

FREE WILL, FREE AGENCY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND PREDESTINATION

Philippians 2:12-13, Ephesians 1:5,11

By Raymond White

This is one of the age-old paradoxes (indeed, *the* age-old paradox) of the Bible and our notions about God. Are our actions spawned from our own free will and choice, or are they spawned from God's sovereign control over us? And if the second, then how can our free will be anything but an elaborate illusion?

[1] PARADOXES

Our problem is not just that the Bible insists on divine sovereignty, but that it insists on divine sovereignty *and* man's free will at the same time, which is paradoxical.

With some mental gymnastics we can try to convince ourselves that the two ideas can coexist. For instance, we might say yes, we do have free will, but God's sovereignty controls our free will. That, of course, is nonsense, because controlled free will is not free will — free means not controlled. So we cannot escape the lunacy quite so easily, we have to make some real effort to reconcile the two sides or live with the paradox.

In addition to sovereignty, there is the notion of predestination, and those two are synonymous, sort of. Sovereignty says our wills are controlled by God and predestination says our wills are controlled by destiny. They are synonymous, sort of, because if God controls us then our future is predestined, and if we are predestined, then it is God's sovereignty that predestinated us. So it doesn't much matter if it is God who is tugging the strings of our marionette wills, or destiny, or both. Either implies the other and they are just two ways of saying the same thing. Sovereignty implies predestination, predestination implies sovereignty, and either way, our free will is compromised and there is nothing free about it. Free will is, as I said, just an elaborate illusion.

So, which is it? Do we have free will, or are we just puppets manipulated by God and destiny? It doesn't seem reasonable that both could be true. Can it be that A causes B *and* B causes A? Reciprocating causality seems impossible. Watch any movie that involves time travel and you'll get an uneasy sense of that sort of silliness.

We can try to escape the paradox by saying God doesn't *cause* the future, he just *knows* it. But that doesn't help. For if he knows the future, then there is a future to know. Hence we are still predestined and once again there goes our free will. There is no escape.

Here's a bizarre thought: maybe God *knowing* the future *causes* the future. That sounds a bit like quantum mechanics where mere observation changes reality.

This paradox is not just a paradox of God, it is a paradox of science as well. But scientists phrase it differently. Here is how scientists ask the question: Is the universe deterministic or not? By that they mean this: If we knew with infinite precision the absolute current state of the entire universe, could we know the next state of the universe? If yes, then the future is knowable and therefore pre-set, and that makes the universe deterministic. And of course there is no room for free will in that sort of universe.

Fortunately, however, science had Heisenberg to let us off that philosophical hook. His Uncertainty Principle insists that the universe really is random and the future definitely is not deterministic.

But theologians are not blessed with a Heisenberg to settle the dispute, we're stuck with the Bible. Our problem, as I said, is not just that the Bible insists on predestination, but that it insists on predestination *and* free will. How can they both be true? Paradoxes are not supposed to exist, at least not in any kind of rational universe.

When my daughter was in high school, she came home upset one day because her high school teacher told her, "How can you believe in God when there are paradoxes about him? For instance, if he can do anything, why is there evil?" I answered, "If that is an irresistible argument, then we must apply it universally. How can we believe that the universe exists when there are paradoxes about *it*?" Then I gave her a short course in quantum physics and a few other things. Truth is, we live with paradoxes everywhere.

Mathematicians like to use paradoxes to shortcut their proofs. If they want to determine if a statement is true or not, they'll pick one side and fiddle with it until they arrive at a paradox, then conclude, "Ahah! That way leads to a paradox therefore it cannot be true, therefore the other way must be true."

Well, maybe. But what if the other way also leads to a paradox? What if the paradox is the truth? This is not a frivolous speculation. Kurt Godel's Incompleteness Theorem proved that every mathematical system does, in fact, lead to inescapable paradoxes. That's very disturbing, because if we disallow paradoxes, then we disallow all of mathematics. And yet, we know that math works so we keep using it.

