

Selections from: Bondage of the Will



by Martin Luther

(1483-1546)

Written in response to Erasmus' book FREEDOM OF THE WILL

(iii) Of the importance of knowing what power free will has

It is not irreligious, idle, or superfluous, but in the highest degree wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know whether or not his will has anything to do in matters pertaining to salvation. Indeed, let me tell you, this is the hinge on which our discussion turns, the crucial issue between us; our aim is, simply, to investigate what ability free will has, in what respect it is the subject of Divine action and how it stands related to the grace of God. If we know nothing of these things, we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity, and

shall be in worse case than any people on earth! He who dissents from that statement should acknowledge that he is no Christian; and he who ridicules or derides it should realize that he is the Christian's chief foe. For if I am ignorant in the nature, extent and limits of what I can and must do with reference to God, I shall be equally ignorant and uncertain of the nature, extent and limits of what God can and will do in me - though God, in fact, works all in all [ICor 12:6]. Now, if I am ignorant of God's works and power, I am ignorant of God himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks or serve Him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him. We need, therefore, to have in mind a clear-cut distinction between God's power and ours, and God's work and ours, if we would live a godly life.

(iv) Of the necessitating foreknowledge of God

It is fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks free-will flat, and utterly shatters it; so that those who want to assert it must either deny my bombshell, or pretend not to notice it, or find some other way of dodging it.

Surely it was you, my good Erasmus, who a moment ago asserted that God is by nature just, and kindness itself? If this is true, does it not follow that He is immutably just and kind? that, as His nature remains unchanged to all eternity, so do His justice and kindness? And what is said of His justice and kindness must be said also of His knowledge, His wisdom, His goodness, His will, and the other

Divine attributes. But if it is religious, godly and wholesome, to affirm these things of God, as you do, what has come over you, that now you should contradict yourself by affirming that it is irreligious, idle and vain to say that God foreknows by necessity? You insist that we should learn the immutability of God's will, while forbidding us to know the immutability of His foreknowledge! Do you suppose that He does not will what He foreknows, or that He does not foreknow what He wills? If he wills what He foreknows, His will is eternal and changeless, because His nature is so. From which it follows, by resistless logic, that all we do, however it may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, is in reality done necessarily and immutably in respect of God's will. For the will of God is effective and cannot be impeded, since power belongs to God's nature; and His wisdom is such that He cannot be deceived. Since, then His will is not impeded, what is done cannot but be done where, when, how, as far as, and by whom, He foresees and wills...

I could wish, indeed, that a better term was available for our discussion than the accepted one, necessity, which cannot accurately be used of either man's will or God's. Its meaning is too harsh, and foreign to the subject; for it suggests some sort of compulsion, and something that is against one's will, which is no part of the view under debate. This will, whether it be God's or man's does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion, but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free. Yet the will of God, which rules over our mutable will, is changeless and sure - as Boetius sings, Immovable Thyself, Thou movement giv'st to all; and our will, principally because of its corruption, can do no good of itself. The reader's understanding, therefore, must supply what the word itself fails to convey, from his knowledge of the intended

signification - the immutable will of God on the one hand, and the impotence of our corrupt will on the other. Some have called it necessity of immutability, but the phrase is both grammatically and theologically defective.

(v) Of the importance of knowing that God necessitates all things

I would also point out, not only how true these things are (I shall discuss that more fully from Scripture on a later page), but also how godly, reverent and necessary it is to know them. For where they are not known, there can be no faith, nor any worship of God. To lack this knowledge is really to be ignorant of God - and salvation is notoriously incompatible with such ignorance. For if you hesitate to believe, or are too proud to acknowledge, that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe, trust and rely on His promises? When He makes promises, you ought to be out of doubt that He knows, and can and will perform, what He promises; otherwise, you will be accounting Him neither true nor faithful, which is unbelief, and the height of irreverence, and a denial of the most high God! And how can you be thus sure and certain, unless you know that certainly, infallibly, immutably and necessarily, He knows, wills and will perform what He promises? Not only should we be sure that God wills, and will execute His will, necessarily and immutably; we should glory in the fact, as Paul does in Romans 3:4 - Let God be true, but every man a liar, and again, Not that the word of God has failed [Romans 9:6], and in another place, The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His [II Tim 2:19]. In Titus 1:2 he says: Which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began...

If, then, we are taught and believe that we ought to be ignorant of the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole gospel fall to the ground completely; for the Christian's chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered or impeded.

