

IS FREE WILL AN ILLUSION?

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”¹

—John 8:31-32

A mouse lives in a tiny corner of the earth and knows nothing of the greater world beyond her small territory. Her nature drives her to find food, reproduce, and raise baby mice. She cannot change what God made her or where He put her.

We are like the mouse in many ways. We do not choose the time, the place, or the circumstances of our birth. Our nature drives us to eat and sleep—we cannot choose to do otherwise for any extended period of time without serious consequences. The almost irresistible attraction of the opposite sex compels most of us to mate and reproduce. And as much as we pretend otherwise, none of us can avoid death.² Yet something inside us cries out that we are different from the mouse. We believe we can rise above our circumstances and resist our nature. We can *choose* how we act. We are *free*. Or are we?

Some argue that our “freedom” is simply an illusion. Our choices are all determined by some combination of genetics, circumstances, experiences, and environment, leaving no room for free will. For example, we “choose” a religion because our culture or our parents ingrained it in us as children.³

Among Christians, some argue that freedom to choose our eternal destiny is similarly illusory—i.e., that God decided whether you and I would go to Heaven or Hell⁴ before we were even born. Such giants of the faith as St. Augustine,⁵ John Calvin, and John Knox⁶ have advocated for this

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

² As Jesus pointed out: “which of you by worrying can add a *single* hour to his life's span?” (Luke 12:25)

³ The story of my conversion to Christianity does not follow this pattern. I was an agnostic who found Christ as a young adult. You can read more in “About the Author,” on this web site.

⁴ I do not subscribe to the traditional view of Hell as fire, brimstone, and eternal torture, nor do I believe that Scripture supports such a view. For a discussion of what Scripture **truly** says about Hell, see the article, “What is Hell Really Like?,” on this web site.

⁵ For more on St. Augustine (354 - 430 A.D.), see the article, “St. Augustine,” on this web site.

position. Many others, reading the same Bible, have concluded that our eternal fate depends upon our choices. But what does the Bible say?

The Case for Free Will

Some degree of freedom of action is implicit in the New Testament. When Jesus says, “follow Me,” as He often does,⁷ the statement suggests that the hearer can choose to either follow Him or not. And while most chose to follow, the rich young ruler did not.⁸ When Jesus tells someone to go somewhere,⁹ or to do something,¹⁰ He does not even hint that the person lacks the freedom to do otherwise—and as with the rich young ruler, occasionally a person did do otherwise.¹¹ Jesus Himself seems to have been at least a little surprised when the people of His home town of Nazareth rejected Him,¹² for “He wondered at their unbelief.”¹³

More to the point, the New Testament is full of commands and pleas regarding how we **ought** to behave. For example, Jesus talks about the need to humble ourselves.¹⁴ He admonishes us not to judge other people,¹⁵ but

⁶ John Calvin (1509 - 1564) and John Knox (ca. 1505 - 1572) were two of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, along with Martin Luther and others. For more on the Protestant Reformation, see the articles, “Predecessors of the Reformation” and “Martin Luther,” on this web site.

⁷ See for example: Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 19:21; Mark 1:17, 2:14, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 9:59, 18:22; John 1:43, 21:19, 21:22.

⁸ See Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, and Luke 18:18-23.

⁹ For example, see Mark 1:44: “. . . go, show yourself to the priest. . . .” See also: Matthew 19:21, 28:7, 28:10, 28:19-20; Mark 2:11, 5:19, 11:2, 14:13, 16:7; Luke 5:14, 7:22, 8:38-39, 13:32, 19:30, 22:8; John 4:16, 4:50, 7:8, 9:7, 20:17; Acts 9:11, 9:15, 22:10, 22:18, 22:21.

¹⁰ For example, see Luke 6:8, which says: “. . . He said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Get up and come forward!’ ” Or John 2:7-8: “Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ So they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Draw *some* out now and take it to the headwaiter.’ So they took it *to him*.” See also: Matthew 16:20; Mark 3:5, 6:10-11, 7:36, 8:26, 9:9, 9:39, 10:14, 11:1-3, 14:13-16; Luke 5:3-4, 6:10, 9:50, 10:2-12, 19:5, 19:30-31, 20:24, 22:19, 22:40, 22:46, 24:39, 24:49; John 1:39, 2:16, 4:7, 5:8, 5:14, 6:12, 11:39, 11:44, 12:7, 18:11, 21:6, 21:10, 21:12; Acts 1:4.

¹¹ Mark 7:36 says: “And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it.” Other examples of people not doing what Jesus told them to do include: Mark 1:44-45, 6:11; Luke 10:10-12.

¹² See Mark 6:1-6 and Matthew 13:54-58.

¹³ Mark 6:6

¹⁴ For example, see Matthew 20:25-28:

instead to forgive them.¹⁶ He forbids divorce under most circumstances.¹⁷ He warns against the dangers of money and greed, and insists that we should be more concerned about God than about the worries of this life.¹⁸ He urges us to show each other love and kindness.¹⁹ And of course He commands us to think, speak, and act properly, rather than wickedly.²⁰ Indeed, Jesus' teachings constantly presume that our actions and our **choices** affect our relationship with God,²¹ and therefore we must choose wisely.

The teachings of His followers are no different. Very early in the life of the Church, the leaders sent a letter to the Christians in Antioch, setting down a few simple rules for the Gentile Christians there to follow:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

See also, Matthew 18:1-6, 18:10; Mark 9:35-37, 10:15; Luke 9:48, 14:8-11, 18:13-14, 18:16-17, 22:26, 13:14-15

¹⁵ Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37, 6:41-42

¹⁶ Matthew 6:14-15, 18:34-35; Luke 6:27-29

¹⁷ Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18

¹⁸ Matthew 6:19-20, 16:24-27, 22:21; Mark 8:34-38, 12:17; Luke 9:23-26, 9:61-62, 11:28, 12:15, 12:22-23, 12:33-34, 14:26-27, 14:33, 16:9, 20:25, 21:34

¹⁹ See Matthew 5:44-47; Luke 6:27-38, 10:25-37, 14:12-14; John 13:34-35, 15:12, 15:17; and see Luke 3:10-14, where John the Baptist preaches a similar message.

²⁰ See Matthew 5:19-20, 12:33-37, 15:18-20, 18:8-9, 23:1-3, 23:25-28; Mark 7:20-23, 9:43-48, 10:19; Luke 11:39-42, 18:20; John 5:28-29, 7:19, 8:11, 8:39; see also, Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8, where John the Baptist delivers a similar message.

²¹ For example, in John 14:23-24, Jesus says:

“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me.”

See also: Matthew 7:21, 10:40-42, 18:7, 19:12, 23:23-24, 25:32-46; Mark 3:28-30, 3:35, 7:6-13, 9:41-42, 9:50, 13:33-37, 14:7; Luke 6:46-49, 8:18, 8:21, 11:9-13, 11:46, 11:52, 12:56-57, 13:23-24, 17:1-2, 17:23, 21:8, 21:36, John 7:24, 8:51, 9:41, 13:17, 14:15, 14:21, 15:10, 15:14, 15:22, 15:24.

strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.”²²

Why write such a letter unless the Antioch Christians were free to conform their conduct to these rules—or choose not to do so?

