

QUESTIONS ABOUT "FREE WILL" AND "FOREKNOWLEDGE"

Let me start by saying that this issue is not resolved by our ability to define God in terms that we like and are acceptable to us. *God is good* and the biblical definition of *good is God*. God is not insecure about being God and is not sitting in heaven thinking to Himself, "Boy, I sure hope they like me." God is the God of truth and it is God alone who defines truth. This may seem arrogant and egocentric, but when You are the only perfect divine being, to do anything else but exalt Yourself and truth as You define it would be wrong. With respect to the great God of Truth I offer the following:

Truth is true—even if no one knows it.

Truth is true—even if no one admits it.

Truth is true—even if no one agrees what it is.

Truth is true—even if no one follows it.

Truth is true—even if no one but God grasps it fully.

Paul Copan

Q. What is your view on man's level of free will in salvation?

Answer:

The answer to this question depends greatly on how one defines "free will." If you mean by "free will" that men and women are *autonomous* then I think this is a philosophical attempt to place mankind in a position of moral neutrality that the Scripture will not permit. The Bible ONLY describes two kinds of people on the face of this earth – *children of God* and *unbelievers who are blinded by sin and Satan*. No one is saved from a position of moral neutrality, but all people are saved from the domination and damnation associated with sin and Satan. Consider the following Scriptures that make the same point.

- Jesus made this point during His earthly ministry, "*Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.'*" (John 8:34, NIV)
- The question may be asked, "Who sins?" The Apostle Paul answers that question. "*As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.' 'Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.' 'The poison of vipers is on their lips.' 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.' 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.' 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'* Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." (Romans 3:10-19, NIV)
- The Apostle Paul makes the point clearly in Romans 6 that a person is either under the *realm (or reigning power) of sin* or the *realm of righteousness*. "*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to

QUESTIONS ABOUT "FREE WILL" AND "FOREKNOWLEDGE"

*sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become **slaves to God**, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:15-23, NIV)

- The Apostle Paul also says that unbelievers follow the evil one and are blinded by Satan's power and influence.

Ephesians 2:1-5 "*As for you, you were **dead in your transgressions and sins**, in which you used to live when you **followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved."*

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 "³*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."*

- The Apostle John makes the same point and indicates that the whole purpose of Jesus' redemptive work was destroy the devil's work and influence over the lives of those born again as children of God. "*Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. **He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil**, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."* (1 John 3:7-8, NIV)

However, if you mean by "free will" that men and women are *morally responsible* for the choices they make with respect to truth and salvation, then I will be more accepting of that definition. But I choose to say that men and women are *morally responsible* for the decisions they make in life rather than saying they have "free will" because I feel the deduction made by many today is that people are autonomous.

I do believe that when unbelievers choose to reject truth, spurn Christ or turn a deaf hear and blind eye to the grace and glory of God they are morally responsible for their choice. Yet their choice is not because they are being forced against their will to be godless. They are truly doing what they want to do. In support of this, consider the following passages:

Acts 2:22-23 "*Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; **and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.**"*

Acts 4:27-29 "*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."*

No matter how God operates behind the scenes in the crucifixion of His Son, Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the others did what they chose to do; they did what they wanted to do, and therefore, they are morally responsible. But this is considerably different from saying they had absolute power not to do what they did in the event (free will). If they could have done something different than what God had determined then God would be shown to be without sovereign power and determinative will. The human agents involved were not absolutely

QUESTIONS ABOUT "FREE WILL" AND "FOREKNOWLEDGE"

free; for if they were, God could have ordained that the events of the crucifixion take place, and then the human beings involved could have decided otherwise. Yet God did not ordain that they do something as if they were mere puppets, or, still worse, against their will. *They did what they wanted to do*, and that is why they are rightly accountable.

When it comes to salvation, people come to saving faith in Jesus Christ because God in His grace and mercy enables them to do so. God grants people a new covenant heart of responsive flesh as opposed to the lifeless, cold and indifferent heart of stone that is characteristic of all unsaved people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; Ephesians 2:1-5).

- Faith and repentance are precious gifts of God and not the product of human determination.

