

# YOUR GOD IS STILL TOO SMALL

## Chapter 6

### *Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and the Infinite Just God*

-----

*God makes choices; his image bearers make choices;  
Failure to accept that stems from a view of God that is still too small!*

In 1971, the Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology at Harvard University B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) published the popular book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. In the slim paperback, written for a popular market, Skinner set out a “technology for behavior,” that he considered long overdue. The book emphasized basic principles that would justify and explain how to modify the behavior of humans. Some saw the book as the precursor to George Orwell’s *1984*, where a select few were set to mold and shape the behavior of the masses. Skinner’s desire to see one part of humanity manipulate and control the behavior of another part is itself, disturbing. What is equally provocative and disturbing in the book are the premises that underlie Skinner’s beliefs about behavior modification.

Skinner was what philosophers would term “a determinist.” Skinner believed that all the actions of every person are preset and determined. He thought that science had finally advanced to a point of recognizing that everyone is a makeup of genetics and environment. For Skinner, every thought, every decision, and every action is not something that proceeded forth from a free will or an autonomous being. Instead, the DNA of a person, interacting with every environmental factor, produces every mental and physical change or action. Our brains, the seat of actions in the body, are a pool of chemicals and matter that respond to the laws of chemistry and physics. Skinner believed that these laws of chemistry and physics would always dictate how the chemicals and molecules of the brain acted and interacted. He thought that as assuredly as two plus two is always four, the brain’s following of the laws of the universe would dictate the “decisions” and “actions” that flowed forth.



**B. F. Skinner**

Think of it in everyday terms. You are reading this right now. *Why* are you reading? If we put the question into a “cause and effect” analysis, your reading these words are the “effect.” What is the cause? What has caused you to read these words right now? Skinner would not accept the simple answer, “I chose to read these words.” For Skinner, the idea of making a “choice” is an illusion. He believed that you really had no “choice,” at least as that word is generally used. Instead, you have a genetic makeup that enables you to read, you have been in environments that have taught you to read, and you have come to this point in your life where this material has interested you enough to at least read to this point. Those interests were stirred by other environmental factors that have affected you. This examination of “causes” behind each effect can go backwards beyond our ability to verbalize. In the process, though, Skinner believed that given the world as it is, the environment that has subsumed you (the values that you were taught, the positive reinforcement you received when certain things happened, the negative reinforcement received when other things happened, *etc.*), and your genetic makeup, that rewinding the tape, you would make the “choice” to read this every time. There would be no difference, for you really never made a “choice.” Your brain chemistry and the molecular reaction to the environmental stimuli would always have the same result, just as assuredly as the laws of chemistry and physics are inviolable.

The belief that a person has “an attitude,” “pride,” “a sense of responsibility,” “concerns,” “a will” for this or that, were anachronisms to Skinner. These were really nothing more than nice ideas from a prescientific time before scientists recognized decisions are chemical reactions in a brain that must follow basic laws of physics. As such, there is the genetic makeup of the brain, and there are the outside stimuli (the “environment”) that have set up chemical chain reactions in the brain. Those chemical reactions charade as non-physical things like “ideas” and “choices,” but in fact, they are predetermined chemical reactions that are no more open to change than the rule that two plus two is four. Skinner asked where “such nonphysical things as *purposes, deliberations, plans, decisions, theories, tensions, and value*” come from. He noted that pre-science views might indicate “from the gods, or God,” but he considered such an answer unacceptable in our scientific age. His answer had only two sources:

A person’s genetic endowment, a product of the evolution of the species, is said to explain part of the workings of his mind and personal history the rest.<sup>1</sup>

Skinner wrote dismissively of man as an autonomous being that had a free will for making decisions. It was a “prescientific” thought to him.

Autonomous man serves to explain only the things we are not yet able to explain in other ways. His existence depends upon our ignorance, and he naturally loses status as we come to know more about behavior.<sup>2</sup>

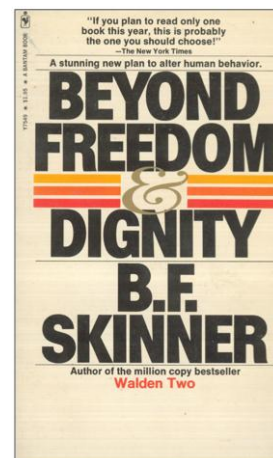
There are some readily appreciable, yet disturbing, consequences of Skinner's beliefs. Skinner does not run from those, but rather embraces them. He readily concedes that man has no real ultimate credit when he does something right. Similarly, man cannot be held "responsible for what he does," nor can man be "justly punished" in the sense of a *real responsibility*.<sup>3</sup> As the title of the book forecasts, Skinner believed science had moved, and was continuing to move human understanding of behavior into a mechanical process where "nothing is eventually left for which autonomous man can take credit." Science was on a course to destroy the idea of man's dignity and freedom. For Skinner, man was a machine, albeit a biological one.

In our last chapter, we discussed the ideas of "right" and "wrong," and Skinner's approach to that was similarly mechanical, turning the terms on their heads:

To make a value judgment by calling something good or bad is to classify it in terms of its reinforcing effects.<sup>4</sup>

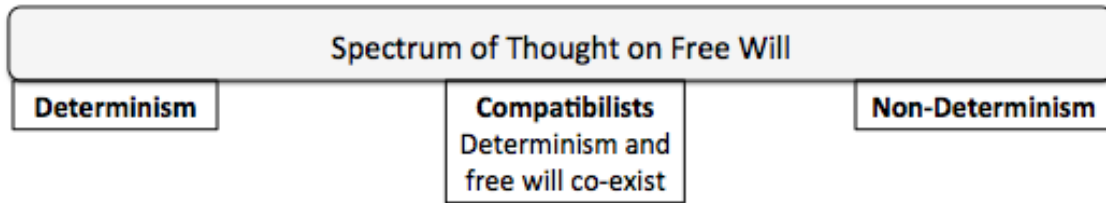
By this, Skinner was setting out his subjective view of right and wrong in terms of his ultimate goal behind the book. Skinner wanted people to use his beliefs to sculpt the environment into what it needed to be for the good of humanity. By positively reinforcing behaviors that are desirable (give treats!), and negatively reinforcing the undesirable ones (mete out punishments!), the world could become what Skinner thought it should become. Behavior could be dictated.