Scientists are constantly stuck with paradox-like truths that exist in the physical universe. Here are a few. What could have caused the big bang when the big bang was the first event? If nothing can escape a black hole, how could the big bang, the biggest, blackest hole of all time, have happened? How can light be both particles and waves? If nothing can travel faster than light, how can entangled particles communicate with each other across the universe? And how can gamma particles vanish and reappear somewhere else thus traveling at an infinite speed? And then of course there's Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle which makes the entire universe a sort of paradox. But in spite of all these paradoxes, no one is suggesting that the universe does not exist when it clearly does. If the universe can exist with its paradoxes, then God can exist with his.

That satisfied my daughter and she's a happy believer to this day.

When I was in college, my Physics professor showed us a "picture" of an electron cloud which showed not where the electron was (which we can never know) but where it was *likely* to be. Of course we mush-head students asked the question: "But where is the electron, *really*? What *is* the truth?" The professor replied, "The *cloud* is the truth!" Now if we can grasp that, that the cloud is the truth, then we can begin to understand the Bible and not imagine God out of existence because we don't like his paradoxes.

So, now, armed with that tantalizing discussion about paradoxes and why we should not be so hostile to them, let's now dive recklessly into the Bible and take on this most difficult of all paradoxes: man's free agency versus God's irresistible sovereignty. What does the Bible say about the two sides of this mental dispute, and is there anything like a resolution or compromise? And if there is no resolution, then the *cloud* is the truth.

[2] FREE WILL AND FREE AGENCY

Do we really have free will? The Bible demands that we do. Let's begin at the beginning of the Bible to when humans first began to think about such things.

Genesis 2:17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. 3:2* *And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, :3* *But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it lest ye die. :6* *And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.*

God told them, don't eat of that tree. And they understood his direction because Eve recited it to the serpent. Then they ignored the direction and ate the fruit anyway.

Let's notice a few things. God did not prevent them. He could have because later he did bar them from the tree of life, **3:24**. So God's direction was not an impediment, it was just good advice which they could and did ignore. Did God cause them (predestined them) to ignore his own advice? If he did, then he acted against his own commandment and thus God was the first sinner. That, clearly, was impossible. Therefore we must conclude that Adam and Eve exercised their impulse of free will and as free agents acted contrary to God's explicit directive. That is the definition of free will and free agency.

Deuteronomy 11:26 *Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse :27* *A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: :28* *And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God; but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.*

Deuteronomy 30:15 *See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil: :16* *In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God; to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that ye mayest live and multiply; and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. :17* *But if thine heart turn away, so that thou will not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; :18* *I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. :19* *I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:*

When God said, "I have set before thee..." surely he meant that he really did set before them two real choices, not one real and one phony. Your free agency, God is saying, is *not* fettered by my divine sovereignty. You have a choice to make. Really, you do. It is not an illusion. And when God said "if", surely that means uncertainty, the future is *not* set; human souls really are up for grabs.

What else could it mean? If free will is all God's great hoax, we have to wonder, why would he bother? Why would God play dice to entertain himself and then use loaded

dice? It's like watching a baseball game that you've already seen, or reading a novel whose ending you already know. What's the point?

Joshua 24:15 *And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose ye this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your father served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

The operative word is, "choose." Choose means choice, which implies *free* choice, which of course implies free agency and free will. You don't tell a robot to choose, you program its decisions. Of course you can program in the *illusion* of choice with a random number generator, but still it is no choice at all but just a pre-programmed response to random inputs, a finite state machine, to use technical jargon.

Only people make "choices" and God said, "choose."

1 Kings 18:21 *And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, then follow him: But if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.*

God did not back off. He had given them choices and now he is holding them to it, making them accountable for the choices they've made, or refused to make (no choice is a choice). God is nudging them: Come on, people. I gave you free agency, now use it.

Jeremiah 21:8 *And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.*

Again, God really did set two paths, not one real path which they *had* to follow and another smoke and mirrors path to trick them into thinking it was their choice.

Acts 2:40 *And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.*

God does not assume responsibility. He dumps the responsibility for their salvation right on their shoulders. "Save yourselves." *You* do it. I've done enough.

Galatians 6:7 *Be not deceived, God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. :8* *For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*

Don't be fooled, Paul says, into believing that you are not responsible. You *are* responsible. What you do really is your choice. "The devil made me do it" (or "God made me do it") doesn't work because God made you a free agent.

Philippians 2:12 *...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*

God has given us an assignment, a task, a chore, a job. And he leaves us with the duty to do it. We can then choose to either do it or not. This verse is strong evidence that God gave us free will, and with it the responsibility to choose rightly.

