

Free Moral Agency

By A.P. Adams

Do not the views set forth in the foregoing article clash with the doctrine of man's free moral agency? Do they not make him out to be a sort of a machine without any will of his own? Before answering these questions let me call the attention of the reader to the **fact** that the foregoing views are most plainly Scriptural. The many illustrations I have given (and I might give more) clearly set forth the absolute sovereignty of God. Let me also call attention to the fact that the phrase, "free moral agency," is not a Scriptural one, any more than the phrase "immortal soul" is Scriptural. Free moral agency is simply a theological expression, man-manufactured for his own convenience, and it may be that it does not express the truth. Let us by all means fit our theology to the Bible; and not try, as many do, to conform the Bible to our theology. Now then to the question. **Is man a free moral agent?** I answer most emphatically, **no**. Is he a **machine** then? Again I say **no**. What then is the truth? An **agent** is an **actor**, one who is able to act; a **free agent** is one who can act as he pleases without any restraint; a **free moral agent** is one who is free to act as he pleases on all moral questions, i.e. all questions involving the qualities of right and wrong. Now we do not hesitate to say that man is not a free moral agent. One passage of scripture would confirm this position if we had no other. **"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee, the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain"** (Psa. 76:10). If man is under **restraint** then he is not a free agent; and surely the illustrations we have given in the preceding article clearly show that God does restrain and control, and use man just as he pleases. And yet man is free; the Bible teaches it and I firmly believe it; but **how** free? Free as to his **will**, I answer; but **not** free as to his **acts**. He is a free moral **chooser**, but not a free moral **actor**. Man's will is free, he may choose what he pleases. His purposes, determinations, volitions, are entirely under his own control and guidance. But his **actions** are controlled and directed and over-ruled by God.

We have seen this to be true in the illustrations we have already given. Let us **notice another**.

The Jews were exceedingly desirous of getting Paul out of the way; they wanted to kill him. Paul was arrested and forty Jews banded together under a great curse that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed him. (Acts 23:12). I do not know whether these wicked Jews kept their oath or not, but if they did they starved to death for they never killed the apostle. They were murderers in the sight of God just as much as though they had committed the deed; but he interfered so that they were unable to carry their **wicked** purpose into action. But God did not interfere to prevent cruel Nero from taking Paul's life later on. This illustration shows how God sometimes **restrains** and sometimes **permits** evil. He restrains it when he cannot over-rule it to his glory. He permits it when he can so over-rule it. The very night before these forty Jews had formed their murderous intention, the Lord had stood by the apostle and said, *"be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou has testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also in Rome"* (Acts 23:11). God's word was thus passed to the apostle, assuring him that he had no immediate cause for alarm, and mapping out his future service. Would God allow forty Jews to thwart his purpose, or cause his word to fail? No, nor forty millions of them. Paul is delivered and God's word comes to pass; as God, himself, says: *"My counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure"* (Isa. 45:10). But now why did not God interfere to save Paul's life from Nero? Because the apostle's work was done then, and he could glorify God in such a death. Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from a Roman dungeon, while awaiting his execution, in which he exclaims, *"I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand; I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished my course, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness"* (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Paul's mission was accomplished; hence, God allowed Nero to carry out his wicked purpose; and yet he was no more guilty of the murder of the apostle, than were the forty Jews who were **not** permitted to carry out their purpose. Turn to the case of Joseph again. His brethren were determined to kill him, but God "restrained" them. Then they decided to sell him into slavery; this God allowed because he could over-rule it for good. Thus does the wrath of man praise God, and the remainder (what cannot be made to

praise him), he restrains. Man may purpose or determine what he pleases, and as he purposes, so he is judged. ***"For that he hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, therefore shall he eat of the fruit of his own way, and be filled with his own devices"*** (Prov. I:29, 31). ***"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he"*** (Prov. 23:7), and so will he be judged. But whether he will carry out his thoughts and plans, will depend upon whether God will let him or not; and whether God will let him will depend upon whether he can overrule it for the good of his creatures and his own praise. If he can, he permits it; if he cannot, he restrains. But whether he permits or restrains the man is equally accountable for his purposes. Christ makes this plain in his sermon on the mount. He there makes the guilt to consist in the purpose of the **will**, not in the outward act. ***"Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart"*** (Matt. 5:28), whether he is allowed to carry out his evil desires or not.

This is the Bible doctrine of man's freedom. He is not a free **agent**; **his actions are entirely under the control of a higher power**; this does not render the person guiltless, however, when he commits a wrong deed, even though the deed were foreordained by God. The crucifixion, we have seen, was foreordained and predetermined, and yet Peter lays the guilt of that sin upon the Jews. ***"Ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain"*** (Acts 2:23). And Stephen denounces them as ***"the betrayers and murderers"*** of ***"the Just One"*** (Acts 7:52). But though man is not a free agent, his will is free; he has the full power of choice and volition. Now let us notice how clearly this view is confirmed and fully established in the book of Proverbs. ***"For the ways of man. are before the eyes of the Lord, and he pondereth all his goings"*** (5: 21). ***"A man's heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps"*** (16: 9). ***"There are many devices in a man's heart, nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand"*** (19:21). Now mark the next passage, ***"Man's goings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way?"*** (20: 24). ***"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water, he turneth it whithersoever he will"*** (21:1). And finally we have the whole doctrine in a single sentence in 16:33 ***"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord."*** This is a scriptural version of the old maxim, **Man proposes but God**

disposes." And thus it appears that the Proverbs of Solomon are unmistakably in harmony with the view I have presented of man's freedom.

