

GENESIS 2:16, 17

(FREE TO WILL OR NOT FREE TO WILL THAT IS THE QUESTION)

If you remember Jacob Marley in Dicken's classic, *A Christmas Carol*, he was the friend and co-worker of Ebenezer Scrooge who had died many years before and who returned as a ghost to warn Ebenezer. When Scrooge asked him about the chains he was bound in, he said this "I wear the chain I forged in life....I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

Marley acknowledged that he exercised free will to his own detriment. While studying quotes for this sermon, I was surprised to find the number of people on both sides of the religious spectrum that deny free-will. Believe it or not, even some atheists deny free will.

Talk about a contradiction in the thought process – how can someone claim there's no God... nothing but the universe, and then deny that the choices they make belong to them alone? If the atheist doesn't have free will, then something must be directing him. If there is something beyond him, then no matter what it is, it is greater than Him. Atheism, at its core, is a mentally corrupt thought process.

For an atheist to ascribe his decisions to the interaction of atoms as I read in one commentary is to simply pass a red herring over the question. Either the will is free or it isn't regardless of the make up of the decider of the decision.

And then there are the multitudes of Christians who not only deny free will, but who claim that people who believe in free will are enemies of God. W. E. Best said: "God's character is maligned by every person who believes in free will."

I have to ask, "How does free will malign God's character?"

It's hugely important to understand why we have free-will and to be able to defend it from the Bible. The reason is twofold. First, if man doesn't have free will as Best claims, then God must be the ultimate author of evil. How

someone can come to any other conclusion when reading the Bible is astounding.

And secondly, if we don't choose Jesus as He asks us to, such as in John 3:16, then God is forcing us to love Him. It doesn't matter how corrupt we are and how deep is the pit from which He pulls us, if He does it against our free will, then it isn't allowing a demonstration of love and devotion on our part. And this is exactly what both testaments of the Bible expect from us.

RC Sproul, the modern Presbyterian theologian and free-will denier said once, "If intent is sin as when Jesus said, 'he who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart' then Adam fell before the fall, because he sinned before eating of the forbidden fruit by intending to eat it. So the question is, 'from whence comes evil?'"

Yes RC, whence comes evil? If you deny free will, then that is a gigantic problem because God supposedly created everything good. I mean, if He created man already intent on evil, then you have a real dilemma. But that's Dr. Sproul's conundrum.

Thomas Aquinas, the 13th Century Theologian says this about free-will "Man has free choice, or otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain."

Introduction: The Bible is as much a book of choices as it is anything else. Freewill is implied on almost every page and in every account it records. The verses which seem to deny free will, and free will deniers have a lot of them, need to be taken in the context of God's sovereignty, His foreknowledge, and His love.

Text Verse: And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Exodus 4:21

May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

I. The choice in the Garden

¹⁶ **And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;**

¹⁷ **but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”**

Toba Beta wisely stated, “If there was no free will in men, then there is no sins. When sins happened, it was ‘free will’ that made them doable. This is true, unless God has predestined human to do and to have sins.”

RC Sproul, reads this account and can’t comprehend how Adam actually fell. He has a couple of reasons. First, he cannot accept that man has freewill. His doctrine tells him that man is incapable of doing anything good – a state known as Total Depravity. He misreads and misinterprets verses of the Bible which tell of our fallen state and our inability to fix the mess and equates that with an inability on our part to get out of the mess at all.

Secondly, he knows he cannot ascribe evil to God as no sound theologian ever would or could. And therefore he is left with his amazing and unanswerable question, “Whence comes evil?”

But this is a problem of the heart and a problem of conditioning, not an unfathomable mystery that only God can answer within Himself. Rather, it is a revealed truth contained in the verses we just read – “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...”

Three points we have to think through are all revealed in this one verse.

Point 1: You may – Of every tree of the garden **you may** freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...

Mi kol ets ha-gan a-kol tochel, uh-me-ets ha-da-at tov va-ra, lo tochal mimenu (2:44)

There is a lot of information we can glean from this one sentence –

First, there were multiple trees in the garden and they were graciously granted to Adam. Second, man was given the freedom to choose. As it says, “You **may** freely eat.” And third, only after acknowledging Adam’s free will was he told what he couldn’t eat.

This verse contains the very first words ever recorded as spoken by God directly to man and it certainly indicates him possessing free will. You may eat. “May” indicates choice... and it’s neutral – in other words, you may or you may not – it’s up to you Adam. Snack on what you’d like except this one thing.

If I’m leaving my house with a sitter while I go on vacation, I might say, “Sitter, the refrigerator is full and you may eat whatever you want in that full refrigerator.” If I came back and the fridge was empty and I had given no other instructions, I could only say “Gee Sitter, you had a big appetite. You even ate all the dog food that I had in the Tupperware.”