Now let's flip the coin over.

[3] PREDESTINATION, FOREKNOWLEDGE, SOVEREIGNTY, ELECTION, GRACE

All of those really amount to the same thing. They are all theological devices to replace our free will with something more reliable, something we hope is better able to get us into heaven. I'm not saying they're not true, I'm just calling a spade a spade.

Let's begin where we left off, but let's add a few more words.

Philippians 2:12 ...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. :13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

So who exactly is doing the work of salvation? Is it you and your agency working out your salvation, or is it God at work overriding your agency? Or both?

Here we have a contradiction thrown right in our face. Paul does not seem to notice the contradiction in his own words — he just rolls right over it and keeps on going.

But maybe we can escape this contradiction. Maybe God working in us does not necessarily imply irresistible, sovereign control. Maybe it means divine nudging, “Do that, please.” The word “worketh” does imply effort to accomplish something that may or may not get done to his satisfaction. If it is impossible for God to not get what he wants, then why does he need to work? Work implies uncertainty.

But the meaning of :12 is certain. It means that *you* must do it. In other words, do what God is nudging you to do.

Genesis 18:18 ...Abraham shall surely become a great nation :19 For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment...

And just how does God know that so that he can bless Abraham in advance? Abraham is being rewarded for what he *will* do, God is that sure.

Jeremiah 10:23 O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.

We do not direct our own steps. There are compelling influences that cause us to do what we do and we can't help doing what we do.

Luke 22:21 But, behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table. :22 And truly the Son of Man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed:

Not only did God determine that Jesus would die, he also determined that Judas would betray him. Where was Judas's free agency in that?

John 1:12 *But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name :13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

“Received him” sounds like their choice, but the text continues to argue the opposite. Their conversion, the text insists, was not *their* doing (not the will of flesh or of man), but God’s doing.

John 6:37 *But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not. :44 No man can come to me, except the father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.*

You do not believe me because God did not pick you to believe me.

John 10:26 *But ye believe me not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. :27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. :28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.*

I’m saving them and I am not saving you because you are not one of my flock.

Acts 2:23 *Him, him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God; ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.*

You did this evil thing because it was determined that you would do it. God determined it, and he knew you would.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that all things work together for the good of them that love God, to them who are the called according to his pleasure.*

Paul couldn’t have left it at “for the good of them that love God,” he had to add “to them who are the called according to his pleasure.” In other words: only the called. And the called are called because God wants them and not others. Sounds like sovereign choice to me, predestination at its harshest.

Romans 8:38 *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, :39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul wrote this to be comforting, as if to say, “God has you covered so don’t worry.” But at the same time it is disconcerting because it seems to suspend our own free will: we can’t even choose to fall from God’s grace. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

To soften it a bit, Paul begins with, “I am persuaded” which casts its own doubts on the matter. “Persuaded” implies a logical conclusion which is quite a different thing than absolute certainty. If he “knew,” why would he have to be “persuaded”?

Romans 9:11 *(For the children being not yet born, neither having not yet done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;)* **:12** *It was said unto her, the elder shall server the younger.* **:13** *As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*

Yes, I know, Paul is talking about nations, and the individual persons serve only as an allegory. But we can't escape on this technicality — the two nations are predestined *because* the two brothers were predestined. Jacob and Esau acted out God's election *so that* the two nations would come into existence and act out God's election.

Romans 9:18 *Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.* **:19** *Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doeth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?* **:20** *Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the think formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?* **:21** *Hath the potter power over the clay, of the lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?* **:22** *What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endureth with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.* **:23** *And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.*

This is very disturbing, that God might have actually have created people just so he could damn them, and that to show saved soul how good they have it.

There is one escape. **:22** *What if God* implies that this whole picture is just that, a picture. Paul is giving a for instance. What if God did it like this? Then you wouldn't even have the right to complain, would you? In other words, go to hell, and don't even question why. Does that even make sense?

It's a good thing that Paul said, “what if,” because a God who damns people just because he wants to is certainly a different picture than a God —

1 Timothy 2:4 *Who will have all men to be saved...*

I would far rather believe Paul's words to Timothy even if it means that God doesn't really control everything and doesn't always get his way. God has certainly failed to save “all men.”