Similarly, during Paul’s first missionary journey, he issues a warning to Elymas the magician that is just silly unless Elymas actually possessed the freedom to change his behavior:

“You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?”²³

Indeed, Paul speaks often of the need to behave properly, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Romans:

*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.*²⁴

Echoing the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, the authors of the other New Testament books constantly tell us how we ought to behave. They warn us not to judge others,²⁵ but instead to think and act with humility.²⁶ They advise us to be kind, considerate, and forgiving,²⁷ and to exercise self-control, rather than indulging selfishness, immorality, or other evil desires.²⁸

²² Acts 15:28-29; see also Acts 15:19-20.

²³ Acts 13:10

²⁴ Romans 12:9-13; see also, Romans 2:21-23, 6:1-2, 6:12-13, 6:15, 6:19, 12:1-2, and 13:12-14.

²⁵ Romans 2:1, 14:1-3, 14:10, 14:13; 1 Corinthians 4:5; James 4:11

²⁶ Romans 12:3, 12:16; 1 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; James 1:21; 1 Peter 3:8, 5:5-6

²⁷ Romans 12:14, 12:17-21, 10:24, 10:32-33, 15:1-2; 2 Corinthians 2:7-8; Galatians 6:1, 6:9-10; Ephesians 4:32; Philippians 2:4; Colossians 3:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Titus 3:2; 1 Peter 3:8-9; 2 Peter 1:7

²⁸ Acts 24:25; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, 6:15, 6:18, 9:24-27, 10:8, 15:33-34; 2 Corinthians 7:1, 13:7; Galatians 5:13, 5:16, 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:17-19, 4:22-24, 4:25-31, 5:3-4, 5:7-11; Philippians 2:14-15, 4:8; Colossians 3:5-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; 2 Thessalonians

They counsel against divorce.²⁹ They command that we respect and obey those in positions of authority over us.³⁰ And above all, Jesus' followers implore us to love each other and get along with each other.³¹ This is not a complete list of verses that talk about our behavior,³² but I'm sure you get the idea.

Since Jesus and the New Testament writers tell us how we should behave—on many topics, and with great frequency—they must have believed that we possess some measure of freedom to act accordingly. Yet the New Testament contains even stronger evidence for free will.

I Repent, Therefore I Am Free

The New Testament's terminology regarding how we establish and nurture our relationship with God is especially revealing. Jesus and the New Testament writers use such terms as “repent,” “love,” “faith,” and “believe,” all of which involve **choices**.

Jesus' earliest preaching stressed repentance: “From that time [the arrest of John the Baptist] Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ”³³ John the Baptist delivered a similar message: “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism

3:6; 1 Timothy 3:8, 3:11, 4:7, 6:9-11; 2 Timothy 2:19, 2:22; Titus 2:11-12; 1 Peter 1:14-15, 2:11-12, 2:16, 4:15; 2 Peter 1:5-6; 3 John 11

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:10-13, 7:27

³⁰ Romans 13:1-7; 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; Ephesians 6:1, 6:5; Colossians 3:20, 3:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10, 3:1; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13-15, 2:17-20

³¹ Romans 14:15, 14:21, 15:7; 1 Corinthians 1:10, 6:4-8; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:15, 5:25-26, 6:2; Ephesians 4:1-3, 5:2, 5:25, 5:33, 6:4, 6:9; Philippians 1:27, 2:2; Colossians 3:14, 3:19, 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:9, 5:13; 1 Timothy 6:17-18; 2 Timothy 2:23-24; Titus 3:9-10; Hebrews 12:14-15; James 2:8; 1 Peter 1:22, 2:17, 4:8-9; 1 John 3:11, 3:16-18, 3:23, 4:7-8, 4:11-12, 4:21; 2 John 5

³² For example, see also: Acts 10:13-15, 17:29; Romans 6:16, 14:5, 14:20, 16:17-19; 1 Corinthians 3:10, 3:21, 4:6, 4:16-17, 6:9-10, 7:5, 7:9, 7:15, 7:17-20, 7:21-24, 7:36, 7:38-40, 8:9, 10:7, 10:9-10, 10:14, 10:25-29, 11:1, 11:27-28, 11:33-34, 12:31, 14:1, 14:12-13, 14:27-32, 14:34-35, 14:39-40; 2 Corinthians 6:14, 9:7; Galatians 4:12, 6:6-8; Ephesians 5:15, 5:17-22, 6:7, 6:18; Philippians 2:5, 4:6, 4:9; Colossians 3:15-18, 3:21, 3:23, 4:2, 4:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, 4:1, 4:10-11, 5:14, 5:16-21; 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15; 1 Timothy 2:8-11, 4:12, 5:1-3, 5:8, 5:16, 6:13-14; 2 Timothy 2:14, 2:16; Titus 2:1-4, 2:6-7, 3:8, 3:14; Hebrews 10:24-25, 12:1, 12:12-13, 13:2-5, 13:15-16; James 1:9-10, 1:19, 1:22-27, 2:1-4, 2:9, 3:10, 3:13-14, 4:15, 5:7-9, 5:12-14, 5:16; 1 Peter 2:1-2, 3:1, 3:7, 4:7, 4:16; 1 John 2:3-4, 2:15, 5:3, 5:21; 2 John 6; 3 John 5-8; Jude 22-23.

³³ Matthew 4:17; see also, Mark 1:14-15.

of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”³⁴ And so did Peter.³⁵ Indeed, the value and importance of repentance is a constant theme in the New Testament.³⁶

To “repent” means to feel sorry for the wrongs you have done,³⁷ both to God and to other people. But in the New Testament it means much more—a point John the Baptist made when he addressed the Jewish religious leaders who came to hear him preach:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore **bear fruit in keeping with repentance**; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.”³⁸

Repentance involves changing not only your mind, but your heart, your attitude, and your behavior toward God and other people. Repentance necessarily requires freedom. If we lack the freedom to change—our mind,

³⁴ Mark 1:4; see also, Matthew 3:1-2 and Luke 3:2-3.

³⁵ See Acts 2:37-38:

Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

³⁶ See Matthew 11:21, 12:41-42; Mark 6:12; Luke 5:31-32, Luke 10:13, 11:32, 13:2-5, 15:7, 15:10, 16:30, Luke 17:3-4, 24:47; Acts 3:19, 8:22, 11:18, 17:30, 19:4, 20:21, 26:19-20; Romans 2:5; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, 12:21; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Hebrews 6:4-6; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 2:4-5, 2:16, 2:20-22, 3:3, 3:19, 9:20-21; see also Mark 2:17, which is similar to Luke 5:31-32.