And if I came back and the refrigerator was still full, I might think the sitter was good at restraining herself, but I at least offered the food to her.

Point 2: You shall not – “Shall not” indicates **choice** as well because the tree is there. Were “shall not” a choice, God would have put no tree there at all, or He would have made it inaccessible. Maybe He could have put a force-field around it or guarded it with cherubim like He would later guard the garden itself. In that case, God would have said, “You can not.”

What if I said to my house sitter, “Sitter, I’m only going to be gone for 2 days, so don’t eat the food in my fridge.” She still has the choice to eat it, but it would be out of disobedience and she would have to face whatever consequences I decided on.

If I wanted to make sure she didn’t eat it, I could put a lock on the fridge, leave nothing in it, or hire a security guard to keep her out of it. No matter what, unless I acted first, the implication is that she could use her free will even though she wasn’t supposed to.

Everything so far implies free will in man. God didn't keep the tree from him, but simply warned him not to eat of it. Paul says in 1 Corinthians –

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

God certainly gave Adam a choice in the matter and He also provided a way of escape. There was no burden beyond his ability to bear.

Point 3: The knowledge of good and evil. To finish our three points of this verse we return to the thought, "From whence comes evil?" What we need to do is to simply think these words through. "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."

Man was given free will. From the context of what we've look at, this is absolutely certain. Those who deny this point have failed to come to the text with clear eyes and instead are wearing rose colored glasses as they teach and preach from such a clear and carefully worded statement from God.

However, this free will was given and exercised in a state of innocence. If he hadn't yet eaten of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" then he didn't have... well, obviously he didn't have the knowledge of good and evil.

In fact, as well see in chapter 3 when we get there, two obvious things occurred when Adam ate of the fruit. First, he became more, not less like God – at least in one way – and secondly, he became aware of right and wrong –

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. (22)

Adam was told to not eat of this particular fruit or he would be punished. At the time, he was in a state of innocence – not knowing good from evil,

but innocence, as I said last week, doesn't negate guilt. And that brings us to our next major point today.

II. Disobedience is Sin and Sin Leads to Death

The great philosopher and author of last century, CS Lewis said this about free will –

“God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. ... Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently, He thought it worth the risk. (...) If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will – that is, for making a real world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings – then we may take it [that] it is worth paying.”

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;

¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

As I said, innocence does not set aside guilt. The speed limit on your way home tonight will vary from time to time and from place to place. When you first pull out on Midnight Pass Road, you're not going to see a speed limit sign. So suppose you go 40 mph when you leave here. You might get a ticket because the speed limit is actually 35 until you get around a few turns and then it turns to 40.

If a cop pulls you over and says, “You were speeding,” you might try to defend yourself by saying, “but there was no sign posted from the time I

pulled out onto Midnight Pass until now.” Do you think he’s going to say, “Oh, well then, never mind – my bad.”?

Of course not! You are responsible to know the laws of the road and obey them. Your lack of knowledge doesn’t excuse your guilt.

What Adam did was in innocence because he had no knowledge of right and wrong. However, he had his warning clearly laid out for him – “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Just as every driver knows that a ticket waits for the speeder, Adam knew that death would come if he disobeyed God’s law.

This brings up a point that we shouldn’t miss though. Adam had never died and he had never experienced death around him. When he was told that death would result from disobedience, he had no way of understanding death’s implications.

If you tell a child that doesn’t understand death that they can die from something, they have no idea what you’re talking about until you explain it to them. Without the knowledge of good and evil, Adam could not comprehend death – the result of evil.

Again, this innocence towards death in no way relieves him of the consequences of guilt. Guilt comes about from disobedience and death results from guilt. James explains this in his small epistle which appears 59 books into the Bible –

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. James 1:13:15

Adam was placed in the garden and given instructions. When God placed the tree there that He wasn’t supposed to eat from, it wasn’t God’s fault if Adam disobeyed. God in no way tempted Adam. He created and therefore everything is as He purposes. And plus, He gave Adam the warning.

If he wanted to make every tree in the garden forbidden except one and that one tree could sustain Adam's life, then that would have been fine. Instead, he **allowed** every tree but one. How much more is God clear of Adam's sin?

On the other hand, if God made Adam the way He did, knowing that Adam needed to eat and drink in order to survive, and then He forbid Adam from eating and drinking anything at all, then God would be guilty of tempting Adam and forcing him into sin.

What if a mother said to her newborn baby, "You'd better not cry, baby. If you cry, then I'm going to punish you."? Mom would be guilty both morally and criminally of abuse. The same might be true about one of my sermons. I could say, "If I catch you sleeping, I'm going to punish you..." you might have a case against me.

But Adam had no case against God... not even a hint of it. As David wrote after his horrendous sin of murder and adultery –

Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done *this* evil in Your sight—
That You may be found just when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.