Romans 11:5 *Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.* **:6** *And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace...*

By God's sovereignty, he elects some to grace and others not, and this election specifically has nothing to do with works. That's Paul's message. Why is he so adamant?

Romans 15:15 *Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that was given to me of God :16 That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the gentiles...*

The reason that Paul is so adamant about grace is because he has been on the receiving end of so much of it.

1 Corinthians 15:15 *But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God that was in me.*

Again Paul ascribes everything to grace. Then he points out how hard he's worked. But then he will not even claim credit for his work, but instead ascribes all his hard work and success to God's grace.

Is all this just false humility? Does he deserve no credit for his contribution? Paul would say none at all, but we don't believe that. And therein lies another tension, this one between grace and well deserved (though self-denied) praise for a job well done.

It's never simple, is it? Whichever side of any debate you take (in this case works versus grace) the opposite seems just as compelling, I mean from the Bible.

Ephesians 1:4 *According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. :5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.*

Paul leaves us little wiggle room here. God chose us. God predestinated us. And he did it simply because he wanted to. The word predestinated (Gr: pra-a-rid-zo) means "marked out boundary."

There is the question, however, of certainty. Just because you are in the marked out boundary, does that mean you will remain? Is the boundary impassible? Does it leak? You see, it doesn't really matter what the English words predestine and foreordain mean, it only matters what the Greek word pra-a-rid-zo meant to the author, and that is vague.

And then there is the question, does "us" really mean specifically you and me, or does it just mean a bunch of people to be named later which just happened to include us? "Marked out boundary" does not necessarily mean that the specific individuals who will later be in the boundary were pre-known. This is especially true since they didn't exist yet except in the mind of God. And "in the mind of God" seems a stretch.

But "chose us before the foundation" sure sounds like you and me specifically even though we didn't exist yet, except in the mind of God.

Does it really make sense that God chose people who didn't exist? Beside the trouble we have with his pre-choosing, that we didn't exist is double trouble.

All of this makes a plausible case for the Mormon notion of pre-existence, for in the Mormon view, God at least had real people, us, to pick over and chose from. We were just spirits. So that when a Mormon talks about foreordination and not pre-destination, there is at least some sense to it because of pre-existence. This makes additional sense

when you consider the Greek word “katallage” which translates to “atonement” and “reconcile.” You can’t reconcile two enemies unless they were previously friends. Reconcile means reconcile them to a friendship they once had, to restore a friendship. Well, if we were born enemies to God, then when were we ever friends? Mormons answer, in the pre-existence.

But I digressed. Back to the subject.

***Ephesians 1:11** In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to his purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.*

Paul uses predestination to encourage them. “Don’t worry. God choose *you!*” He meant it as a positive (we’re secure), but we take it as a negative (we have no free will) which was never his intent.

***Philippians 1:6** Being confident of this very thing, that he which begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

You don’t really need to worry about anything, is his point. You can’t fail. And the reason you can’t is because your faith wasn’t your doing in the first place, it was Jesus’. If your salvation was your work, then you could fail. But it is not your work, it is his work, and he always finishes what he begins. Trust *him*, not yourself.

***2 Timothy 2:19** Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.*

You are sealed, it is sure, God knows you, so don’t worry. Unless you are observant and ask Paul this question: “It’s nice that ‘the Lord knoweth them that are his.’ But that’s not the issue, Paul. The issue is, am *I* in that elect group and how do I know?”

***Hebrews 12:2** Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith...*

You didn’t start your faith so you won’t be finishing it. Jesus started the faith in you (he picked you and not the other way around) and he will finish what he started. So there is nothing you should be anxious about.

Well, there is something to be anxious about. There are people who believe but then fall away. Paul will argue that their apostasy is proof that they didn’t really believe in the first place. But that undermines his whole argument which is that you can know now that you are secure because of divine sovereignty and predestination. But “knowing now” is little comfort if others who “know now” fall away. But, Paul would insist, if they fall, that proves that they didn’t really believe. But that is weak because how can I know that I won’t fall? How can I know that I know? And “wait ‘till the end” is no answer.

***Revelation 17:8** ...and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names are not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world....*

Oh, that's harsh. There are people who, from the beginning of the world, were excluded from the book of life.