(ix) That a will which has no power without grace is not free

You describe the power of free-will as small, and wholly ineffective apart from the grace of God. Agreed? Now then, I ask you: If God's grace is wanting, if it is taken away from that small power, what can it do? It is ineffective, you say, and can do nothing good. So it will not do what God or His grace wills. Why? Because we have now taken God's grace away from it, and what the grace of God does not do is not good. Hence it follows that free-will without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil, since it cannot turn itself to good. This being so, I give you full permission to enlarge the power of free-will as much as you like; make it angelic, make it divine, if you can! - but when you add this doleful postscript, that it is ineffective apart from God's grace, straightway you rob it of all its power. What is ineffective power but (in plain language) no power? So to say that free-will exists and has power, albeit ineffective power, is, in the Sophists' phrase, a contradiction in terms. It is like saying 'free-will' is something which is not free - as if you said that fire is cold and earth hot. Fire certainly has power to heat; but if hell-fire (even) was cold and chilling instead of burning and scorching, I would not call it fire, let alone hot (unless you meant to refer to an imaginary fire, or a painted one). Note, however, that if we meant by the power of free-

will the power which makes human beings fit subjects to be caught up by the Spirit and touched by God's grace, as creatures made for eternal life or eternal death, we should have a proper definition.

And I certainly acknowledge the existence of this power, this fitness, or dispositional quality and passive aptitude (as the Sophists call it), which, as everyone knows, is not given to plants or animals. As the proverb says, God did not make heaven for geese!

It is a settled truth, then, even on the basis of your own testimony, that we do everything of necessity, and nothing by free-will; for the power of free-will is nil, and it does no good, nor can do, without grace. It follows, therefore, that free-will is obviously a term applicable only to Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does (as the Psalmist sings) whatever he wills in heaven and earth [Psalms 135:6]. If free-will is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be - and no blasphemy could exceed that! So it befits theologians to refrain from using the term when they want to speak of human ability, and to leave it to be applied to God only. They would do well also to take the term out of men's mouths and speech, and to claim it for their God, as if it were His own holy and awful Name. If they must at all hazards assign some power to men, let them teach that it be denoted by some other term than free-will; especially since we know from our own observation that the mass of men are sadly deceived and misled by this phrase. The meaning which it conveys to their minds is far removed from anything that theologians believe and discuss. The term free-will is too grandiose and comprehensive and fulsome. People think it means what the natural force of the phrase would require, namely, a power of freely turning in any direction, yielding to none and subject to none. If they knew that this was not so, and that the term signifies only a tiny spark of power, and that utterly

ineffective in itself, since it is the devil's prisoner and slave, it would be a wonder if they did not stone us as mockers and deceivers, who say one thing and mean another - indeed, who have not yet decided what we do mean!

Since, therefore, we have lost the meaning and the real reference of this glorious term, or, rather, have never grasped them (as was claimed by the Pelagians, who themselves mistook the phrase) why do we cling so tenaciously to an empty word, and endanger and delude faithful people in consequence? There is no more wisdom in so doing than there is in the modern foible of kings and potentates, who retain, or lay claim to, empty titles of kingdoms and countries, and flaunt them, while all the time they are really paupers, and anything but the possessors of those kingdoms and countries. We can tolerate their antics, for they fool nobody, but just feed themselves up - unprofitably enough - on their own vainglory. But this false idea of free-will is a real threat to salvation, and a delusion fraught with the most perilous consequences.

If we do not want to drop this term altogether - which would really be the safest and most Christian thing to do - we may still in good faith teach people to use it to credit man with free-will in respect, not of what is above him, but of what is below him. That is to say, man should realize that in regard to his money and possessions he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own free-will - though that very free-will is overruled by the free-will of God alone, according to His own pleasure. However, with regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he has no free-will, but is a captive, prisoner and bondsman, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.

(x) Of God preached and not preached, and of His revealed and secret will.

As to why some are touched by the law and others not, so that some receive and others scorn the offer of grace, that is another question, which Ezekiel does not here discuss. He speaks of the published offer of God's mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to Himself and forbidden us to know it; and it is much more worthy of reverence than an infinite number of Corycian caverns!

Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us. That is His glory and beauty, in which the Psalmist proclaims Him to be clothed [Ps. 21:5]. I say that the righteous God does not deplore the death of His people which He Himself works in them, but He deplores the death which He finds in His people and desires to remove from them. God preached works to the end that sin and death may be taken away, and we may be saved. He sent His word and healed them [Ps. 107:20]. But God hidden in Majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, and death, and all in all; nor has He set bounds to Himself by His Word, but has kept Himself free over all things.

The Diatribe is deceived by its own ignorance in that it makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is,

between the Word of God and God Himself. God does many things which He does not show in His word, and He wills many things which he does not in His Word show us that He wills. Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner - that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided. In any case, who can direct himself according to a will that is inscrutable and incomprehensible? It is enough simply to know that there is in God an inscrutable will; what, why, and within what limits It wills, it is wholly unlawful to inquire, or wish to know, or be concerned about, or touch upon; we may only fear and adore!

So it is right to say: If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish; this, I repeat, is right if you spoke of God preached. For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him; as He says in Matt. 23:37 How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not! But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Romans 11: Who art thou that repliest against God? [Romans 9:20].