³⁷ Webster’s defines “repent” as:

1. to feel sorry or self-reproachful for what one has done or failed to do; be conscience-stricken or contrite (often with *of*) 2. to feel such regret or dissatisfaction over some past action, intention, etc. as to change one’s mind about (often with *of*) [to *repent* of one’s generosity] 3. to feel so contrite over one’s sins as to change, or decide to change, one’s ways; be penitent.

Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language, David B. Guralnik, Editor in Chief (The World Publishing Company, New York and Cleveland, 1970).

³⁸ Matthew 3:7-9 (emphasis added)

our attitude, and, yes, even our behavior—then the New Testament writers are foolishly imploring us to do something we cannot do. But we must not stop there.

Agapaô-Love and Pisteuô-Faith

Jesus also emphasizes the need to love God. In fact, this is paramount:

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.’ The second is this, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”³⁹

The word, “love,” in this verse is the Greek *agapaô*, which is the selfless and self-giving love that always seeks what is best for the person loved.⁴⁰ This is the kind of love Paul describes in the famous 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians:

³⁹ Mark 12:28-31 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18); see also, Matthew 22:36-40 and Luke 10:25-28

⁴⁰ When you see the English word “love” in the New Testament, the original Greek is always either *agapaô* (or a derivation thereof) or *phileô* (or a derivation thereof). The latter refers to brotherly love (as in **Philadelphia**, “City of Brotherly Love”), and is used in the following verses: Matthew 6:5, 10:37, 23:6; Luke 20:46; John 5:20, 11:3, 11:36, 12:25, 15:19, 16:27, 20:2, 21:15-17; Romans 12:10; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:10; Titus 2:4, 3:4, 3:15; Hebrews 13:1, 13:5; 1 Peter 1:22; 3 John 1:9; Revelation 3:19, 22:15.

Agapaô is used much more frequently in the New Testament: Matthew 5:43-44, 5:46, 6:24, 19:19, 22:37, 22:39, 24:12; Mark 10:21, 12:30-31, 12:33; Luke 6:27, 6:32, 6:35, 7:5, 7:42, 7:47, 10:27, 11:42-43, 16:13; John 3:16, 3:19, 3:35, 5:42, 8:42, 10:17, 11:5, 12:43, 13:1, 13:23, 13:34-35, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23-24, 14:28, 14:31, 15:9-10, 15:12-13, 15:17, 17:23-24, 17:26, 19:26, 21:7, 21:15-16, 21:20; Romans 5:5, 5:8, 8:28, 8:35, 8:37, 8:39, 9:13, 12:9, 13:8-10, 14:15, 15:30; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 4:21, 8:1, 8:3, 13:1-4, 13:8, 13:13, 14:1, 16:14, 16:24; 2 Corinthians 2:4, 2:8, 5:14, 6:6, 8:7-8, 8:24, 9:7, 11:11, 12:15, 13:11, 13:14; Galatians 2:20, 5:6, 5:13-14, 5:22; Ephesians 1:4, 1:15, 2:4, 3:17, 3:19, 4:2, 4:15-16, 5:2, 5:25, 5:28, 5:33, 6:23, 6:35; Philippians 1:9, 1:16, 2:1-2; Colossians 1:4, 1:8, 2:2, 3:14, 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:6, 3:12, 4:9, 5:8, 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:10, 2:16, 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:5, 1:14, 2:15, 4:12, 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7, 1:13, 2:22, 3:10, 4:8, 4:10; Titus 2:2;

Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.⁴¹

This type of love has nothing to do with sexual attraction or emotion or feelings. Agapaô-love is a **choice**. Our emotions may tell us to seek revenge against those who have hurt us, but agapaô-love chooses a different path:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . .”⁴²

Throughout the New Testament we see this idea of love as a choice rather than a feeling. Jesus spoke of it when He said:

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow

Philemon 1:5, 1:7; Hebrews 1:9, 6:10, 10:24, 12:6; James 1:12, 2:5, 2:8; 1 Peter 1:8, 1:22, 2:17, 3:10, 4:8, 5:14; 2 Peter 1:7, 2:15; 1 John 2:5, 2:10, 2:15, 3:1, 3:10-11, 3:14, 3:16-18, 3:23, 4:7-12, 4:16-21, 5:1-3; 2 John 1:1, 1:3, 1:5-6; 3 John 1:1, 1:6; Jude 1:2, 1:12, 1:21; Revelation 1:5, 2:4, 2:19, 3:9, 12:11.

Both *agapaô* and *phileô* are used in a few verses: John 21:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

⁴² Matthew 5:43-44 (see also Luke 6:27 and 6:35). Paul makes the same point in Romans 12:17-21 (quoting Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22):

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.”⁴³

Jesus might as well have said, “He who **chooses** father or mother over Me is not worthy of me,” for that is essentially what He means. Family is important—which Jesus makes clear elsewhere⁴⁴—but God insists that we make Him our number one priority. In the same way, we must choose whether to devote ourselves to God or to the pursuit of money.⁴⁵

Agapaô-love is simply not possible without the freedom to give it—or to withhold it. And neither is faith, another constant theme in the New Testament. Jesus mentions the importance of faith in His healings:

And He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction.”⁴⁶

He even made it a key to salvation: “And He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’ ”⁴⁷ The author of Hebrews says we cannot please God without faith.⁴⁸

No one stressed the importance of faith more than the great missionary and letter writer, Paul, who asserted that justification,⁴⁹ righteousness, and ultimately eternal salvation and eternal life, are all given

⁴³ Matthew 10:37-39; see also Luke 14:26-27

⁴⁴ See Matthew 5:31-32, 15:3-6, 19:3-9; Mark 7:9-13, 10:2-9; John 19:26-27.

⁴⁵ See Luke 16:13:

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

See also Matthew 6:24.

⁴⁶ Mark 5:34; see also, Matthew 9:2-7, 9:22; Mark 2:5-12; Luke 5:20-25, 17:19, 18:42.

⁴⁷ See Luke 7:50; see also, Luke 5:20. Also, in Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34, and Luke 17:19 and 18:42, what Jesus literally says is, “Your faith has **saved** you.” (Emphasis added.)

⁴⁸ Hebrews 11:6

⁴⁹ “Justification” means that God pronounces us righteous and acquits us of our wrongdoing. See *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Moody Press, Chicago, 1962), p. 1192 (Romans 3:24), and *Interpreter’s Concise Commentary: Acts & Paul’s Letters*, by William Baird, Cyril E. Blackman, James L. Price, Victor Paul Furnish, Leander E. Keck, and Eric Lane Titus, and ed. by Charles M. Laymon (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984), at p. 127 (Romans 3:24).

to us as a result of our faith in God.⁵⁰ Paul points out that Abraham gained favor with God through his faith, rather than by any moral conduct,⁵¹ and that we receive God's grace (His unmerited favor) in the same way, through and because of our faith:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.⁵²

In addition to the critical role ascribed to faith,⁵³ the New Testament also talks often about the importance of belief. For example:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever **believes** will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever **believes** in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”⁵⁴

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who **believes**, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-22, 3:26, 3:28, 5:1, 9:30-32, 11:20; Galatians 2:16, 3:8, 3:24; Philippians 3:9; 2 Timothy 3:15.