The Bible seems to be so filled with the notion of God's sovereignty and predestination, one wonders how can we believe otherwise? Do we really have any choice in the matter of our own salvation and should we bother at all?

And that's where the Bible flips it over again. The words "choice" and "if" are also so pervasive in the Bible that if we are going to surrender anything theologically, it had better not be our determination to obey. I'll struggle with predestination, but I won't struggle with obedience. As Satan once tempted Jesus to jump from a pinnacle to test God, my advice to you is, don't do that. Yes, God is holding onto you, but don't test him to see how firm his grip is. Don't use predestination as an excuse to sin.

[4] CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

Some Christians get so caught up with their doctrine of security that they use that security as a license to sin. A homosexual Christian once said, "I am glad I am not saved by the blood of Paul."

Grace notwithstanding — and election, and sovereignty, and preexistence, and whatever — the list of verses that demand obedience is so long and their consequences for disobedience so compelling that we ignore them at our peril. The list is so long that I hesitate to begin it. I won't even try to be thorough. I'll just throw out a few verses that you might want to get to know.

The things you choose to do really are your choice, and you won't be able to blame your bad decisions on the devil, or God, or your mom and dad, or your sixth grade teacher. Every choice you make is yours and yours alone, and you will have to live with them.

***Matthew 10:32** Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my father which is in heaven. :33 But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my father which is in heaven.*

***Matthew 12:36** But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they will give account thereof in the day of judgment. :37 For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.*

***Luke 10:27** And he [the lawyer] answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as well. :28 And he [Jesus] said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.*

***1 Corinthians 15:2** By which also are ye saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.*

Think about the strangeness of this verse, "are saved" (present perfect), "if ye keep" (future conditional). In other words, your current security is dependent on your future behavior. How can that be? The future causes the present? That's what it says.

1 Timothy 4:16 Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

1 John 2:24 ...If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. :25 And this is the promise that he has promised us, even Eternal Life.

That's enough. There are so many verses in the Bible that tell us how to live that I won't even try to write them down here. That should be your life study.

[5] ELECTION

Election is the idea that God chooses some for salvation and others for damnation, and that God's motive for such choices is an eternal mystery. This notion makes us squeamish because it means that the whole game was rigged from the beginning and our self-sense of free will is just illusion.

We would, of course, like to escape this philosophical discomfort. So, to that end, here are some possibilities.

Possibility 1: Maybe election doesn't mean what we think it does. Maybe election means something other than God's pre-picking from his sovereign will who goes to heaven and who doesn't.

Karl Barth gave us a wonderful idea. He pointed out that Israel was elect. But that does not mean that Israel is elect to go to heaven while everyone else, the not-elect, goes to hell. It means that Israel is elect to present God to the world so that Israel and the world can be saved. That's a much softer idea, and it's Biblical.

Applying that to Christianity, maybe Christian election doesn't mean that just Christians are going to heaven, maybe it means that Christians are tasked to bring everyone else with them. I like that idea. I think Karl is right.

Many Christians do not like the word predestination and prefer instead the word foreordination. Indeed, there are some Bible translations that use that word. But when people say foreordination, they are seldom clear on just what it means. It is sometimes said that foreordination means "chosen but not predestinated" as though that clarified anything. But even so, chosen to do what? In Karl Barth's theology, election means chosen to do the work of saving the world. That's well and good, but does God guarantee that that elect person will succeed? If so, then where is the elect person's free will? If not, then where is the security? So we are sort of back where we started. The game is to have it both ways.

Possibility 2: Why does God's sovereignty need to be irresistible? Maybe it doesn't. Consider these two Old Testament people: Sampson and Jonah. They were each elect by God to do something — Sampson, to free Israel from the Philistine war machine, and Jonah, to persuade Nineveh to repent. Neither accepted their assignments, but in the end both accomplished God's goal and did so with stunning, though reluctant, valor.

Now, what do those stories tell us about election? They tell us that election is not about God pre-setting destiny (nothing so mystical as that) but that election is simply God interfering with the natural course of human events to get what he wants done. It wasn't destiny that funneled these two men to act out God's will, it was God kicking them both in the butt until they surrendered to his will. It wasn't God controlling the future, it was God tweaking the present, and that is an entirely different thing than predestination.

