

# Chapter 11

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## Predestination and Free Will

### Calvinism

Years ago, when I was first exposed to an extreme form of Calvinism, I was shocked to learn that the doctrine of predestination was still alive and well. It hadn't died out in the era of Jonathan Edwards as I had thought. The idea that God would arbitrarily decide in advance who would be saved and who would spend eternity in Hell, without giving anyone a say in the matter, simply repulsed me. Not only was this doctrine alive and well, but it was, and still is, the predominant view in many mainline protestant denominations and even in the Baptist church, of which I was a member.

According to an extreme form of this system of thought, sometimes called hyper-Calvinism, Jesus only died for the Elect (limited atonement), and God only loves the Elect, and it is impossible to become saved by one's own volition, because God decides in advance who is going to desire to be saved and who is not. When God calls you to be saved His grace is irresistible. If He does not call you then it would be impossible for you to come to repentance and be saved. The idea is that man is totally depraved and unless God intervenes and awakens in him a desire to become saved, the result is a hardened heart that cannot be changed.

One of the main themes of this system of thought is the sovereignty of God. The idea is that God is all-powerful and completely sovereign over His creation and will absolutely accomplish all that He sets out to do. Because God is sovereign and does not save everyone, it must be assumed that God does not want everyone to be saved. Not all Calvinists are this extreme in their beliefs. Many do not believe in the limited atonement and many believe that God really does love everyone. He just loves the elect in a different way than those who are not of the elect.

All Calvinists teach that human freedom is an illusion. It only seems real because God allows us to make our own choices in life, sometimes referred to as free-agency, to distinguish it from free-will. The idea is that we are free to do what we want, but what we want is not determined by us, but by God. So we don't really possess free-will, only free-agency.

Of course, there are many Scriptures that refute these teachings, but there is also much Scriptural support for some of them.

### Arminianism

Arminianism came about as a reaction against Calvinism. Arminians believe that Jesus did indeed die for everyone and that we are all genuinely free to make our own choices in life. While it is true that God decides in advance (elects, chooses, predestinates) who will become saved, His

choices are based on His foreknowledge of who would be predisposed to receive the Gospel and who would not. According to Arminianism, human freedom is real and God's grace is offered freely to all.

The Arminian arguments seem sound enough at first glance, and there is much Scriptural support for this system of thought. However, as I pondered their arguments I came to a very disturbing realization. Human freedom must be an illusion, even if the Arminians are right and the Calvinists are wrong. If God doesn't determine our desire to be saved or not, what does? Can any of our choices in life actually be self-caused? While it is true that we are free to make our own choices in life, we are not free to determine what our desires will be. All of our thoughts have an antecedent cause. The choices we desire to make in life, if not directly determined by God, are at least indirectly determined by Him. After all, it was God who created the universe and set in motion random processes which resulted in our birth, genetic, social, societal, and psychological make-up and environment. We didn't choose where we would be born or in what kind of family or social environment we would be raised. All of these factors combine to make each one of us unique and different.

The reason my choices in life are different from yours is that I am different from you. Did I cause myself to be different? Not really. So, whether you believe that your uniqueness was caused by God or by random processes, it is still not self-caused. If you choose to become saved and I do not, who is to blame? Ultimately, we must "blame" God for all the choices we make in life. God is the one who started it all, knowing full-well what the result would be and how each individual life would be affected.

So, it doesn't matter whether you take the Calvinist position or the Arminian position, God is still ultimately responsible for all that happens.

### **Freedom of Will vs. Freedom of Choice**

I do agree with the Calvinistic teaching that man does not possess free will and that God is truly sovereign over His creation, and that all human events are caused by God in accordance with His perfect will.

There are two main reasons why most people resist this teaching.

First, they resist it because they believe that God is both loving and just, and they don't think God should be blamed for unjustly condemning the majority of the human race to an everlasting Hell.

Secondly, they resist it because they don't clearly understand the difference between Freedom of Will (Free Will) and Freedom of Choice (Free Agency). Clearly, God allows us to make our own religious and moral decisions. Not only are we given this freedom of choice, but we are indeed held accountable by God for our choices. We are punished for making the wrong choices and rewarded for making the right choices.

