also able to sin**. For God had said, “In the day that you eat of it (the tree) you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

As soon as Adam fell into sin, human nature was profoundly altered. **Now man was not able not to sin**. In the fall, human nature lost its freedom not to sin.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

The world's current sinful state is directly linked to choices made by Adam and Eve. God created mankind in His own image, and that included the ability to choose.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

If “free will” means that God gives humans the opportunity to make choices that genuinely affect their destiny, then yes, human beings do have a free will. The world’s current sinful state is directly linked to choices made by Adam and Eve. God created mankind in His own image, and that included the ability to choose.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

However, free will does not mean that mankind can do anything he pleases. Our choices are limited to what is in keeping with our nature. For example, a man may choose to walk across a bridge or not to walk across it; what he may not choose is to fly over the bridge—his nature prevents him from flying. In a similar way, a man cannot choose to make himself righteous—his (sin) nature prevents him from canceling his guilt (Romans 3:23). So, free will is limited by nature.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

This limitation does not mitigate our accountability. The Bible is clear that we not only have the ability to choose, we also have the responsibility to choose wisely.

In the Old Testament, God chose a nation (Israel), but individuals within that nation still bore an obligation to choose obedience to God. And individuals outside of Israel were able to choose to believe and follow God as well (e.g., Ruth and Rahab).

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In the New Testament, sinners are commanded over and over to “**repent**” and “**believe**” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Acts 3:19; 1 John 3:23).

Every call to repent is a call to choose. The command to believe assumes that the hearer can choose to obey the command.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Jesus identified the problem of some unbelievers when He told them, “You refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:40).

Clearly, they could have come if they wanted to; their problem was they chose not to. “A man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7), and those who are outside of salvation are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20-21).

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Jesus identified the problem of some unbelievers when He told them, “You refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:40).

Clearly, they could have come if they wanted to; their problem was they chose not to. “A man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7), and those who are outside of salvation are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20-21).

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

But how can man, limited by a sin nature, ever choose what is good? It is only through the grace and power of God that free will truly becomes “free” in the sense of being able to choose salvation (John 15:16). **It is the Holy Spirit who works in and through a person’s will to regenerate that person (John 1:12-13) and give him/her a new nature “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). Salvation is God’s work.** At the same time, our motives, desires, and actions are voluntary, and we are rightly held responsible for them.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Do we have free will when it comes to God?

When we talk about free will there are two major questions that have been debated by religious leaders and followers:

- Does God give us free will to make our own decisions in life?
- or are we predestined to the decisions we make?

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In Christian theology, God is described as not only **omniscient** but **omnipotent**; a notion which some people, Christians and non-Christians alike believe, implies that not only has God always known what choices individuals will make tomorrow, but has actually determined those choices. That is, they believe by virtue of his foreknowledge he knows **what will influence individual choices**, and by virtue of his omnipotence he controls those factors.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

This becomes especially important for the doctrines relating to salvation and predestination. Some denominations, such as Methodists, believe that while God is omnipotent and knows the choices that individuals will make, he still gives individuals the power to ultimately choose or reject everything, regardless of any internal or external conditions relating to the choice.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

For example, when Jesus was nailed on the cross, the two murderers, one on each side, were about to die. Only one asked Jesus for forgiveness while the other, even at the end of his life with nothing else to lose, mocked Jesus.

In the view of **Methodists** and others who believe in free will, this was a free choice of everlasting death over everlasting life.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Calvinists embrace the idea that God chose who would be saved from before the creation. They quote Ephesians 1:4 "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" and also 2:8 "For it is by grace you are saved, through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

One of the strongest defenders of this theological point of view was the Puritan-American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. It should not be thought that this view completely denies freedom of choice; however, it claims that man is free to act on his moral impulses and desires, but is not free to act contrary to them, or to change them.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