If what I'm saying is not true, then let me ask you this: If God can just predestine the future, then why are there angels? Angels are constantly pulling and tugging at human "destiny" to try to shape the course of events to God's will. Angels work hard at their assigned tasks. That means that God has to have them do what they do in order to get done what he wants done. That means that his sovereign control is limited to *now*. He can't just wish for universal compliance, it has to be *accomplished*.

Genesis 1:1 *In the beginning, God created...*

That means *work*. God *did* something. His wishful thinking would have created nothing. His doing created everything. And that necessarily saddles God with limitations.

Joseph Smith the Mormon prophet said it this way: "All things are possible with God that are possible."

In the end what election and sovereignty and predestination, and foreordination mean is that things go as God wants them to because God works at it. If that's not true, then why is he working so hard? Remember, on the seventh day God rested.

Possibility 3: As long as God is working hard to get what he wants, then let's allow this: Maybe he pre-knows what you are (good, bad, whatever) by his sovereign knowledge. Then he works hard to bring you in contact with that precise set of circumstances that expose you for what you are. And at that destined moment, you chose life or death, a choice God knew you would make, and you expose yourself to be what God already knew you were. You do have free will; God merely exposes it.

We call that providence.

If that is what sovereignty and predestination mean, then we have just resolved the conflict.

That works, I guess, but it feels like entrapment, doesn't it? That's where a cop says to you, "Hey buddy, want some pot?" And you say, "Sure," and the cop arrests you. Cops can't do that. Cops can't initiate a crime and then arrest you for going along.

Does God really do that? Does he not know that people really do make different choices based on their life exposures? Like for instance, ***Proverbs 33:6*** *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.* If a child's life is shaped by his good training or bad training through no fault of the child, then God arranging circumstance to expose a person's "true character" seems arbitrary after all. But still, it's a possibility.

Possibility 4: But there is another more direct approach to all of this, and I'll take my risk and offer it to you now. Maybe God changes. And if he changes, then the universe, and its future, changes along with him.

This idea is tied up in the name of God. Here is the short version.

Exodus 3:12 And he [God] said, Certainly I will be with thee... :**14** And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM...

Here's the surprise. "I will be" is correct. "I am" is not correct. Those two Hebrew words are the same word and it is future imperfect. God's real name is not "I am that I am" but "I am becoming what I am becoming." And his becoming is somehow entangled (quantum physics) with the becoming of Israel, or more likely the whole human race. Now it makes sense to talk about the omnipotent, sovereign God that controls everything *that exists*, but not everything that *doesn't* exist — yet.

Not only does God change, but he also changes his mind.

Genesis 6:6 And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth
1 Chronicles 21:15 And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it...and he repented him of the evil.

Psalms 106:45 And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented...

Jeremiah 15:6 ...I am weary with repenting. [God is tired of changing his mind.]

So if God changes his mind, how much can we really rely on, or be threatened by, his sovereign predestination? It's not just our own free will that we distrust as fickle, it's his sovereign will that we might be concerned about, for if God pre-sets the future, he seems to reset it from time to time.

Also, we should note that God can't do everything. Whoa! Now that's heresy. No, it's not. It's biblical.

Isaiah 1:13 I cannot away with it (can't stand hypocrisy)

Habakkuk 1:13 Thou ... canst not look on iniquity

2 Timothy 2:13 ... he cannot deny himself

Titus 1:2 ... God, that cannot lie ...

1 Timothy 2:4 ...will have all...saved... [won't happen]

(For Mormons who want some extra credit, there are also these: *Ether 3:12*;

Mosiah 15:27; *Alma 7:20, 11:37, 45:15*. Enjoy.)

So, there are things that God cannot do. And that makes him not a magician but an engineer bounded by natural restrictions.

But what about omnipotence (*Revelation 19:6*)? Now that we've seen some things that he *can't* do, that word must be restricted to mean that he can do anything *that can be done*, which might well exclude pre-setting the outcome of everything in a deterministic universe which does not exist. Hence, no predestination, at least no in the fate decreed sense. But in the God-tweaks-things-until-he-gets-it-right sense; yes, there is predestination. And that allows, actually demands, free will. Non-Calvinistic Christians including Mormons prefer the word foreordination, and that's a better fit.