⁵¹ Romans 4:1-5, 4:9, 4:13, 4:16-22; Galatians 3:6-7

⁵² Ephesians 2:8-9; see also, Romans 5:2 and Galatians 5:4-6.

⁵³ See also: Acts 15:9, 24:24, 26:18; Romans 1:5, 16:26; 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, 15:14, 15:17, 16:13; 2 Corinthians 1:24, 5:7; Galatians 2:20, 3:2, 3:5, 3:9, 3:14, 3:22-26; Ephesians 3:11-12, 3:17; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 1:3-4, 1:21-23, 2:5-7; 1 Thessalonians 3:5-8, 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 3:1-2; 1 Timothy 1:3-5, 1:18-19, 2:15, 3:13, 4:12, 6:11-12, 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 1:5, 1:13, 4:7-8; Philemon 4-5; Hebrews 4:2, 6:12, 10:22, 10:39, 11:39-40, 13:7; James 1:5-6; 1 Peter 1:8-9; 2 Peter 1:5; 1 John 5:4; Jude 20-21; Revelation 2:10, 14:12.

⁵⁴ John 3:14-16 (emphasis added)

⁵⁵ Romans 1:16 (emphasis added). The New Testament contains many other references to the importance of belief. See, for example: Matthew 21:31-32; Mark 1:15; Luke 12:46, 24:25; John 1:7, 1:12, 3:18, 3:36, 5:24, 5:38, 5:44-47, 6:29, 6:35-36, 6:40, 6:47, 7:37-38, 8:24, 8:31-32, 9:35, 11:25-26, 11:40, 11:42, 12:36, 12:44, 12:46, 14:1, 14:11, 17:20, 19:35, 20:27-29, 20:31; Acts 10:43, 13:39, 16:31, 19:4; Romans 3:21-22, 4:16-20, 4:23-24, 10:4, 10:8-11, 10:14, 11:20, 11:23; 1 Corinthians 1:21, 3:5, 15:2, 15:11; Galatians 2:16, 3:6, 3:22; Ephesians 1:13, 1:18-19; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10, 2:12; 1 Timothy 1:16, 4:10, 4:12; Hebrews 3:12, 3:19, 4:3, 11:6; 1 Peter 1:8, 2:6-7; 1 John 3:23, 5:10-11, 5:13.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, “faith” and “belief” are both translated from the Greek word, *pisteuô* (or a derivative of it), which is really closer in meaning to “trust” or “surrender.”⁵⁶ “Belief” recognizes Truth, but *pisteuô*-faith makes a commitment to that Truth. Like *agapaô*-love, *pisteuô*-faith involves a choice—the choice to place our trust in God, and to put our lives and our eternal future in His hands.

Other New Testament terminology merely reinforces this idea that following God is a choice—in many ways, an ongoing, continuous choice—which of course requires the freedom to choose. For example, we are urged to **confess**⁵⁷ and to **endure**.⁵⁸ We are told we must **forgive** others if we wish to be forgiven by God,⁵⁹ and we are commanded to **obey** God.⁶⁰ Such commands would be meaningless without the freedom to choose whether or not to comply.

With such overwhelming Biblical evidence that we are free, why do some insist that we are not? Is there any Scriptural evidence for predestination? Indeed there is, and a lot of it.

The Case for Predestination

First, the New Testament contains abundant and irrefutable evidence that many specific people were predestined—including Jesus Himself:

. . . an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy

⁵⁶ For more on this topic, see “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” on this web site.

⁵⁷ Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 12:8-9; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:12; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9, 2:23, 4:15

⁵⁸ Matthew 10:22, 24:13; Luke 21:19; Acts 11:23; 2 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Timothy 4:5; Hebrews 10:36, 12:7; James 1:12; 1 Peter 2:20. Many other verses speak in similar terms, such as the need to “stand firm,” “hold fast,” or to “continue in the faith,” and the need for “perseverance.” For example, see the following: Luke 22:28-30; Acts 14:22; Romans 2:7, 8:25; 11:22; 1 Corinthians 15:2, 15:58, 16:13; Philippians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:4, 2:15; 1 Timothy 4:16, 6:11; Titus 1:9; Hebrews 3:6, 3:14, 10:23; 2 Peter 1:6; Revelation 14:12.

⁵⁹ Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21-22, 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3-4; 2 Corinthians 2:7; see also, Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4.

⁶⁰ Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46; John 3:36; Acts 5:29, 5:32; Romans 6:12-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; Hebrews 5:9

Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”⁶¹

Jesus was destined to suffer and be killed—and then to be resurrected—and He was well aware of it:

For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.”⁶²

The Gospels imply that Judas Iscariot was, in some sense, predestined to betray Christ, just as Peter would deny Him and the other disciples would desert Him, because Jesus knew about all of these events before they happened:

Jesus answered them, “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and *yet* one of you is a devil?” Now He meant Judas *the son* of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.⁶³

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.’ But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” But Peter said to Him, “*Even* though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this *very* night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” Peter said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” All the disciples said the same thing too.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Matthew 1:20-21; see also Luke 1:30-33, 2:10-11, 2:25-34; John 17:24, 18:37

⁶² Mark 9:31; see also Matthew 12:40, 16:21, 17:9, 17:12, 17:22-23, 20:17-19, 20:22, 26:39, 26:42, 27:63; Mark 8:31, 10:32-34, 14:35-36; Luke 9:21-22, 9:43-44, 13:33, 17:25, 18:31-33, 22:15, 22:37, 22:42, 24:26, 24:44, 24:46; John 3:14, 7:8, 7:30, 7:33, 13:1, 13:3, 16:19-22, 16:28, 18:4, 18:11; Acts 2:22-23, 3:18, 4:27-28.

⁶³ John 6:70-71; see also, Matthew 26:21-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:3-6; John 6:64, 13:2, 13:11, 13:18, 13:21, 13:25-27; Acts 1:16.

⁶⁴ Matthew 26:31-35. Of course, Peter **did** deny Jesus three times, and the disciples all deserted Him, just as Jesus predicted. See Matthew 26:56 and 26:69-75. The other

Paul believed that God had fated him to be God's messenger to the Gentiles,⁶⁵ and he was surely correct, for God strong-armed him in the most important decisions of his life—from his conversion on the road to Damascus⁶⁶ to his journey to Rome,⁶⁷ and many critical decisions in between.⁶⁸

Similarly, God gave many other people in the New Testament little or no choice but to act in accordance with His will, such as: John the Baptist's ministry as preacher and prophet;⁶⁹ Lazarus' death and resurrection;⁷⁰ Pilate's role in condemning Jesus;⁷¹ or the preaching and persecution of Jesus' disciples.⁷² Moreover, God almost forced Paul,⁷³ the apostle Thomas,⁷⁴ and the proconsul Sergius Paulus⁷⁵ to believe, by confronting them with the undeniably miraculous. And Paul implies that God used similar methods to persuade the Thessalonians.⁷⁶

We see examples of predestination in the Old Testament as well. Before Jacob and his twin brother Esau were even born,

Gospels tell a similar story: Mark 14:27-31, 14:50, 14:66-72; Luke 22:31-34, 22:54-62; John 13:36-38, 16:32, 18:15-18, 18:25-27.