I will call attention to only two more passages in this same line. (See Psa. 37:23, 24). I have read this passage many times, and in former years taken it for a text, and in preaching upon it I have laid great stress on the word **"good."** ***"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord."*** It is only recently that I noticed, while reading Young's translation of the Old Testament, that the word **"good"** is not in the original. This is indicated in our English Bibles by that word being in italics. The passage is general, not particular: ***"the steps of a man (any man, all men) are ordered of the Lord."*** Young renders it thus; ***"From Jehovah are the steps of a man, they have been prepared and his way he (i.e. God) desireth. When he falleth, he is not cast down, for Jehovah is sustaining his hand."*** The translators had to **"tinker"** this passage because they did not understand the great truth that ***"all things are of God"*** (II Cor. 5:18). That the meaning of this passage is as indicated above is fully confirmed by other Scripture. We have already noticed two such confirmatory passages from Prov. 16: 9, and 22:24. We will refer to one more in Jer. 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."*** Young renders it; ***"I have known, O Jehovah, that not of man is his way, not of man the going and establishing of his steps."*** Is it not plain, is it not absolutely sure from these scriptures that man is not a free agent (actor)? and yet it is equally plain and sure that man's will is free, he has the full power of choice. Thus is God's sovereignty and man's freedom fully harmonized and Scripturally established, and it gives the true Christian a most comforting view of God. He is Supreme Ruler, Universal King. All things are under His control, all things are of Him. The wicked purposes of man are not carried out unless God permits, and he does not permit unless he can over-rule it for good. O, how safe and secure the trustful child of God feels when he realizes this truth! ***"All things are of God"*** (II Cor. 5:18), whatever comes to him, whether for the present joyous or grievous he knows that it is by his Father's appointment or permission, and hence, must be for his good. Whether it be a blow or a gift, a pain or a joy, tears or smiles, reproaches or blessings, persecutions or benefits, slander or praise, sickness or health, death or life, in

every case, and in all it is the will of God, and that will is always the expression of a Father's love, and therefore sweet, and precious and good. These truths give us an idea of God that is at once grand and reassuring. He is "***Our Father***," the Almighty, infinite in Wisdom and boundless in Love. O, **what** a God for fallen man! from whom we may expect nothing but good, and always good, and only good and all good. "***Thou art good, and doest good***" (Psa. 119:68). "**I will love thee, O, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my Rock and my Fortress, and my Deliverer; my God, my Strength, in whom I will trust; my Buckler and the horn of my Salvation and my High Tower**" (Psa. 18:1, 2).

This Bible view of God is not only thus personally blessed to the Christian, but it assures us of another thing. God's plans and purposes are being carried out. Amid all the mutations of earthly things, its sin and sorrow, and tears, and woe, runs the golden thread of God's "***purpose of the ages***" (Eph. 3: 11 NV margin), binding all together and to the eternal throne, and leading the creature unerringly to the final goal, **the image of the Creator**.

Not only is it true that God's plans are not retarded or hindered by the wickedness of man, but God uses wicked men to **advance** His plans. He not only does not allow the wrath of man to work against Him, but He causes it to praise Him. How wonderful is all this! There is nothing to fear. God reigneth. "***He worketh all things after the counsel of His own will***" (Eph. 1:11). If we can only see this great truth, and, in some degree, realize it, we shall have no cares and no anxiety either about ourselves or concerning God's work. **All** things work together for good. We have seen how **some** things, apparently evil, and only evil, have nevertheless under God worked together for good: though in the beginning they seemed to be all bad, yet in the end good has been the result. Can we not believe that this is true in **all** cases?

Is it not **certain** that this is thus true? If God is almighty and all wise need He allow anything to take place that he cannot bring good out of in the end? **Would** He allow any such thing to happen? Surely not; to suppose such a thing would be to make God less than infinite, i.e., to dethrone him altogether. Hence it follows, and the conclusion is wonderful as well as

inevitable, mark it well, that all the events transpiring around us in the world, all the movements and actions of man, good and bad (as we term them) are all woven into the warp and woof of God's great plan, light and shade, bright threads and somber ones, tears and laughter, woe and joy, and even good and evil, all woven in to make the grand pattern of that rare tapestry that shall carpet and adorn eternity. Now we are looking at the wrong side of the figure, and we see many tangled and apparently ill assorted threads, disconnected ends and unsightly knots. But, Ah! when we reach the other side! the fair pattern, the rich figure, the exquisite blending of color, in God's finished work! Then we shall exclaim, ***"O, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"*** (Rom. 11:33).

[Home](#)