Possibility 5: Suppose the correct answer is even more bizarre than anything we can imagine. The question is: Are we free agents or does God's sovereignty control us? The right answer might be none of the above.

Consider this mathematical puzzle: Pick a number, any number. Got it? Good. Now, is that number greater than zero, less than zero, or exactly zero? Well, it's got to be one of the three, right? Wrong! What if the correct answer is none of the above? What if the number you picked is "wholly other"? Are there such numbers? What if you had picked the square root of -1? That number, I guarantee you, is not greater than, less than, or equal to zero. It is wholly other, somewhere off the chart in a place we can't even contemplate. But it does exist. See? You're looking right at it: square root of -1. That's the number.

What does that have to do with divinity? Maybe the paradox is the truth after all, but for a reason we don't imagine. Maybe free will and predestination are not mutually exclusive at all.

Now I'm going to get strange: I claim that there are only five things that exist. They are: place (space/time), stuff (matter/energy), life, sets, and laws. Hold that thought.

We have this quandrous question about free will, does it exist or not? But maybe we only have this question because we are asking another question (a wrong question) to try to get the answer. And that question is: Is there randomness and unpredictability in the universe? And if the answer to *that* question is yes, then we are comfortable with free will. But if the answer is no, then we take that as evidence that free will is an illusion.

So we link free will to randomness and that may be a mistake. Why? Because randomness requires *time!* If I know the current state of everything, can I deduce the next state of everything? If yes, then the universe is predestined, deterministic, and there is no free will. Randomness then is a progression through time.

But what if free will has nothing to do with randomness? Randomness is an attribute of stuff. Life is not stuff. Atoms and electrons and whatever mixed together in any combination make lots of stuff but do not make life. Life is not a finite state machine. Life is, well, life. Life is wholly other, and in it lies this perplexing free will, and it has nothing to do with stuff or place or even laws other than they all intersect to create new "things," or to be more specific, "sets," like for instance, "people".

What I'm saying is this: Maybe (only maybe) we are indeed predestined, but that only means that we are in too much awe of time, we give time far too much credit for its hold over us. But life and will are not in time but may be as absolute as laws, as absolute as $2+2=4$. Yes, maybe we are predestinated, but it is our own will that predestinates itself. Yes, we are in a cosmic prison, but we created it and we hold the key. Our predestinated path through eternity is our own sovereign will. That's why we can't escape it, we will it. You can run from anything but yourself. Wherever you go, there you are.

Bizarre? Of course it's bizarre. I'm just thinking out loud, not proselytizing.

[6] SECURITY

Christians want two things: salvation and salvation *now!* That is: the certain knowledge now, right now, that we are saved. The word for that is security.

One day, a long time ago, a local pastor was standing in front of a market engaging shoppers in conversation. As I walked by him towards the store entrance, he stopped me and asked, "Do you know that you are going to heaven?"

Well that's the quintessential question isn't it? I answered truthfully, "I believe I am going to heaven and that is all I can honestly assert."

He said something like, “Doesn’t that frighten you, to only believe it? Wouldn’t you rather know for certain?”

I replied, “Yes, of course I would. But the Bible does not offer me that certainty.”

He said, “How so?”

I said, “**John 20:29** *Jesus saith unto Him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. Romans 3:28* *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith...* There, is that enough for you? I read all over my Bible that I am saved by faith. I don’t read anywhere that I am saved by certain knowledge. Well, if faith is what God offers me, then faith is what I accept from him. I’d prefer to have certain knowledge as you point out, but that’s God’s doing and not mine. And if I demand knowledge or nothing, I might not be as lucky as Thomas. I might end up where I’d rather not be. No. I don’t need what God hasn’t given me, I’m content with what he has given me. Now maybe you have seen and touched the Lord like Thomas did and thus you really do “know.” I have not. I merely believe, and am content that he has assured me that I’m okay. So please, I have some shopping to do.”

As I entered the store, I thought I saw him wandering away muttering something.

Another story: When I was a kid, in my church I frequently heard people say things like, “I know beyond the shadow of a doubt.” I don’t hear people say that much anymore, I think people are more realistic. Now, maybe some people have had a special revelation and should say “I know” because they do. But that’s their business with God and not mine. As for me, I will not be pressured even by prophets to say what is not true, because that would compromise what I have, which is that I really do believe. It is a poor faith, I think, when a person has to convince himself that he knows what he does not know. I decided I’d be much better off with the truth; which is, I believe and that’s that.