⁶⁵ For example, see Galatians 1:15-17 (emphasis supplied):

But when God, who had set me apart *even* from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

See also Acts 9:15-16, 22:10; Romans 1:1-2, 15:15-16; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 10:8, 13:10; Galatians 1:1; Colossians 1:1, 1:25; 2 Timothy 1:11.

⁶⁶ Acts 9:3-8, 9:15-16, 26:12-18

⁶⁷ Acts 23:11, 27:23-24

⁶⁸ See, for example, Acts 13:2-4, 16:6-10, 20:22-23, 21:10-14, 22:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:16-17; 2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4.

⁶⁹ Luke 1:13-17; John 1:6-7; and see Matthew 11:9-10

⁷⁰ John 11:1-44

⁷¹ John 19:10-11

⁷² John 15:16, 15:19, 16:2, 21:18-19; Acts 1:7-8, 15:7

⁷³ Acts 9:3-18; see also 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

⁷⁴ John 20:24-29

⁷⁵ Acts 13:6-12

⁷⁶ See 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5: “. . . knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. . . .”

The LORD said to her [their mother, Rebekah], “Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger.”⁷⁷

Before any of the ten plagues struck Egypt, God told Moses what would happen:

“You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments.”⁷⁸

Psalms 139 even suggests that God had predetermined the day of the psalmist's death:

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained *for me*,
When as yet there was not one of them.⁷⁹

Election, Parables, and Prophecy

The New Testament often speaks of the “elect,” and of those who are “chosen” or “called” by God.⁸⁰ Some of these verses have nothing to do with salvation⁸¹—and many are ambiguous⁸²—but a few clearly refer to eternal salvation, such as:

⁷⁷ Genesis 25:23; see also, Romans 9:10-13

⁷⁸ Exodus 7:2-4

⁷⁹ Psalms 139:16

⁸⁰ Matthew 22:11-14; Mark 13:20-22, 13:27; Luke 18:7; John 10:3-5, 15:16, 15:19; Acts 1:24-26, 2:39, 10:40-41, 13:48, 15:7, 16:9-10; Romans 1:5-6, 8:28-30, 8:33, 9:10-13, 9:24, 11:4-5, 11:7, 11:28-29; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, 1:9, 1:24, 1:26-30, 7:17-24; Galatians 1:6, 5:8, 5:13; Ephesians 1:4, 1:18, 4:1, 4:4; Colossians 3:12, 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:4, 4:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 1:9, 2:10; Titus 1:1; Hebrews 9:15; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:9, 2:21, 3:9, 5:10, 5:13; 2 Peter 1:3, 1:10; 2 John 1, 13; Jude 1; Revelation 17:14

⁸¹ Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:24-26, 15:7, 16:9-10; Romans 9:11

When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.⁸³

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸⁴

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.⁸⁵

We can also imply predestination from many other New Testament verses, with varying degrees of reliability. Parables compare people to plants,⁸⁶ trees,⁸⁷ or soil,⁸⁸ as if God forms each of us in a way that allows us to respond to Him—or makes us incapable of doing so. Jesus talks of people being **unable** to understand God’s message,⁸⁹ without really making clear whether this inability stems from their choices or their nature. And He

⁸² I include in the “ambiguous” category both the verses that do not necessarily refer to eternal salvation and those that do not necessarily promise eternal salvation to the “chosen” or “called.” See, for example: Matthew 22:14; Mark 13:20-22; Luke 18:7; John 10:3, 15:16, 15:19; Acts 2:39, 10:40-41; Romans 1:5-6, 8:28, 8:33, 9:24, 11:5, 11:7, 11:28-29; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, 1:9, 1:24, 1:26-30, 7:17-24; Galatians 1:6, 5:8, 5:13; Ephesians 1:18, 4:1, 4:4; Colossians 3:12, 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:4, 4:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:1; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:9-10, 2:21, 3:9, 5:13; 2 Peter 1:3, 1:10; 2 John 1, 13; Jude 1; Revelation 17:14.

⁸³ Acts 13:48

⁸⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

⁸⁵ 1 Peter 5:10; and see Mark 13:27; Romans 8:29-30; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:10; Hebrews 9:15

⁸⁶ Matthew 3:12, 13:24-30, 15:12-14; Luke 3:17

⁸⁷ Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45 (but see also Matthew 12:33, which indicates that we have at least some free will in deciding what type of “tree” we will be: “ ‘Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.’ ”)

⁸⁸ Matthew 13:3-9, 13:18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 4:14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 8:11-15

⁸⁹ Matthew 11:25, 13:10-15; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:9-10, 10:21-22, 19:42; John 10:26-29, 12:37-40. Paul makes a similar point in verses such as: 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 3:14-16, 4:3-4.

seems to say that some people have an advantage over others in being able to hear, understand, and believe His message.⁹⁰ Indeed, He even speaks of some being “given” to Him by God for the purpose of saving them.⁹¹

Prophecy also implies predestination. If God knows what a person is going to do, does that person really possess the freedom to do otherwise?⁹² Similarly, our freedom is limited by God’s sovereignty and omnipotence—the fact that God is ultimately in control of **everything**, as Paul pointed out to the Athenians:

“ . . . He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation. . . .”⁹³

Indeed, I’m not sure we cannot even *want* to return to God unless He takes the initiative:

“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”⁹⁴

Reconciling Free Will and Predestination

Having made a strong case for both free will and predestination, we next face the question of whether the two can be reconciled. Admittedly, the task appears difficult, yet it is not impossible. After all, the men who wrote the New Testament were no fools. Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel which bears his name, was a physician.⁹⁵ Paul, the likely author of thirteen

⁹⁰ John 10:14-16, 10:26-28, and 18:37; and see Matthew 19:11: “But He said to them, ‘Not all men *can* accept this statement, but *only* those to whom it has been given.’ ” See also, 1 John 4:6, where John’s message is similar.

⁹¹ John 6:37, 6:39, 10:29, 17:1-2, 17:6, 17:9, and 17:24

⁹² For example, see Matthew 23:34-35; Mark 14:13-16; Luke 11:49-51, 19:42-44, 21:6, 21:9-24, 22:10-13; John 19:23-24; Acts 27:22-24; 2 Timothy 3:1-2, 4:3-4; Revelation 13:8.

⁹³ Acts 17:26; this idea of God’s ultimate control is also reflected in Acts 18:21.

