

What about free will?

Understanding freedom, liberty, and grace in salvation
Isaac Torcellini

I have seen people present a Biblical case for sovereign predestination in salvation using passages such as Romans 9 and Ephesians 1. These cases are solid and well-presented, but those in disagreement will most commonly of all respond with the question, “What about free will?”

I have found myself asked this question in a great deal of topics. Since a Biblical understanding of sin informs so much of how we understand philosophy, government, human nature, and more, I have been asked this question in discussions ranging from Freud’s psychology to gospel advocacy.

But what is “free will”? We in the West, especially as Americans, like making choices. We like potlucks. We like voting. We like choosing schools, colleges, and careers. We can quite easily see how this question arises in becoming a Christian. Do we “choose” Christ? Was it our action?

We like freedom in the sense of doing. We like choosing dishes. We like choosing one candidate over the other. Freedom is thought of referring to choosing good or evil. This is not the Biblical definition of freedom, however. The Bible discusses bondage versus freedom quite often. When it does, it more often refers to remaining in a free state, not exercising freedom between two different states.

This misunderstanding of freedom has permeated American thought to such an extent that Christianity is viewed by outsiders as a religion of laws and regulation. Freedom is good. Freedom is not, however, found wavering between good and evil, or doing what we want. It is found firmly rooted within God’s laws and promises together.

Let us consider the Bible’s definition of freedom.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Paul gives us a clear description. “Again” indicates the yoke of slavery as being a previous state. It is thus evident that Paul is referring to our life before faith. When we were without faith, we were in bondage. Yet with faith, we are set free by Christ.

We should also note the middle part of the passage: “stand firm therefore.” Freedom is not wavering between good and evil; it is staying firmly within good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. (1 Peter 2:15-16)

Just like Paul, Peter is quite clear here. When we are living servants of God, we are living as free people. Once again, freedom is not the choosing or wavering between good and evil, not even the *ability* to choose good or evil. It specifically refers to us being firmly within Christ.

According to Peter, we are free as servants of God, not when we act how we desire.

Many will argue that free will is necessary for virtue: “If God created people as robots completely controlled by him, they would not freely glorify him. That’s why God gave man free will to sin.”

Jonathan Edwards, in his treatise *The Freedom of the Will*, examined this argument. Does God have free will? Of course he does! He had the ability to create the entirety of the world, to save sinners, and to triumph over death. But can God sin? No, he cannot. God is the freest of all. Nothing at all restrains him. Yet God cannot sin. Evidently, then, freedom is not choosing good or evil; it is remaining righteous.

What exactly is free will then? Edwards broke down our ability to act into two categories: natural ability and moral ability. Natural ability is what we are enabled with naturally. We can naturally choose between one option and the other. Moral ability, however, dictates what we are willing to do. I have the free will to jump out my window. However, unless there is a fire, my conscience binds me not to. I have the natural ability, not the moral ability.

According to the Bible, the sinner is morally *unable* to choose God:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

We need God’s grace and sovereign election because we *cannot* seek after God. We are too sinful. We are *not* free. Remember, if we are righteous, we are free. If we are sinful, we are in bondage. We need God’s grace because we are not able to choose God.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

To the unbeliever, the gospel seems foolish. Minds are closed without God’s grace. Free will is not something we exercise. Free will is something we receive from salvation. Without goodness, we are in bondage. With goodness, we are free. Freedom is the result, not the action. Freedom is a state of being, not doing. Freedom is given, not acted upon.

Think of it this way. If we live in an oppressive country under a dictator, we are not free. However, a free country will provide freedom. Our freedom is not choosing between the oppressive country and the free one, it is staying within the free country.

The gospel of freedom works the same way. Freedom is not choosing between God’s kingdom and a kingdom of darkness; it is staying firmly within the free kingdom. That is why Paul exhorts us to “stand firm” to avoid slavery. Freedom is a state of being, not doing.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21)

Freedom is not found in choosing. Freedom is found in *precise* goodness. For the Christian, God’s sovereign election sets us free. With Christ, we are no longer in bondage. We are free.