III. One Command, and in the Negative

TH White in *The Once and Future King* said this – "There was just such a man when I was young—an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work. He tried to impose his reformation by the sword, and plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos. But the thing which this fellow had overlooked, my friend, was that he had a predecessor in the reformation business, called Jesus Christ. Perhaps we may assume that Jesus knew as much as the Austrian did about saving people. But the odd thing is that Jesus did not turn the disciples into storm troopers, burn down the Temple at Jerusalem, and fix the blame on Pontius Pilate. On the contrary, he made it clear that the business of the

philosopher was to make ideas *available*, and *not* to impose them on people.”

The Bible is just a book of do’s and don’ts... I suppose you’ve heard this at one time or another. It’s not really. Instead, at least on these lines, it’s a book of choices. Do’s and don’ts are involved in many of those choices, but in this context the choices are set out for our good.

If there is a “do” it’s there to keep us following the right path. If there is a “don’t” it’s there to keep us from getting onto a wrong path.

When mom says to her son, “Don’t put that screwdriver in the wall outlet” she says it because she doesn’t want him to get hurt. When she says to her son leaving for the military, “remember to go to church on Sunday” she’s telling him this to keep him walking in a straight and upright way.

In both instances, the choice is his. If he wants to try the screwdriver in the outlet thing, he’ll wish he’d listened to his mom. And if he skips church and goes to soccer matches while stationed in England, he will eventually wish he had made church the priority. When his life wanders off into meaninglessness, he’ll hopefully understand why his mother asked him to go to church.

The book of proverbs is a lot like this. There are do’s and don’ts in there, but they are stated in the form of choices. Proverbs opens with these words —

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

² To know wisdom and instruction,

To perceive the words of understanding,

³ To receive the instruction of wisdom,

Justice, judgment, and equity;

⁴ To give prudence to the simple,

To the young man knowledge and discretion—

⁵ A wise *man* will hear and increase learning,

And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel,

⁶ To understand a proverb and an enigma,

The words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:1-7

After saying this, Solomon pens 31 chapters of wisdom for those who are simply willing to listen and he contrasts them with those who turn away from his wise counsel. He says, "...the complacency of fools will destroy them; But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, And will be secure, without fear of evil."

So do's and don'ts aren't all bad and they always imply free will. In the case of Adam, he had no do's and only one don't. In other words, a command that was in the negative. If this is the premise of Adam having eternal life in the Garden of Eden, then there must be a similar premise for returning to that Garden. If not, then there might seem to be a problem with the way God is dealing with His children.

One of the hindrances to understanding God's favor of individuals is tied up in the Law of Moses. In those five books, meaning Genesis to Deuteronomy, also known as the Torah, there are 613 laws – a lot of do's and don'ts.

If there are all of these laws heaped upon laws, then what God expects of us must be immensely complicated, even burdensome. I mean who can do all that stuff? And the LORD even said in Leviticus, "You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I *am* the LORD."

And the penalties for failure... I mean if you slip up you can get beaten with rods, exiled from the community, stoned to death, and so on. Those aren't just minor issues. And time and time again, right after receiving the laws, either individuals or groups turn around and break them.

Within just 40 days of receiving the Ten Commandments, Aaron and the people of Israel made a gold calf in place of God, thus violating the first two commandments. When they did, it cost 3000 people their lives. There are accounts of people being stoned for blaspheming God's name, for breaking a vow of dedication, and for working on the Sabbath. Terrifying stuff.

What happened to Adam's "one command which was in the negative?"

And what about the other side of the coin? David committed adultery and killed the lady's husband and he didn't get stoned. He allowed his children to get away with things that should have called for the death penalty and what... did God turn a blind eye?

And then when David takes a census of the people of Israel – admittedly, something he shouldn't have done, God sends his destroying angel to kill 70,000 Israelites! How does that fit in?

Unless you understand the reason why these things occurred and how they fit into the greater picture of what God is doing, you might come to the same conclusion as some who call God an evil sadist. But this is the furthest thing from the truth and completely misunderstands what God is trying to tell the people of the world.

Free will.

Free will.

God is telling us about our choices, our free will choices, and what the consequences of them are. In the end, He understands our limitations and our faults – He created us.

And He understands the difference between those who love Him, and their internal struggles, like David, and those who either ignore or outright hate Him and act against Him in a high-handed manner. He understands the difference.

What is the reason that God could call David "a man after my own heart" and protect Jerusalem for David's name sake even hundreds of years after he was dead and buried? It was because, despite his faults, despite his internal struggles, David loved God and understood His morally depraved state in the presence of perfect righteousness.

Paul explains the law, which David was under, and it's over-arching purpose in the book of Galatians –

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. ²² But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 3:21-25

The law and all of its associated death and punishment was a tool, or better – a mirror – to get us to look at ourselves and see how desperately sinful we really are and that we needed something more to be right before God.