At first glance that all seems quite fair. A serious problem arises, however, when we delve a bit deeper and ask the question, “Why do we make these choices?” Why does one individual freely choose to become saved and another individual freely choose otherwise? What is it that makes the one individual different from the other in that respect?

Some would answer in this way. An individual chooses to become saved because he desires or wants or wills to be saved. In other words, our moral and spiritual choices in life are based on what we desire, want, or will to do.

We are free to make whatever moral and spiritual choices in life that we desire to make. The Calvinist would refer to this freedom of choice as Free Agency in order to distinguish it from Free Will, which would be the freedom to choose what our desires would be in the first place. The Calvinist would agree that God allows us to freely choose to do good or evil. At the same time, however, they would argue that we do not possess free will. In other words, we do not freely choose our wants and desires.

Let me illustrate this in another way. My wife likes broccoli and I don't. We both may freely choose to eat it or not. But we don't choose whether or not we like the taste of it or would desire to eat it. If God were to perform a miracle (and indeed that would be quite a miracle) and cause me to like the taste of broccoli, then I would most certainly freely choose to eat it. If God did not perform this miracle, then I most certainly would freely choose not to eat it. So you see, it is very easy for God to influence the choices we make in life by altering the conditions of our lives which determine our attitudes and motivations.

Free will is not a Biblical term. Although the Bible clearly teaches that we are to be held accountable for the choices we make, it nowhere teaches that we made ourselves. We were all created unique and different. We did not choose our parents or our physical, mental and emotional capacities. We did not choose the bewildering variety of human events which have uniquely shaped our thought processes. Our wants and desires (our “wills”) have been uniquely shaped, predetermined if you will, by our DNA and the various external events and circumstances of our existence. None of us has freely chosen who we are. We did not freely choose our own uniqueness.

It could be argued, correctly in my view, that God did not directly cause us to accept or reject His offer of salvation. It could also be correctly argued that God is indirectly the cause of everything. He created the universe and everything in it and set in motion a sequence of events that resulted in your existence and everything that is unique about you. Most would agree that when God set in motion this chain of events He foreknew what the result would be. He knew in advance what your choices would be. Apparently He was OK with this result, or He most certainly would have changed it. God is omnipotent and completely sovereign over His creation. He is more than capable of changing the outcome of all human events, should He so desire.

According to Ephesians 2:8-9, we have been saved by grace. Our salvation is “*a gift of God, not of ourselves, lest anyone should boast.*” Because our salvation is not a result of anything meritorious on our part, the converse must also be true, that those who are lost remain so due to no fault of their own. Both conditions are the result of God's choice.

It has been argued that Universalism must be false because for God to eventually save everyone He would have to violate their free will and force them to receive Christ against their wills. It makes better sense that God would save only those who want to be saved, and allow others to freely choose not to be saved.

Here is my answer.

It is a fallacy to assume that in the interest of preserving mankind's freedom of choice God limits what He is able or willing to do. This line of thinking is fallacious in more ways than one.

First, it is nowhere taught in the Bible. The terms "free will" and "freedom of choice" are not found in the Bible. You will find the terms "will" and "choose" in many places, but these terms are never discussed or used in connection with the term "freedom." And nowhere does the Bible indicate that God has placed limits of any kind on His power or ability to accomplish whatever He sets out to do. As a matter of fact, you will find many verses and passages that indicate exactly the opposite (see Isaiah 14:24, 27 and 46:9-10).

Part of the fallacy of assuming that God somehow limits Himself by giving mankind freedom of choice is the assumption that this is some kind of trade off that God makes. It is nowhere taught in the Bible that God allows bad things to happen, mainly sin and suffering, in order to preserve human freedom. The truth is that God created a flawed world on purpose and with loving intent. He gives us the freedom to fall into sin and experience both good and evil in our lives because this is necessary for our spiritual growth. It is impossible to develop good or positive traits in isolation from their evil and negative counterparts. God does not allow or permit things to happen which are not in accordance with his perfect will. When an omniscient and all-powerful God permits something to happen, it's because He wants it to happen.

