



Do we have free will? The Bible's answer will not disappoint the vexing nature of this entire sermon series! Absolutely yes! ...and absolutely no! It is not that sometimes we have free will and sometimes we do not. It is both fully yes and fully no.

Though this answer is frustrating and may tempt you to conclude that theology is a squishy and imprecise enterprise, unlike science, for example. And yet modern science enters into precisely the same paradox.

Is light made up of waves (like an ocean wave connected and continuous) or it is a particle (like tiny ball bearings, each one separate and distinct)? The answer turns on a curious experiment, the double slit experiment, that concludes it is both a particle and a wave. But not a combination of the two...not a wave made up of particles. Rather fully and distinctly a wave, and fully and distinctly a particle. It depends on the perspective from which you ask the question.

It sounds like an impossibility, and yet one of the most heralded physicists Richard Feynman concluded, "Nature [is]...absurd from the point of view of common sense. And it agrees fully with experiment. So I hope you accept Nature as She is — absurd."

And the nature of free will also contradicts common sense and yet it is precisely the world we find ourselves in.

The duality of free will involves two seemingly incompatible topics: our self determination to make free choices that effect our destiny and the Sovereignty of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith from the 1600's sums up God's sovereignty nicely, "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass."

In my self-determination I was free to marry Wendy, to become a pastor and to enjoy, for example, a café con leche. But in the sovereignty of God not so much. God called me to be a pastor, led me to Wendy, and gave me my own unique taste buds and proclivities.

To our finite minds this conundrum seems utterly implausible. It cannot be true that both we are utterly free, and God ordains everything that happens.

And yet this seems to be precisely what scripture teaches.

In today's gospel reading, a man seeking out Jesus wants to know how to obtain eternal life. Jesus gives an answer that falls in line with our free will – obey the commandments. The man has done so. And then the passage tells us Jesus looked at him. We have the sense that

Jesus is gazing into his soul. *“You lack one thing. Sell all you have and give it to the poor.”* The man refuses and presumably does not inherit eternal life.

But the story does not end. Jesus turns to his disciples, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

We take this as an indictment against a certain type of person, but the disciples sensed it was a challenge for everyone. An impossible one at that. Utterly dejected they say, *“Then who can be saved?”*

The passage is no longer about rich people, but people.

In any particular moment you are utterly free to act according to your own will. Thus, in the book of Joshua, the people are challenged to *“Choose this day whom you will serve.”* Throughout the day we make endless choices from what we will eat for dinner to the words we will speak to other people. We seem to be free to choose to believe and to follow God...or not. So, Jesus tells us if you have faith (sounds like a choice!) you can move mountains. If we believe, we can receive all that we ask for. The Bible is filled with ethical commands to not lie, to not commit adultery, to not steal, to not judge and more. It further teaches us that these sins are yet another manifestation of our willful act to pluck the fruit off the tree in defiance of God and that such choices lead to misery, evil and death.

Jesus and the Bible make it clear that it fundamentally matters how we exercise our free will. And we see the travesties and

atrocities by those who exercise it with disregard for others.

Yes, we have free will. But the story does not end.

From the point of view of the man he was free to sell his possessions and follow Jesus. The man chooses not to, presumably because he loves money more than God. But I am not so sure. He goes away grieving. Clearly there is part of him that wants to take this leap. That wants to do the right thing, which he has sought to do his whole life.

He has followed the commandments, something many of us could not claim. But though he is good, he is not perfect – no one is and we all have a fatal flaw. There is a struggle in his soul. In this he is like the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, *“I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”* (Romans 7:15)

Because of the sin that has broken this world, he has free will to want to do the good thing, but he is not free enough to actually do it.

A colleague of mine in Alabama, Samford Turner, shared with me an event he witnessed in Springhill, Alabama, that showed that power of God to break through human weakness.

At this gathering there was a Jewish man from Mississippi, named Stan, who harbored a great loathing for decades for a violent, evil and wicked man, Tom Tarrant. Tom Tarrant was also at this Springhill gathering. He had been a card carrying KKK member who had harbored a trinity of hatred for African Americans, Jews and Communists. He became

a part of a clandestine terror group that murdered and bombed their way through the South. Eventually, in a deadly shootout, he was caught and imprisoned. But Stan knew him as a teenager.

Back then, Tom called him the most terrible of Jewish insults, grabbed him by the throat and threw him up against a locker and looked into his eyes with a hatred that burned bright and told him, "The next time I see you I am going to kill you". It was decades later when they saw each other again for the first time in Springhill.

Stan told Tom that he had followed his criminal career in the KKK and knew what he had done, especially on that night in Meridian with the planned bombing of the Jewish community leader's home. Stan told Tom that his fear became anger and that he hated and loathed Tom and that hatred and loathing and even the fear had persisted over all these years.

Tom Tarrant, in his evil racism and violence, had infected Stan, who became a prison to hatred himself; just hatred of Tom, but it bound him, nonetheless. Perhaps you have held similar hatred, and even wanted to let it go but you never seemed able to do it. Your free will could not control your feelings of love or hatred.

And if free will were the determining factor, then in response to the disciples' dire question, "*Who can be saved?!!*" we would have expected Jesus to say something like, "those with clean hands and open hearts" or some other plausibly pious platitude.

Instead, Jesus shifts perspectives; looking at it not from the human point of view in which free will is determinative, but into the godly frame, "*With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.*"

Thus from God's point of view, our salvation is not about human choice but divine determination, so Ephesians 1:4 explains, "*In Christ we have obtained an inheritance having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes **all things according to his counsel and will.***"!!! An inheritance is not something we earn or choose, rather it is something that another chooses to give to us.

In the end, God's sovereignty triumphs over the inevitable failure of human freedom and in this radical moment God's choice transforms our own free will and the two become one as we grow towards God.

This happens through the power of love. Love conquers all Paul tells us, especially our will.

Tom Tarrant was at Springhill to share his story. He shared the love he was shown in prison by a small Presbyterian Church, who opened the Bible up to him, who prayed for him, and eventually he got down on his knees to ask God for forgiveness. He was out of prison because a black civil rights activist lobbied for his release, convinced he was a changed man.

Tom knew there were many sins of his past he had never reconciled. Tom Tarrant did not know what Stan might say or even do next. Perhaps something violent. Perhaps simple

words of hatred. But that is not what happened.

*Then Stan told Tom that recently during Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), when Jews pray fervently that God might forgive them of their sins, he was in Synagogue praying alone on his knees for God to forgive him for his sins. In the midst of his prayers, Stan said to Tom, "Your name came to me." Then all alone praying, Stan said he heard a voice; he thought that maybe – just maybe – the voice he heard was the voice of God.*

*He turned back to Tom and said, "God said to me 'Stan, you want me to forgive your sins – but first I want you to do something. I want you to forgive Tom Tarrants for what he did to you. But, God said, that is not the most difficult thing I want you to do. After you forgive Tom, I want you to go to him and ask him to forgive you for all the hatred you have had in your heart for him these many years.*

*Then Stan walked toward Tom and said, "That is what I have come here tonight to do – to tell you that I forgive you -- and to ask you to forgive me." As Tom came to meet him, they embraced and from their hearts poured forth forgiveness – in sighs too deep for words – as God was filling them both with new life. (As told me Pastor Sam from South Alabama).*

We have free will. And we can use it for good or for ill. But we all have flaws, and

sometimes fatal ones. So, in divine love through Christ on the cross God chooses us and so changes our hearts to love...everyone and anyone. Amen.