⁹⁴ John 6:44; see also, John 6:65, which is similar; and see Romans 2:4: “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” Similarly, see 2 Timothy 2:25-26.

⁹⁵ See Colossians 4:14, where Paul refers to “Luke, the beloved physician.” The Gospel of Luke and Acts have similar introductions (Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:1-2), as well as similar style and vocabulary, which has convinced Biblical scholars that a single author wrote both. Early Christian writers identified Luke, a companion of Paul, as the author. Luke’s

of the letters in the New Testament, was an educated Pharisee (one of the Jewish religious leaders) before his conversion to Christianity.⁹⁶ The New Testament authors—each in his own style—present the story of Jesus in a way that is at once appealing, compelling, inspiring, and uncompromising. So if these wise and skilled writers appear to not only contradict each other, but themselves as well, and sometimes within a single sentence,⁹⁷ perhaps we have misunderstood their meaning.⁹⁸

God Really Does Predestine Some—But Not All.

First, the Biblical evidence compels the conclusion that God can, **and does**, sometimes place very real limits on people’s freedom in order to accomplish His purposes. Pharaoh, Judas Iscariot, and Pontius Pilate all played their role in God’s plans, as did many Old Testament prophets and kings, and I cannot confidently say that any of them had much freedom to do otherwise. However, predestination in this context does not refer to eternal destiny. While God used Pharaoh, Judas Iscariot, and Pontius Pilate, the Bible is silent about their ultimate salvation. Perhaps God saved them in the end.⁹⁹

In addition, some persons may truly be predestined for salvation, at least in the sense that God can be very persuasive when He wants to be. He made His truth so plain and obvious to Paul, Thomas, and many of the early

ties to Paul are established by Paul’s references to him (Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24), as well as the switch from third person (“they”) to first person (“we”) in Acts. (Compare Acts 16:6-7 and 16:10.)

⁹⁶ Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5

⁹⁷ For example, see Romans 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.” The phrase, “those who love God,” is an expression of free will, without which love is impossible, but “those who are called” implies predestination.

⁹⁸ In the law, courts follow a rule of interpretation called *pari materia*, which requires that statutes be interpreted, whenever possible, so that they are consistent with each other, so long as they address the same general subject, or have the same general purpose. This rule recognizes the fact that legislatures do not intentionally pass laws that contradict each other, and therefore an interpretation which leads to that result is probably wrong. I follow the same principle when interpreting Scripture.

⁹⁹ I do not ignore the implications of Matthew 26:24, which states: “ ‘The Son of Man *is to go*, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.’ ” (See also Mark 14:21 and Luke 22:22.) This verse might refer to Judas’ ultimate destiny, but it could just as easily be interpreted as a recognition of the severe guilt, shame, and despair he would feel as he saw Jesus condemned—feelings that led Judas to commit suicide. See Matthew 27:3-5.

Christians that their only real “choice” was to accept it and surrender to God’s purposes, or to oppose God from sheer wickedness. This appears to be what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the Thessalonians being “chosen” by God:

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers . . . knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, **but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction**; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, the fact that Paul and others were in some sense predestined for salvation does not mean that the ultimate destiny of the rest of us is similarly fixed. To illustrate this truth, let’s look at a very strong assertion of predestination from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as **He chose us** in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love **He predestined us** to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, **having been predestined** according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. . . .¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 4-5 (emphasis added)

¹⁰¹ Ephesians 1:3-11 (emphasis added via boldface)

Paul talks of people, including himself, being “chosen” and “predestined,” and I believe he has eternal salvation in mind.¹⁰² But he is not talking about you or me, a fact he makes clear in the next two verses:

to the end that **we who were the first to hope in Christ** would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, **you also**, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise¹⁰³

The predestined are “we who were the first to hope in Christ”—that is, the early believers. You and I are like the Ephesians—the “you also”—who come to Christ not through predestination, but by “listening to the message of truth” and embracing it. Thus, although God predestined some early believers for salvation—at least in the sense that He demonstrated the truth of the Gospel to them through indisputable proofs—He gave many others a very real choice. And that latter group includes most of the rest of us.

God’s Chosen People. Like the first chapter of Ephesians, chapters 8 and 9 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans contain language that strongly supports predestination:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are **called** according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also **predestined to become** conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He **predestined**, He also **called**; and these whom He **called**, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² However, see also 1 Corinthians 9:26-27, where Paul seems to say that he could still lose his salvation:

Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

¹⁰³ Ephesians 1:12-13 (emphasis added via boldface)

¹⁰⁴ Romans 8:28-30 (emphasis added via boldface)

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath **prepared for destruction**? And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He **prepared beforehand for glory**, *even us*, whom He also **called**, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.¹⁰⁵

However, in Romans, Paul’s point is a little different than in Ephesians. First, notice that juxtaposed with these statements supporting predestination is the ultimate expression of free will: “to those who love God.”¹⁰⁶ Love is nothing if not freely given. Furthermore, throughout Romans, Paul emphasizes the importance of faith,¹⁰⁷ which presents us with the choice of following God or pursuing our own agenda. If Paul, the most articulate letter writer in history, truly meant that everyone’s eternal fate is predestined, he would have clearly said so. But that is not what he meant, for **when Paul talks of predestination in Romans, he is speaking primarily of a people, not individuals.**

Remember that the Jews were God’s “chosen” people,¹⁰⁸ “entrusted with the oracles of God.”¹⁰⁹ The Lord chose Abraham.¹¹⁰ The Lord chose

¹⁰⁵ Romans 9:18-24 (emphasis added via boldface); and see Romans 8:33-34.

¹⁰⁶ Romans 8:28. Similar examples of this type of juxtaposition of free will and predestination appear in other letters, such as 2 Timothy 2:10, where Paul states: “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus *and with it* eternal glory”? If they are already “chosen” for salvation, why must Paul endure **anything** to help them obtain it?

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Romans 1:5, 1:8, 1:12, 1:17, 3:22, 3:26-28, 4:5, 4:9, 4:13, 5:1-2, 9:30, 9:32.

¹⁰⁸ Deuteronomy 7:6: “the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” See also Deuteronomy 14:2.

