

Free Will

Arthur P. Adams (1845-1925)



The phrase “Free moral agency” is not a scriptural one, any more than the “immortal soul” is scriptural. Free moral agency is simply a theological expression, man-manufactured for his own convenience, and it may be that it does not express the truth. Let us by all means fit our theology to the Bible, and not try, as many do, to conform the Bible to our theology.

Now, then, to the question. Is man a free moral agent? I answer most emphatically, no. Is he a machine then? Again I say no. What, then, is the truth? An *agent* is an actor, one who is able to act; a *free agent* is one who can act as he pleases without any restraint; a *free moral agent* is one who is free to act as he pleases on all moral questions, *i.e.*, all questions involving the qualities of right and wrong.

Now we do not hesitate to say that man is *not* a free moral agent. One passage of Scripture would confirm this position if we had no other.

Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee, the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain (Psalm 76:10).

If man is under restraint then he is *not* a free agent, and God does restrain and control, and uses man just as He pleases. Yet man has a will; but how free is it? “Free” as to his *will*, I answer; but **not free** as to his *acts*. He is a free moral *chooser*, but not a free moral *actor*. Man may choose what he pleases, but his actions are controlled and directed and over-ruled by God.

He worketh all things after the counsel of His Own will (Ephesians 1:11).

This verse could not be true if man had power to act contrary to the will of God or in spite of His will. If the reader will stop and think a moment, he will perceive that God must have a controlling influence over man's actions, or else he could not work all things after the counsel of His Own will; it would not be true that,

Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things (Romans 11:36).

The Jews were exceedingly desirous of getting Paul out of the way; they wanted to kill him. Paul was arrested, and forty Jews banded together under a great curse that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed him (Acts 23:12). I do not know whether these wicked Jews kept their oath or not, but if they did they starved to death, for they never killed the apostle. They were murderers in the sight of God just as much as though they had committed the deed; but He "interfered" so that they were unable to carry their wicked purpose into action. Yet God did not "interfere" to "prevent" cruel Nero from taking Paul's life later on. This illustration shows how God sometimes "restrains" and sometimes "permits" evil.

The very night before these forty Jews had formed their murderous intention; the Lord had stood by the apostle and said,

Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou has testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also in Rome (Acts 23:11).

God's Word was thus passed to the apostle, assuring him that he had no immediate cause for alarm, and mapping out his future service. Would God allow forty Jews to thwart His purpose, or cause His Word to fail? No, nor forty million of them. Paul is delivered and God's Word comes to pass; as God Himself says,

My counsel shall stand and I will do all My pleasure (Isaiah 45:10).

Now, why did *not* God "interfere" to save Paul's life from Nero? Because the apostle's work was done then, and he could glorify God in such a death. Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from a Roman dungeon while awaiting his execution, in which he exclaims,

I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand; I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished my course, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness (II Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul's mission was accomplished; hence, God "allowed" Nero to carry out his wicked purpose; and yet he was no more guilty of the murder of the apostle than were the forty Jews who were "not permitted" to carry out their purpose. Turn to the case of Joseph again. His brothers were determined to kill him, but God "restrained" them. Then they decided to sell him into slavery, and God overrode it for good. Thus does the wrath of man praise God, and the remainder (what cannot be made to praise Him), he "restrains." Man may purpose or determine what he pleases, and as he purposes, so he is judged.

For that he hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, therefore shall he eat of the fruit of his own way, and be filled with his own devices (Proverbs 1:29, 31).

“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7), and so will he be judged. Yet whether he will carry out his thoughts and plans will depend upon whether or not God will “let” him. Whether He “permits” or “restrains” the will of man, he is equally *accountable* for his *purposes*. Christ makes this plain in His Sermon on the Mount. He there makes the guilt to consist in the purpose of the will, not in the outward act. “*Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matthew 5:28), whether or not he is “allowed” to carry out his evil desires.

This is the Bible doctrine of man’s “will.” He is *not* a free agent; his actions are *entirely* under the control of the Sovereign God. This does not render the person guiltless, however, when he commits a wrong deed, even though the deed was foreordained by God.

The crucifixion was foreordained and predetermined, yet Peter lays the guilt of that sin upon the Jews.

Ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain (Acts 2:23).

Stephen denounces them as “*the betrayers and murderers*” of “*the Just One*” (Acts 7:52).

GOD’S CONTROL AS SEEN IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Now let us notice further how clearly the view of God’s control is set forth in the book of Proverbs.

For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He pondereth all his goings (Proverbs 5:21).

A man’s heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

There are many devices in a man’s heart, nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand (Proverbs 19:21).

Man’s goings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way? (Proverbs 20:24).

The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water, he turneth it whithersoever He will (Proverbs 21:1).