The law could never give life back to man. Just as Paul said, “if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.”

So what is it that even those under the law needed? They needed grace. And this is exactly what they got, once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The very fact that they needed a Day of Atonement meant that they could never meet the demands of the law. And where did the atonement come from? Did the sacrificed animals take away the people’s sins? No.

The book of Hebrews says that “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.” So think it through... if the Day of Atonement was God’s grace to the people and the blood which was shed on that day didn’t provide the grace, then what did? It was the people’s faith in God’s provision.

Back to Adam ... what was Adam lacking from the tree? He was lacking the knowledge of good and evil. Is knowledge faith? No. Faith is faith. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. And this is the evidence that God wanted from Adam – the surety of things not seen.

This is also what God respected Enoch for. And not only Enoch but Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, David, and a host of others throughout

history who were sure of what they couldn't see.

Was Adam faithful about the promise of surely dying if he ate the fruit? No. Was the man who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath day faithful about believing God would provide for him the other six days? No. Was David faithful when he had Uriah killed after sleeping with Bathsheba? No.

Then why was the Sabbath breaker stoned and David allowed to live? Why are some treated differently than others? Some are examples of God's justice. Some are examples of God's mercy. Some are lessons of high-handed sin and some are lessons of repentant hearts. Each case is given to teach us of the many facets of God and the key to obtaining His favor – which is always faith.

And faith only comes – ONLY COMES – through free will. Forced faith isn't faith. The book of Ephesians says this –

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. 2:8

The construct of these verses tell us that we are saved not by grace alone nor by faith alone, but by grace and faith together and that these are a "gift" of God. A forced gift – be it grace or faith or both – isn't a gift at all. Rather, these are offered to us by God. They are unmerited and they are available to all. And that brings us to our final point –

IV. Your Choice

"Mi kol ets a-gan a-kol tochal, uh-me-ets a-da-at tov va-ra, lo tochal mimenu." Of every tree of the garden **you may** freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...

Jim Butcher says this about your free will – "God isn't about making good things happen to you, or bad things happen to you. He's all about you making choices--exercising the **gift** of free will. God wants you to have good things and a good life, but He won't gift wrap them for you. You have to

choose the actions that lead you to that life.”

One argument used by Dr. Sproul and most others who argue against free will stems from Paul’s comment in Romans –

There is none righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ *There is none who understands;*

There is none who seeks after God.

¹² *They have all turned aside;*

They have together become unprofitable;

There is none who does good, no, not one.” 3:10-12

Their claim is that if there is “none who seeks after God” that we can’t freely choose life through Jesus Christ. Free will is nullified in humans based on this verse. But this quote of Paul comes from the psalms. It’s repeated in Psalm 14 and Psalm 53.

The fool has said in his heart,

“There is no God.”

They are corrupt,

They have done abominable works,

There is none who does good.

The questions I submit to you are, “Are Muslims seeking God?” “Are Mormons seeking God?” “Are Jews seeking God?” The answer is “Yes.” The context of the quote from Paul which comes from the Psalms is speaking of the atheist – “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

The problem with people like muslims and mormons isn’t that they are lacking faith. The problem is their faith is misdirected. And misdirected faith is wasted faith. One can’t use Paul’s verse as an overall claim to deny free will. In fact, the opposite is the truth. One must freely deny God in order to deny God.

In our previous point I said that in the Garden there was one command and that it was in the negative and that “There must be a similar premise for

returning to that Garden. If not, then there might seem to be a problem with the way God is dealing with His children.”

A similar premise? There is, you know. There is a similar premise for returning to the Garden. Paul lays it out in the book of Romans. In the Garden, there was one command in the negative and that command was based on faith. In Christ there is one request and it is in the positive. And it, likewise, is based on faith.

...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Vs 9.

That sounds like two things, but it's really one. If you confess Jesus as Lord, it's based on the assumption that Jesus is alive. If He is alive, then God raised Him from the dead.

I am free to choose, this is known
Because to deny that I can
Is a choice of its own

Free will doesn't claim the place of God
Instead it exalts Him when He judges
Wouldn't it be rather odd
To blame on Him all of my life's smudges?

Perfect and pure is my Savior
Undefined are His ways
My free will is mine alone
To withhold from or to give Him praise

I can choose to be a fool
And deny He is God
I can follow Muhammed or Buddha if I choose
Or I can give Krishna a favorable nod

But I choose life, I choose Jesus
He alone destroyed the grave

And He is ever here with us
He alone is able, our souls to save

Great and worthy – behold the Lamb
Sacrificed because of our choices
Let us turn our souls to Him
And lets us to Him raise our voices

Thank You O God for the gift You granted
Grace and faith tied into one
Thank You for the greatest Gift
Thank You O God for Jesus, our Lord Your Son

Hallelujah and Amen
Thank You for Jesus, our Lord Your Son