This is the Christian struggle, to cling to faith and to know, as well as we can know, that it’s all true, and to not pretend that we know more than we do.

There are three devices that Christians use to persuade themselves that they are right with God. All Christians believe that salvation is by grace through faith, but some Christians tweak it differently than other Christians.

First: Catholics and Mormons and other “ordinary” Christians believe that we are saved by grace as long as they don’t do anything really bad. Catholics call such things mortal sins, those sins that take you out of grace. Mormons are vague. The problem for such Christians is no one is ever sure if they are *good enough* to actually make it or if they ever will be good enough. And the evangelicals rightly rub their nose in it.

Second: So Martin Luther came along and resolved the *good enough* tension by teaching that salvation has nothing to do with works but comes by faith alone. That certainly relieved the tension of not knowing if you are good enough — we’ll just accept the grace, thank you. But that created a new tension, which is: Yes, I believe today, and yes, I am saved today. But what if I stop believing tomorrow? Am I still saved or have I lost my salvation? That question Lutherans and Evangelicals can’t answer.

Third: So John Calvin came along and resolved Luther’s tension by teaching predestination. If I believe today, then I know I will also believe tomorrow because the God who caused me to believe today will also cause me to believe tomorrow because he has predestined it. That certainly relieved the tension of not knowing if I will continue to believe but it created yet a new tension, which is: I know people who were just as believing and therefore just a predestined and secure as I am, and they fell away. So

therefore they were not predestined after all. And that leaves me with a problem: how can I be sure that I really am one of the predestined? Answer: You can't, until the end, and then of course, it's too late. Calvinists want to know now and they can't know now.

Here's the overall problem: You can't know what you desperately want to know; namely, that you're in and not out. Sorry, but you can't know that, you can only believe it. Here's the solution: Pick one of the three tensions, whichever you like, and go with it.

[7] FINAL THOUGHT

Don't fret so much about the Bible's doctrine of sovereignty, predestination, election, etc. Those notions are there to encourage us with thoughts of security, not to discourage us with thoughts of divine unfairness. The message is this: you're in, not you're out. But being in is not so secure that you can construe it as permission to live sinfully, any more than Jesus trusting God was permission to jump from the pinnacle. It is, however, permission to feel confident. If you trust Jesus for your salvation then you should feel very confident indeed.

On the other hand, if you are looking to yourself to be *good enough* then either you are very smug or very worried. Either way, you might consider redirecting your trust towards someone a bit more secure than yourself. It's an old adage but it's true: work as though everything depends on you and believe as though everything depends on God.

Paradoxically as it seems, that really is the truth, the cloud is the truth, and that is the broad message of the Bible. Just be glad you're in and live right. There's really nothing more to it than that.

An ancient author wrote Ecclesiastes. After he had philosophized for twelve chapters and was more confused than at the beginning, he concluded with this:

***Ecclesiastes 12:13** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God; and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. **:14** For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

But if that is still not satisfying and you do want something more like real security, there is the next verse. It is, in my opinion, the best verse in the Bible on the subject of personal security. It seems to endure all the theological tugging from every side, so that whatever your theological bent — faith or works, free will or sovereign predestination, or whatever — this verse will speak to you and give you confidence before God without trying to rob you of your free will. Here it is.

***Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.*

I think that all Christians — Catholics, Lutherans, Evangelicals, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, whoever — can read that verse and say, "Yes, I believe *that*," and feel confident in God's grace for them.

I think Paul struggled many times to get the words just right to balance the agonizing conflict of free will versus election, sovereignty, security, predestination, and all that. And I think in this verse he finally got it right.

Notice this: It is a holy walk that God wants from us, not a holy arrival. It's the progression that matters. If you are on that holy walk when you are called home to God, then you will find your holy arrival. No Christian is smug enough to say or even think "I am holy, I am good enough, I am righteous before God." But there are a great many good Christians, nervous Christians, who can and should believe, "I am at least on that holy walk." Those Christians have a God-given right to feel secure in God's love.

So really, don't worry about it. But do live it.