The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord (Proverbs 16:33).

This last verse is a scriptural version of the old maxim, *Man proposes but God disposes*, and this is exactly the truth. The lot is cast into the lap; you have your choice; you may plan and purpose as you please, “*but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.*” Do not forget that. Thus the Proverbs of Solomon are unmistakably in harmony with the view I have presented of man’s will.

THE STEPS OF A MAN ARE ORDERED BY THE LORD

I will call attention to Psalm 37:23. I have read this passage many times, and in former years taken it for a text, and in preaching upon it I have laid great stress on the word “good.”

*The steps of a **good** man are ordered by the Lord.*

It is only recently that I noticed, while reading *Young’s Translation of the Old Testament*, that the word “good” is not in the original. This is indicated in our English Bibles by that word being in *italics*. The passage is general, not particular:

*The steps of a man [**any** man, **all** men] are ordered by the Lord.*

Man goes the way that God desires; his steps have been prepared beforehand and are all ordered of the Lord. The translators had to “tinker” with this passage because they did not understand the great truth that,

All things are of God (II Corinthians 5:18).

THE WAY OF MAN IS NOT IN HIMSELF

That the meaning of this passage is as indicated above is fully confirmed by other Scripture. We have already noticed two such confirmatory passages from Proverbs 16:9 and 20:24. We will refer to one more in Jeremiah 10:23.

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.

Young renders it,

I have known, O Jehovah, that not of man is his way, not of man the going and establishing of his steps.

Is it not plain, is it not absolutely sure from these Scriptures that man is *not* a free agent (actor)? God is the Supreme Ruler, the Universal King. “*All things*” are under His control, all things are “*of Him*.” A man’s ways are “*of the Lord*,” let him be or do what he may. “*A man’s heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps*.” Mankind are His tools and weapons; the wicked are His sword (Psalm 17:13). He uses them as a carpenter uses his axe and saw (Isaiah 10:15).

Thank God for this knowledge! With such a God one may rest assured under the shadow of His wing. Not a sparrow falls, not a hair of your head shall be touched, not a minute event transpires, but according to the will of the Almighty. O, how safe and secure the trustful child of God feels when he realizes this truth!

FURTHER AND DEEPER

This truth goes further and penetrates deeper than this. Some may be hardened and incorrigible, defiant and unyielding in their will, but not forever. God will be able literally and absolutely to “*subdue all things unto Himself*” (Philippians 3:21), and to “*reconcile all things unto Himself*” (Colossians 1:20), so that He *will be “All in all”* (I Corinthians 15:28). Unless this is true, God fails; His resources are inadequate; the provision for man’s recovery is not “*much more*” (Romans 5), but *much less* than enough to undo the effects of “the fall.”

God will be able to bring all into harmony with Himself, so that at the last “*every knee shall bow and every tongue confess*” to God’s glory (Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 14:11). Look at the conversion of Paul as an example.

THE CONVERSION OF PAUL

Judging from the facts in the case, we can scarcely imagine a more unlikely thing, humanly speaking, than the conversion of Saul. Every circumstance that would make such an event unlikely was present in his case. His ancestry and birth; his training and education; his religion, the most rigid of Phariseism; all of his prejudices and worldly interests – every circumstance and consideration connected with him – were all utterly against the idea of his ever becoming a follower of the despised Nazarene.

It is not that he was an uncommonly wicked man, or an infidel or atheist, but he was ironclad with prejudice and self-righteousness; with his will adamantly set against Christ, and a determination as rigid as steel to stamp out and annihilate His followers; and to make his case still more hopeless from a human standpoint, in all of this he thought he was doing God’s service, he was utterly blinded and deceived.

The extreme unlikeliness of his conversion is still further shown in the fact that after the event, the disciples would not believe that he was converted, but seemed to fear some treachery, some deeply laid scheme to entrap and destroy them. Yet this same Saul of Tarsus was transformed in a moment, as it were, from the willful, proud, bitter prosecutor, to the mild, suffering, obedient servant of the Lord. From “*breathing out threatening and slaughter*” against Christ and His followers, to “*Lord, what wilt thou have me do?*” seems a vast distance; yet Paul traversed that distance in a moment.

One glance at the Lord Whom he had been persecuting was enough to sweep away all of his Jewish prejudices, all of his hatred, pride and self-righteousness; he became humble, submissive and obedient, ready to lay down his life for the sake of the cause that, up to that time, he had done all in his power to overthrow.

How was this accomplished? Simply by opening his eyes to see the truth. Did he not choose the good part? Certainly he did; and yet did not God in a most wonderful and effectual manner influence his will? The whole thing was “*of God.*”

Paul realized that his conversion was of God, for he says in his letter to the Galatians,

When it pleased God, Who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace,

to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood (1:15-16).