(vi) Of the hardening of Pharaoh

... This is why Moses generally repeats after each plague: And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, so that he would not let the people go; as the Lord had spoken [Exodus 7:13, 22; 8:15; 9:12]. What

was the point of: As the Lord had spoken, but that the Lord might appear true, as having foretold that Pharaoh should be hardened? Had there been in Pharaoh any power to turn, or freedom of will that might have gone either way, God could not with such certainty have foretold his hardening. But as it is, He who neither deceives nor is deceived guarantees it; which means that it is completely certain, and necessary, that Pharaoh's hardening will come to pass. And it would not be so, were not that hardening wholly beyond the strength of man, and in the power of God alone, in the manner that I spoke of above: that is, God was certain that He would not suspend the ordinary operation of omnipotence in Pharaoh, or on Pharaoh's account - indeed, He could not omit it; and He was equally certain that the will of Pharaoh, being naturally evil and perverse, could not consent to the word and work of God which opposed it; hence, while by the omnipotence of God the energy of willing was preserved to Pharaoh within, and the word and work that opposed him was set before him without, nothing could happen in Pharaoh but the offending and hardening of his heart. If God had suspended the action of His omnipotence in Pharaoh when He set before him the word of Moses which opposed him, and if the will of Pharaoh might be supposed to have acted alone by its own power, then there could perhaps have been a place for debating which way it had power to turn. But as it is, since he is impelled and made to act by his own willing, no violence is done to his will; for it is not under unwilling constraint, but by an operation of God consonant with its nature it is impelled to will naturally, according to what it is (that is, evil). Therefore, it could not but turn upon one word, and thus become hardened. Thus we see that this passage makes most forcibly against free-will on this account that God, who promises,

cannot lie; and, if He cannot lie, then Pharaoh cannot but be hardened.

(xviii) Of the comfort of knowing that salvation does not depend on free-will

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want free-will to be given to me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my free-will (for one devil is stronger than all men, and on these terms no man could be saved); but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleases God, or whether He required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken my salvation out the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. No one, He says, shall pluck them out of my hand, because my father which gave them me is greater than all [John 10:28-29]. Thus it is that, if not all, yet some,

indeed many, are saved; whereas, by the power of free-will none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish.

Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favor promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.

(xix) Of faith in the justice of God in His dealings with men

You may be worried that it is hard to defend the mercy and equity of God in damning the undeserving, that is, ungodly persons, who, being born in ungodliness, can by no means avoid being ungodly, and staying so, and being damned, but are compelled by natural necessity to sin and perish; as Paul says: We were all the children of wrath, even as others [Eph. 2:3], created such by God Himself from a seed that had been corrupted by the sin of one man, Adam. But here God must be revered and held in awe, as being most merciful to those whom He justifies and saves in their own utter unworthiness; and we must show some measure of deference to His Divine wisdom by believing Him just when to us He seems unjust. If His justice were such as could be adjudged just by human reckoning, it clearly would not be Divine; it would in no way differ from human justice. But inasmuch as He is the one true God, wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to man's understanding, it is reasonable, indeed inevitable, that His justice also should be incomprehensible; as Paul cries, saying: 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! [Romans 11:33]. They would not, however, be unsearchable if we could at every

point grasp the grounds on which they are just. What is man compared with God? How much can our power achieve compared with His power? What is our strength compared with His strength? What is our knowledge compared with His wisdom? What is our substance compared with His substance? In a word, what is all that we are compared with all that He is? If, now, even nature teaches to acknowledge that human power, strength, wisdom, knowledge and substance, and all that is ours, is nothing compared with the Divine power, strength, wisdom, knowledge and substance, what perversity is it on our part to worry at the justice and the judgment of the only God, and to arrogate so much to our own judgment as to presume to comprehend, judge and evaluate God's judgment!

I shall here end this book, ready though I am to pursue the matter further, if need be; but I think that abundant satisfaction has here been afforded for the godly man who is willing to yield to truth without stubborn resistance. For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He cannot be deceived or obstructed in His foreknowledge and predestination; and that nothing happens but at His will (which reason itself is compelled to grant); then, on reason's own testimony, there can be no free-will in man, or angel, or in any creature.

So, if we believe that Satan is the prince of this world, ever ensnaring and opposing the kingdom of Christ with all his strength, and that he does not let his prisoners go unless he is driven out by the power of the Divine Spirit, it is again apparent that there can be no free-will.

So, if we believe that original sin has ruined us to such an extent that even in the godly, who are led by the Spirit, it causes

abundance of trouble by striving against good, it is clear that in a man who lacks the Spirit nothing is left that can turn itself to good, but only to evil.

Again, if the Jews, who followed after righteousness with all their powers, fell into unrighteousness instead, while the Gentiles, who followed after unrighteousness, attained to an un-hoped-for righteousness, by God's free gift, it is equally apparent from their very works and experience that man without grace can will nothing but evil.

And, finally, if we believe that Christ redeemed men by His blood, we are forced to confess that all of man was lost; otherwise, we make Christ either wholly superfluous, or else the redeemer of the least valuable part of man only; which is blasphemy, and sacrilege.

Martin Luther, The Bondage of The Will, 1525