

The Case of Paul

I generally avoid "discussions" concerning free will versus determinism, as I feel this can detract from the evangel we are to proclaim ... "Be conciliated to God! For the One not knowing sin, He makes to be a sin offering for our sakes that we may be becoming God's righteousness in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21) I feel it is more important to share the good news; that salvation comes thru the grace of God, accomplished thru the work of Christ upon the cross; and this salvation will one day come to all of mankind.

Whether one believes we have free will (however that is defined), or that our actions are determined, the bottom line is that nothing can stop God from accomplishing His will.

The one believing in absolute free will objects, stating that while God desires all mankind to be saved, He will never force man to accept Him, as that would be a taking away of man's free will.

But then we consider the case of Paul!

In Acts 9 we read about several days in the life of Saul, later to be known as the apostle Paul. The chapter opens with Saul "breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." If Paul has free will, he is exercising it by vehemently persecuting the followers of Jesus Christ.

Saul deserves judgment. He leads a terrorist organization, wreaking havoc with the people of God. He is much the same as Osama bin Laden, fully believing he is serving God as he terrorizes. But while Saul deserves judgment, he receives grace.

A light out of heaven flashes about him, and falling on the earth he hears a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:3) When Saul asks, "Who art Thou, Lord?" the voice replies, "I am Jesus Whom you are persecuting."

Saul opens his eyes, but can see nothing, as he has been temporarily blinded.

Let's think about this! Saul is quite happily exercising his "free will" as he terrorizes the early Believers. In a flash of light the Lord Jesus Christ appears to Saul, speaks to him, blinds him, and has him led helplessly to Damascus. Saul is then given a vision, telling him he will be visited by a man named Ananias. Ananias then comes, telling Saul he has been commissioned by the Lord Jesus to visit Saul and restore his sight. From this moment on, Saul proclaims that Jesus Christ is the resurrected Son of God ... the same Jesus he had been persecuting up until a few days ago.

Did Saul have free will? Regardless of how you define “free will,” no one can say that his will was not strongly influenced by external forces ... by Jesus Himself!

Some might quickly respond that still Saul’s will was not “forced,” and that he could still have made a decision to continue his persecution of the Believers if he chose to do so. Easy for you to say!

Saul was permitted to see Christ, to hear His voice, to be temporarily blinded and led to Damascus, to see a vision, to have that vision fulfilled, and to have his sight restored; all thru a string of events that impacted his will.

If Saul had free will to begin with, and if he had the ability to resist the will of God even after experiencing this sequence of events that impacted his own will, it would seem that God knew what it would take to convince Saul that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God.

If God knew what it would take to reach Saul, and if God was willing to bring the necessary influences to bear upon Saul to accomplish His own will, then what will stop God from doing the same with every one of His creation?

Some bow their knee with little external influence ... perhaps by reading Scripture or hearing the evangel proclaimed. Others resist for a lifetime before they subject themselves to God. Some come in response to the spoken word, while others take a bit more (like Saul). Some believe without seeing, while others must see for themselves (like “doubting Thomas”).

Some believe in this lifetime and become a part of the “ecclesia” (commonly called “church”). These have been called by God to demonstrate His grace to others, and to glorify Him in this present age. Others will only believe after experiencing the lake of fire, the second death.

But Christ must reign until all enemies are placed under His feet ... until all are “subjected” to Him (1 Corinthians 15:25-27). And when this is finally accomplished, the last enemy (death) is abolished, the Son of God subjects Himself to God the Father, and God becomes All in all.

Some of us may be more stubborn than others. Some may take longer to submit to God. Some may take greater external influence to impact our will. But “free will” or not, nothing will stop God from accomplishing His will to save all of mankind (1 Timothy 2:4).

- Bob Evely -

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| October 24-26, 2003 | Wagener, SC | Rick Farwell 803/564-3464 |
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