When it pleases God the work is done. No obstacle can stay His hand; His council shall stand and He will do all of His pleasure.

Some are apt to think that the apostle's case was exceptional; that the Lord brought to bear upon him an unusual influence in order to so speedily convert him. If this was true it would show that God was a respecter of persons, and that He showed Paul a favor that He withholds from other sinners. If He could thus so speedily break down and subdue the iron will of Saul of Tarsus, then could he do the same in the case of every sinner?

We are not, however, left to conjecture on this point. We *know* that Paul's case was *not* exceptional, but rather was a "*pattern*" case.

Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him ... (I Timothy 1:16).

The conclusion of Paul's case is inevitable. *God will never lack resources whereby to subdue every stubborn will.* So it was with Saul of Tarsus. All that was needed to set him right was to open his eyes to see the truth, and to give him power to embrace it.

Paul describes his case exactly in Philippians 3:4-14. First he speaks of those worldly considerations – his birth, bright prospects, blameless character, etc. – which might have been counted "*gain*" to him in temporal things; but all of these he counted "*loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord,*" "*for Whom,*" he continues,

I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith; that I may know Him, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

A little further he declares,

This one thing I do, forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Like Paul, would not every son and daughter of the race choose life rather than death, when they fully understand the true circumstances of the case? Surely man's will is no obstacle in the way of universal restitution.

Especially does the conversion of Paul, as a "*pattern*" case, give us the above assurance. Even as "*the chief of sinners*" the Lord had no difficulty in turning him about and making him a "*pattern to them who should afterward believe.*" Will *anyone* then withstand God forever? Will there be hopeless ones whom He *cannot* subdue? No, He will be fully "*able even to subdue all things unto Himself,*" so that "*every knee shall bow and every tongue shall give praise to God.*"

ALL FOR OUR GOOD

We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

“*All things are of God*” (II Corinthians 5:18), whatever comes to us, whether for the present joyous or grievous, we know that it is by Father’s appointment, and hence, must be for our good. Whether it is a blow or a gift, a pain or a joy, tears or smiles, reproaches or blessings, persecutions or benefits, slander or praise, sickness or health, death or life, in every case, and in *all* it is *the will of God*, and that will is always the expression of a Father’s love, and therefore sweet, and precious and good.

These truths give us an idea of God that is at once grand and reassuring. He is “*Our Father*,” the Almighty, infinite in Wisdom and boundless in Love. O, what a God for fallen man, from Whom we may expect nothing but good, and always good, and only good and all good!

Thou art good, and doest good (Psalm 119:68).

I will love thee, O, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my Rock and my Fortress, and my Deliverer; my God, my Strength, in Whom I will trust; my Buckler and the Horn of my Salvation and my High Tower (Psalm 18:1-2).

This Bible view of God is not only thus personally blessed to the Christian, but it assures us of another thing: God’s plans and purposes are being carried out. Amid all of the mutations of earthly things, its sin and sorrow, and tears, and woe, runs the golden thread of God’s “*purpose of the ages*” (Ephesians 3:11), binding all together and to the eternal throne, and leading the creature unerringly to the final goal, the image of the Creator.

Not only is it true that God’s plans are not *retarded* or *hindered* by the wickedness of man, but God uses wicked men to *advance* His plans. He not only does not *allow* the wrath of man to work against Him, but He *causes* it to praise Him. How wonderful is *all* of this! There is *nothing* to fear. God reigns!

He worketh all things after the counsel of His Own will (Ephesians 1:11).

If we can only see this *great* truth and, in some degree, realize it, we shall have no cares and no anxiety either about ourselves or concerning God’s work. “*All things work together for good.*” We have seen how some things, apparently evil, and only evil, have nevertheless under God worked together for good, though in the beginning they seemed to be all bad, yet in the end good has been the result. Why can we not believe that this is true in all cases?

Is it not certain that this is thus true? Surely; to suppose otherwise would be to make God less than infinite, *i.e.*, to dethrone Him altogether. Hence it follows, and the conclusion is wonderful as well as inevitable, mark it well, that *all* of the events transpiring around us in the world, *all* of the movements and actions of man, good and bad (as we term them) are all woven into the warp and woof of God’s great plan: light and shade, bright threads and somber ones, tears and laughter, woe and joy, and even good and evil, all woven in to make the grand pattern of that rare tapestry that shall carpet and adorn eternity.

For the present time we are looking at the wrong side of the figure, and we see many tangled and apparently ill-assorted threads, disconnected ends and unsightly knots – but, Ah! when we reach the other side! The fair pattern, the rich figure, the exquisite blending of color, in God’s finished work! Then we shall exclaim,

O, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33).

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