However, a reconciliation more compatible with non-Calvinist theology states that God is, in fact, not aware of future events, but rather, being eternal, He is outside time, and sees the past, present, and future as one whole creation. Consequently, it is not as though God would know in advance that Jeffrey Dahmer would become guilty of homicide years prior to the event as an example, but that He was aware of it from all eternity, viewing all time as a single present.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In **Calvinism**, Divine Providence is an integral part of his theology. Calvinism emphasizes the **depravity of man** and the complete **sovereignty** of God. God's plan for the world and every soul that he has created is guided by **his will**, or providence. According to Calvin, the idea that man has a free will and is able to make choices independently of what God has already determined is based on our limited understanding of God's perfection and the illusion (created by Satan) that we are able to reject God's plan for us. In this mode of thought, providence is related to predestination.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

But Scripture never uses the phrases “**free will**” or “**free choice.**” How do we know that we have such thing? In the book of Deuteronomy, God says to the people of Israel: *“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life”* (Deut 30:19-20). **God does not set before people two alternatives and then predetermine what choice they will make.** It would be a mockery for God to command the people to choose when He knew very well, they could not.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Moreover, Elijah commanded the people to choose and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21). Elijah obviously believed the people were capable of making a choice to follow the Lord.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In Genesis 2 and 3, God placed the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden precisely in order to give human beings a choice: He commanded them not to eat of this tree (Gen 2:17), and placed the serpent in the garden to be the mouthpiece of Satan to tempt them. Without the tree and without Satan, Adam and Eve and all humanity would have lived in paradise forever, **but not as full persons.**

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

God wanted them to confront good and evil and make a choice. **God did not predetermine the choice, although He knew beforehand which way they would choose.**

Free will was built into our humanity from the Garden of Eden.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

COMBATILISM VS. FATALISM

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Compatibilism is the view that God is **absolutely sovereign** and yet our choices have real meaning and we are responsible for them. This is often considered along the lines of Calvinism.

- Compatibilists often define an instance of "free will" as **one in which the agent had freedom to act according to their own motivation.**

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Fatalism, on the other hand, teaches that no matter what you choose or do, things will turn out the same.

- Fatalism is a philosophical doctrine that stresses the subjugation of all events or actions to destiny. Fatalism generally refers to any of the following ideas:

The view that we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do.

- Included in this is that humans have no power to influence the future or indeed their own actions.
- This belief is very similar to predeterminism.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

For example, if it is determined that Bill will get an “F” on his test tomorrow, then no matter how hard he studies or how well he knows the material, he will fail. His choices do not really affect what will happen.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

Compatibilism, in contrast to fatalism, says that our choices really do affect the future, and that if different choices had been made, the future would have been different. On this view, if Bill doesn't study, he will fail. But if he does study hard, then his studying will be the means that brings about a good grade.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In regard to God's sovereignty, this means that God does not just ordain the ends and then say this will happen no matter what. No, **God also ordains the means to his planned end.** Our decisions are each links in the chain of means ordained by God to bring about his planned ends. If different decisions had been made, the consequences would have been different. But God works to ensure that the means he has ordained will most certainly occur **so that none of his purposes can fail.**

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

In regard to **God's sovereignty**, this means that God does not just ordain the ends and then say this will happen no matter what. No, **God also ordains the means to his planned end.** Our decisions are each links in the chain of means ordained by God to bring about his planned ends. If different decisions had been made, the consequences would have been different. But God works to ensure that the means he has ordained will most certainly occur **so that none of his purposes can fail.**

This makes human decisions truly significant and vital.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

There are great measures of self-determination, as the Bible often shows, but never is man the **ultimate or decisive cause** of his preferences and choices. When man's agency and God's agency are compared, both are real, but **God's is decisive**. Yet — and here's the mystery that causes so many to stumble — God is always decisive in such a way that man's agency is real, and his responsibility remains.

IS FREE WILL REALLY FREE?

References:

The Bible, King James Version

Olson, Roger E. The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity. InterVarsity Press, 2002

Grace Online Library, 20 Nov. 2006. <Reference.com <http://graceonlinelibrary.com>>

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 10 Oct. 2006. <Reference.com <http://en.wikipedia.org/>>

Questions?