¹⁰⁹ Romans 3:2

¹¹⁰ Genesis 18:19

Isaac instead of Ishmael,¹¹¹ Jacob rather than Esau.¹¹² The Lord later rejected the ten tribes (i.e., the descendants of nine of Jacob’s twelve sons¹¹³), because of their unfaithfulness, ultimately allowing them to be carried into exile, dispersed, and lost to history.¹¹⁴ Many times in the Old Testament, the Lord rejected **individuals**, often due to their unfaithfulness, but He never rejected His “chosen” people. In Romans, Paul seeks to demonstrate that God has now chosen a new people—the Christians.¹¹⁵

Paul begins by arguing that the reliance of the Jewish people upon their special relationship with God as His “chosen” people, or upon the Law that God entrusted to them,¹¹⁶ will not save them. Thus, Paul points out that everyone—Jew and Gentile alike—falls short of what the Law requires,¹¹⁷ and that those Jews who disobey God’s Law will suffer God’s judgment, despite their special status.¹¹⁸ Therefore, both Jew and Gentile must rely on faith in Christ for salvation, rather than depending on the Law or their own righteousness.¹¹⁹ For although we may want to comply with what the Law requires, we cannot actually do it.¹²⁰

In later chapters of Romans, Paul anticipates the objection that the substitution of the Christians for the Jews as God’s “chosen” people would violate His promise to Abraham. Not so, responds Paul, for many of the Christians whom God has chosen are Jews, like Paul.¹²¹ God’s promise to

¹¹¹ Genesis 17:15-21, 21:12

¹¹² Genesis 25:23

¹¹³ The ten tribes were descended from the following nine sons of Israel (Jacob): Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Joseph. There were ten tribes, rather than nine, because two tribes came from Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

¹¹⁴ 2 Kings 15:29, 17:1-23, 18:9-12

¹¹⁵ Peter makes the same point in 1 Peter 2:9-10:

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

¹¹⁶ The “Law” refers to the Jewish Law, as contained in the first five books of the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

¹¹⁷ See Romans 3:9-12, 3:20, 3:23.

¹¹⁸ See Romans 2:3, 2:9, 2:12, 2:17-25.

¹¹⁹ See Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-22, 3:28, 4:3-5, 4:16, 4:22-25.

¹²⁰ See Romans 7:5, 7:7-25, 8:6-7.

¹²¹ See Romans 11:1-5, below (quotes are from 1 Kings 19:10, 19:14, and 19:18):

Abraham does not fail merely because God moves forward with some, rather than all, of Abraham's descendants—which is exactly what He did in Abraham's day, when He chose the descendants of Isaac rather than those of Ishmael.¹²²

Thus, God chose some of the Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day—including Paul himself—to see, hear, and understand God's new message of salvation through faith in Christ. And if some were chosen, obviously others were not. Is this predestination? Of course. But it is not **universal** predestination—the idea that God has predetermined everyone's eternal fate—a fact Paul implicitly recognizes when he expresses hope and confidence that many of his fellow Jews may yet be saved through faith in Christ.¹²³

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about* Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? “Lord, **THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE.**” But what is the divine response to him? “**I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL.**” In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to *God's* gracious choice.

See also, Romans 9:25-28.

¹²² See Romans 9:6-9, below (quotes are from Genesis 21:12 and Genesis 18:10):

But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: “**THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED.**” That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is the word of promise: “**AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON.**”

¹²³ See, for example, Romans 11:11-15:

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their

This is the context of the “predestination” verses in chapters 8 and 9 of Romans, which are part of Paul’s argument. Paul is saying that God has predestined some in order to accomplish His purpose, which is to build up a people who will seek salvation through a loving, trusting relationship with Christ, rather than through their own merit and efforts. This does not mean that all others are condemned,¹²⁴ but only that they were not granted the special privilege of being “chosen.” If this nevertheless seems unfair, since some receive this privilege and others do not, Paul has a response: “who are you, O man, who answers back to God?”¹²⁵ And by the way, Paul—and many others—paid a heavy price for this special privilege.¹²⁶

The Toughest Nuts to Crack

Lastly, we come to a few verses that initially seem irreconcilable with the idea of free will, because they appear to speak of individuals being predestined for eternal condemnation:

Jude 4: For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, **those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation**, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into

rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will *their* acceptance be but life from the dead?

See also, Romans 10:1-3 and 11:23-24.

¹²⁴ Indeed, in Romans 11:25, Paul refers to a “**partial** hardening” of Israel (emphasis added), which may imply that God’s rejection of the Jews was only temporary.

¹²⁵ Romans 9:20

¹²⁶ For example, see 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, where Paul recounts his many sufferings:

Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

You may also want to read the article, “The Eleven Apostles Not Named Iscariot,” on this web site, where I discuss the lives, sufferings, and deaths of Jesus’ apostles.

licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.¹²⁷

Romans 9:22: What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath **prepared for destruction**?¹²⁸

Revelation 13:8: All who dwell on the earth will worship him, *everyone* **whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life** of the Lamb who has been slain.¹²⁹

Revelation 17:8: [An angel speaking] “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, **whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world**, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come.”¹³⁰

First, we must not read more into these verses than is really there. For example, the author of Jude does not explicitly say that he is referring to *eternal* condemnation. Yet even if we assume that much, the Greek¹³¹ simply means “long ago,” without specifying how long ago. Jesus uses the same word when He says:

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in

¹²⁷ Jude 4 (emphasis added)

¹²⁸ Romans 9:22 (emphasis added)

¹²⁹ Revelation 13:8 (emphasis added). Some scholars argue that, in the original Greek, the phrase, “from the foundation of the world,” actually modifies “the Lamb who has been slain.” Thus, they argue, the verse would more accurately be translated:

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, *everyone* whose name has not been written in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain from the foundation of the world.

Even if true, this contention does not explain Revelation 17:8, in which the phrase, “the Lamb who has been slain” is absent.

¹³⁰ Revelation 17:8 (emphasis added)

¹³¹ The Greek word is “*palai*.”

you, they would have repented **long ago** in sackcloth and ashes.”¹³²

Peter also uses the word, which in the following verse is simply translated as “former”: “For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his **former** sins.”¹³³

So the author of Jude is not saying that these “ungodly persons” were predestined for condemnation from birth. Perhaps they were instead “marked out for this condemnation” as a result of a decision to reject God and embrace wickedness. In addition, Jude does not say that these persons are beyond redemption.

Turning next to Romans 9:22, we have already discussed the general context of this verse, which is God’s choice of the Christians (including Jewish Christians), in place of the Jews, to carry forward His new message of redemption. In Chapter 9, Paul talks about God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in order to demonstrate His power through the Plagues and the Exodus. None of these Old Testament references has anything to do with eternal salvation. Instead, Paul is talking about God’s use of people to carry out His purposes in this life and in this world. Thus, when Paul talks about vessels prepared for “destruction” in Romans 9:22, the context suggests that he is **not** talking about eternal condemnation. Perhaps he means that these people are destroying their own lives by rejecting God,¹³⁴ or maybe he is prophetically referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Jews by the Romans in 70 A.D. While both are possibilities, I believe Paul is using a metaphor to describe God’s replacement of the Jews with the Christians as His ambassadors in this life. In other words, the Jewish people’s special relationship or standing with God has in a sense been destroyed. Such an interpretation would be consistent with the context of both Chapter 9 and Romans in general.

Finally, what about Revelation 13:8 and 17:8? At first glance, these two verses appear to state the strongest case for predestination in the entire Bible—at least with regard to eternal salvation.¹³⁵ This is especially so

¹³² Matthew 11:21 (emphasis supplied); see also Luke 10:13

¹³³ 2 Peter 1:9 (emphasis supplied)

¹³⁴ Note also that Paul does not specify who prepared these vessels for destruction, as he does in Romans 9:23, where he states that **God** prepared “vessels of mercy” for glory.