Acts 5:31 *"God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior **that he might give repentance and forgiveness** of sins to Israel."*

Acts 11:18 *"When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, **God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.**'"*

Ephesians 2:8-9 *"⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – **and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God** – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast."*

- Only those graciously enabled by God will come to Jesus as the only way of salvation. John 6:37-40 *"³⁷ **All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.** ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that **I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.** ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."*

John 6:63-65 *"⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵ He went on to say, "This is why I told you that **no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.**"*

Acts 16:13-15 *"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. **The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.** When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us."*

Q. What do you believe regarding the principle of foreknowledge?

Answer:

One of the attributes of our eternal God is that He is omniscient (all-knowing). As the all-knowing God it is impossible for our God to learn anything. This includes His inability to learn anything about anyone or any circumstance. God's knowledge is in this sense always active and never passive. We have a hard time getting a handle on this because we cannot relate with adequate understanding to the omniscient God we serve. Yet this is a fundamental principle when we are talking about God and knowledge.

QUESTIONS ABOUT “FREE WILL” AND “FOREKNOWLEDGE”

When we move into a discussion about “foreknowledge,” we need to keep God’s omniscience in mind. There are a number of interpreters who assume that the word implies that God’s choice is based on what he foresees the human being will choose to do. To see it like this is to put all the significant activity on man as the “pivotal decider,” making predestination a meaningless concept. To imply that God’s knowledge is a reactionary knowledge also discounts God’s omniscience and implies that God can and does learn things about people. Such an explanation will not stand in the light many texts. In particular, Romans 8:29 “For those God **foreknew** he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” (NIV) This text makes it clear that God is not looking forward and seeing *things* happening. What God *foreknows* is **the person**. There have been a number of scholars who have shown that in Semitic thought “to know” a person can have implications of intimacy (i.e. “Adam *knew* his wife...”). The knowledge referred to in Romans 8:29 is not a knowledge of the facts about what people will do but a *knowledge of a personal relationship with the individual* in advance.

Some additional texts that can be sighted to show the knowledge of individuals would be two separate passages in 1 Peter. 1 Peter 1:1-2 says, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the **foreknowledge** of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood...” Additionally 1 Peter 1:20 says of Jesus Christ, “He was **chosen (foreknown)** before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” (NIV) (NASB - 1 Peter 1:20 “For He was **foreknown** before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you...”). God’s knowledge is a personal knowledge of the people in advance. God did not know facts about Jesus in advance, but Jesus himself. For Peter, God’s *foreknowledge* of Christ must be like and kind with that of God’s *foreknowledge* of His elect people.

This would be the same type of point made by other passages based on God’s knowledge of His chosen people.

John 10:14-16 “¹⁴I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶**I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.** They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

Acts 18:9-10 “⁹One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because **I have many people in this city.**”

The point is clear – God knows those who are His in advance and this knowledge is personal and relational.

Q. Does God call certain people to Himself and leave others to their own devices, or does He provide everyone with “equal opportunity?”

Answer:

The Bible does not allow us to say that unbelievers had no chance to believe. When people rejected Jesus Christ, He always put the blame on their willing choice to reject Him, not on any decree by God the Father.

QUESTIONS ABOUT “FREE WILL” AND “FOREKNOWLEDGE”

Matthew 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but you were not willing.**”

John 5:39-40 “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet **you refuse to come to me to have life.**”

John 8:43-44 “Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and **you want to carry out your father's desire.** He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

This is the consistent pattern of Scripture—people remain in unbelief because they are unwilling to come to God. Blame for such unbelief always lies with the unbelievers themselves, never with God. It is not that people would be rejected if they wanted to come to Christ for salvation. They would not. But the fact remains that they will not come unless God effectually calls them through the gift of faith and repentance.

Then the question is asked, What about the “whosoever wills” of Scripture?

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

1 Timothy 2:3-6 “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time.”

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Don't these passages contradict the idea that God has only chosen certain people to be saved?

No they don't. Out of the necessity of consistency and non-contradiction, the concept of a *general call* and an *effectual call* (or a revealed will and a hidden will) must be presented.

(Romans 9:19 “¹⁹ One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? **For who resists his will?**” The context—verse 18—and implication that the Apostle Paul allows to stand is that no one can.) God invites and commands all people to repent and come to Christ for salvation (general call). But we also know that God has chosen those whom He will save (hidden will and/or secret decrees).

Because these things are beyond the reasoning power of any human mind, we would do well to rest our lack of understanding on the shoulders of an all-knowing and sovereign God and say with the Apostle Paul, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:33-36, NIV)