Another fallacy related to the above is the false notion that God is unable to influence our behavior without restricting our freedom of choice. God can easily cause us to freely make the right choices, simply by shaping our thoughts and desires. This in no way violates our freedom to choose. He does this in a variety of ways that are amply illustrated in the Scriptures.

Here are some examples:

The Holy Spirit convicts (or convinces) us of our sinfulness (John 16:8). God works in our hearts to convince us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Through the Holy Spirit He opens our spiritual eyes and enables us to see the truth, not only about our sin, but also about our need for God's remedy, Jesus Christ.

The converse is also true. When it suits His purpose God also can (temporarily) harden our hearts and blind us to the truth. There are numerous references to this in the Bible, the most famous of which is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart prior to leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt (Exodus 9:12).

Similarly, God in New Testament times hardened the hearts of His own chosen people in order that the Gospel might be more easily spread to the Gentiles. Please carefully read Romans 11:25-

32. Here we learn that Israel's blindness was only temporary, until the "*fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*" Afterwards, "*all Israel will be saved.*"

Paul's conversion in Acts, Chapter 9, is an example of God's direct, dramatic, and miraculous intervention to convince Saul, a persecutor of Christians, that His views regarding Jesus were completely erroneous. Paul was one of those Israelites who were temporarily "blinded" to the truth. God used this occasion to open his eyes.

There would be no point to intercessory prayer if we did not believe that God is able to change people's hearts and draw them to Christ. It was Paul's heart's desire and prayer that Israel be saved (Romans 10:1). When God gave us freedom of choice, He did not totally relinquish control over our lives. God does not make our decisions for us, but He is fully capable of influencing our thoughts and attitudes of heart which comprise the motivation for the decisions that we make.

Evangelism and preaching of the word are another way that God influences our thoughts. In addition to correct attitudes of heart, information is also needed. We cannot possibly freely choose to receive Christ as our Savior and Lord if we have never heard of Him or if the information we have about Him is erroneous. So, a very important tool God uses to influence our decision to receive Christ is the sending out of messengers, armed with Gospel information. See Romans 10:14-15.

Rewards and punishments in this life and the next are another way God influences the moral and spiritual decisions that we make. In Matthew 6:19-21, God motivates us to live righteous lives in order to lay up for ourselves "*treasures in Heaven.*" The converse to positive motivation is the negative kind, which takes the form of various punishments and chastisements in this life and also in the next.

Technically, free agency is not the same as free will. This I have made clear, but for God's purposes it accomplishes the same thing. Free agency allows us the perception and experience of having free will and allows us to make right and wrong decisions and bear the consequences of those decisions. As a result of these subjective experiences we learn first-hand about good and evil and experience spiritual growth. Free will is technically an illusion, but a very useful one from God's perspective.

A good analogy would be setting up a military training exercise in an artificial setting. For the participant, the experience seems very real and the result is pretty much the same, as if the learning took place under actual combat situations. God actually takes this a bit further and does not actually inform the participants that they are only experiencing a simulation which is taking place under very controlled circumstances. That makes the experience even more "real" for the participant. The nice thing about this training exercise that we call life is that God remains in control and does not permit matters to get out of hand, as might be the case if He granted us genuine free will and took away all the restraints, as in the case of an actual combat situation.

For our wills to be completely free God would have to completely restrain Himself from intervening into our lives to influence our decisions. The extent to which God intervenes and influences our decisions is the extent to which our freedom of will is restricted.

The conclusion of the matter is this. By allowing the freedom to choose, God in no way limits Himself. He is still fully capable of eventually bringing us all to repentance by influencing our wills by the various means noted above. This, I believe, defeats the argument that God's doing so would somehow violate man's supposed free will.

## **Universal Restoration**

The obvious resolution to the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate is the doctrine of Universal Restoration which in my view is plainly taught throughout the Scriptures. It doesn't really matter if our choices in life are "freely" made or not. God has already decided that eventually all will come to Christ, each in his own turn, some sooner, some later. All will receive the same reward in the end. Since God is the ultimate cause of all our decisions, it fitting that He gets ALL the credit.

Ephesians 2:8-9: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast."*

I love the Parable of the Vineyard. It beautifully illustrates the above principle.

Matthew 20:1-16: *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*