¹³⁵ Psalm 139:16 also contains an extremely strong statement in support of predestination, but not with regard to eternal salvation:

when we consider them in combination with Revelation 20:15, which says: “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”¹³⁶ Since having your name in the “book of life” symbolizes salvation, John, the author of Revelation,¹³⁷ seems to be saying that a person’s eternal salvation (or condemnation) has been decided “from the foundation of the world.” But for many reasons, this interpretation is wrong.

First, keep in mind that Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 do not themselves say that those “whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life” are eternally condemned, but only that they will worship and marvel at the wicked “beast.” Perhaps God will save some, or many, in the end. Revelation 20:15 does not say otherwise, for while it condemns those whose names are not in the “book of life,” the phrase “from the foundation of the world” is conspicuously absent. This omission is critical, because other verses demonstrate that the names in this “book of life” can *change*.

One such verse is Revelation 3:5, which clearly states that names in the “book of life” can be erased from it:

[Jesus speaking] “He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”¹³⁸

Psalms 69 implies the same:

May they be blotted out of the book of life
And may they not be recorded with the righteous.¹³⁹

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained *for me*,
When as yet there was not one of them.

¹³⁶ Revelation 20:15

¹³⁷ See Revelation 1:4. Tradition says that the John of Revelation 1:4 was John the apostle, the youngest of the Twelve chosen by Jesus, and the probable author of the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John. He may also have been the author of 2 John and 3 John, although that is doubted by many. For more on the life of John the Apostle, see the article, “The Eleven Apostles Not Named Iscariot,” on this web site.

¹³⁸ Revelation 3:5

¹³⁹ Psalms 69:28

If names can be deleted from the “book of life,” perhaps names can be added, too.

Let’s see what else Revelation says about this “book of life”:

[John speaking about the New Jerusalem] In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. ¹⁴⁰

In this passage, “those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” are those who are morally “clean” and do not practice “abomination and lying”—in other words, those whom God has purified from sin. This is reminiscent of Revelation 3:5, quoted above, in which he who “overcomes” is clothed in white—also symbolic of purification—and is not erased from the book of life. In Revelation 3:5, this purification results, at least in part, from deliberate, persistent action (overcoming), rather than divine selection. John uses this word, “overcomes,” frequently in Revelation. ¹⁴¹ And the 1st Letter of John says we achieve it through our faith:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ¹⁴²

Thus, Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 do not truly say that our eternal destiny is fixed from birth. To the contrary, the support these verses appear to offer for the doctrine of predestination evaporates in the light of Revelation’s simultaneous insistence that people’s actions and choices are critical to their salvation. Furthermore, Revelation (like all of the New Testament books) contains many verses which make sense only if people have free will, such as those emphasizing repentance, ¹⁴³ faith, ¹⁴⁴ love, ¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Revelation 21:25-27. The “book of life” is also mentioned in Revelation 20:12 and Philippians 4:3, although those verses shed no light for our purposes.

¹⁴¹ See Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21, and 21:7.

¹⁴² 1 John 5:4-5

¹⁴³ See Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 2:21-22, 3:3, 3:19, 9:20-21, 16:9, 16:11.

¹⁴⁴ See Revelation 2:19, 13:10, 14:12.

and perseverance,¹⁴⁶ and those which encourage or warn the reader about the consequences of certain actions.¹⁴⁷ In the end, Revelation confirms that our eternal fate rests, at least in part, on our decisions and choices.

On the other hand, if we interpret Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 to mean that everyone's eternal destiny has been unalterably fixed from time immemorial, then we annul most of the New Testament, including Jesus' talk about the importance of love, Paul's calls to embrace faith, and large parts of Revelation itself. After all, why would the Biblical writers urge me to repent if I'm doomed—or saved—regardless of what I decide to do? That would be like telling me how to win a game that is already over.

Then what are Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 really trying to say? Both describe events which take place in the end times, so they probably have a meaning similar to Ephesians 1:3-13. In other words, a few in those last days will be predestined for salvation (i.e., those whose names are written in the book of life), while everyone else will worship the wicked "beast," leaving their eternal destiny unresolved.

Conclusion. So what can we conclude? First, God has indeed predestined us in many ways. Our genetic structure, the time and place of our birth, the quality and circumstances of our family, our innate talents and abilities, and many other factors beyond our control all conspire to make us what we become. As a result, our freedom in this life may be much more limited and illusory than any of us imagine.

Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that every one of us is, in a sense, predestined for condemnation, because none of us is good enough to *earn* our way into Heaven ("for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. . . ." ¹⁴⁸). We are like criminals condemned to die ("the wages of sin is death" ¹⁴⁹). Even those who *want* to be good find, when they are honest with

¹⁴⁵ See Revelation 2:19.

¹⁴⁶ See Revelation 1:9, 2:2-3, 2:19, 13:10, 14:12.

¹⁴⁷ See Revelation 1:3: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and **heed the things which are written in it**; for the time is near." (Emphasis added.) Or Revelation 22:18-19 (emphasis added):

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: **if anyone adds to them**, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and **if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy**, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

¹⁴⁸ Romans 3:23

¹⁴⁹ Romans 6:23

themselves, that they often come up short: “For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.”¹⁵⁰ Jesus and Paul refer to this as slavery to sin.¹⁵¹ Because of our slavery to sin, we cannot please God¹⁵²—and thus, salvation is beyond our reach.

But God can save us. He takes the initiative; we merely respond. And that is where freedom enters the picture, for the New Testament teaches that God will save those who *choose* to be in relationship with Him.¹⁵³ While God has the power to deny us that choice, He limits Himself in order to give us a truly free choice. So perhaps 1 John 4:19 best summarizes this delicate balance in the New Testament between free will and predestination: “We love, because He first loved us.” We may indeed have much less freedom than we often imagine, but God, at a minimum, allows each of us the freedom to choose whether or not to surrender to Him.¹⁵⁴ And our eternal destiny may depend on that choice.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Romans 7:19

¹⁵¹ For example, see John 8:34-36:

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

And see Romans 6:5-7, 6:15-18, 6:20-23, 7:14; Titus 3:3.

¹⁵² See Romans 8:6-8:

For the mind set on the flesh is death . . . because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

¹⁵³ I am not necessarily saying (as some do) that God cannot or will not save non-Christians. That is a matter best left to God.

¹⁵⁴ Indeed, our only choice in this regard may be slavery to sin or slavery to God. See Romans 6:22:

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

¹⁵⁵ I do not believe that our opportunity to choose or reject God necessarily ends with our death in this life. Scriptures such as John 5:25, 1 Peter 3:19, and 1 Peter 4:6 seem to say that even those who have died in this world will have at least one more opportunity to accept Christ in the afterlife. For more on this topic, see the article, “Is Yahweh an Ogre?,” on this web site.