Reading this should make one think. Even the most ardent supporter of free will, should consider carefully what Skinner has proposed. Skinner was not some fly by night fellow with a handy pen and a good publisher. In a 2002 survey, Skinner was selected as the most eminent psychologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Sigmund Freud, was number three!<sup>5</sup> The New York Times trumpeted about his book, "If you plan to read only one book this year, this is probably the one you should choose!"

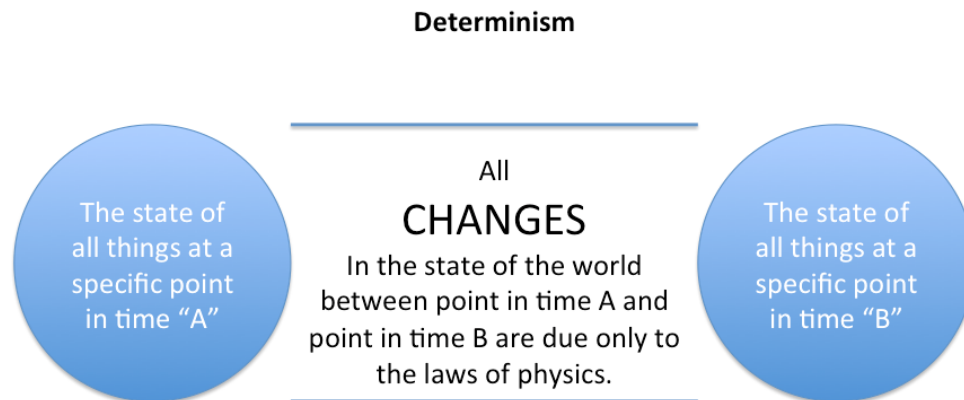


Skinner's approach was not novel, and philosophers have debated for thousands of years what measure of "free will," if any, man possessed. Skinner did not heavily engage the philosophical debating points. It seems to him, they were not worthy of the consideration on the scale of what is learned in

modern science. Philosophers have generally divided these ideas into one of three broad camps, each camp having its own divisions of particular thought.



As noted earlier, Skinner was a determinist. The determinist camp has been divided into subgroups, especially “hard” and “soft” determinists, and the precise definition of “determinism” can vary from author to author. The ultimate idea is that at any point in time, the state of the world, which includes human actors in the world with their ideas, is already determined solely by an earlier state of the world and the laws of physics. Put more simply, the past combined with the laws of physics provide every truth of the future.



At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe determinism is false. Typically, all though not necessarily, these people believe in “free will.” As a general definition, free will means the human capacity to choose a course of action from among various available alternatives. This might seem simple enough; however, even if it is divided into various camps. Plato, for example, believed that man had three aspects to his soul that were responsible for actions. Only the higher “rational” part of the soul had free will (as opposed, for example, to the appetitive aspect of the soul and its more base decisions). If we consider the above model of determinism, then the changes from the state of things in A to that in B is not only the laws of physics, but would also include the choices of humanity.

Some of the most interesting debates among philosophers have stemmed from the middle camp, among the “compatibilists.” This viewpoint generally attempts to accept some tenets of determinism, yet also allow for an exercise of free will by man.

Much of the concern over meshing determinism with free will stems from the recognized need to assess moral responsibility. This arises from the consideration that one is not morally responsible for taking an action if one was not free to choose another action instead. There are some reasons that make free will very important:

- Without free will, how can one be truly responsible for one’s actions?
- Without free will, what truth is there in words of praise for another’s efforts, courage, or creativity? If the other person was simply chemically reacting, and had no choice in his/her actions, then such praise is meaningless.
- Without free will, one cannot have any measure of dignity over any other aspect of nature. There is nothing special to being just another cog in a machine.
- Without free will, what value is there to the love one has for another? Similarly, what value is there in friendship? Love is simply one set of chemical reactions to another’s chemical reactions.

We have, then, two approaches to a common problem: the Skinner approach of science and the philosopher’s approach of reasoning. Neither of these approaches has a consensus of support. Each year brings a new assessment of the problems of earlier views. Skinner’s “science” was pointed out to be missing real science in scathing reviews like that of Noam Chomsky who claimed,

Since his William James lectures of 1947, Skinner has been sparring with these and related problems. The results are nil... No scientific hypotheses with supporting evidence have been produced to substantiate the extravagant claims to which he is addicted.<sup>6</sup>

After pointing out that science does not even closely prove what Skinner asserts, Chomsky quotes Skinner’s fallback position that “as the science of behavior progresses, it will, inevitably, more fully establish these facts.” Chomsky tells the other side of such speculations,

At the moment we have virtually no scientific evidence and not even the germs of an interesting hypothesis about how human behavior is determined.

In the decades since Skinner and Chomsky wrote, science and technology have enabled a number of different tests that have tried to determine whether one is motivated to act and then the brain processes a decision to act (generally deemed consistent with determinism) or whether the decision to act precedes the motivation. The results and interpretations of these tests are not even remotely united. Viewpoints are all over the map.

If we accept the premises established in our earlier chapters, then we are in a different place on this issue. Scripture has revealed that man is an image bearer of God. God did not make man a mere machine. Man has an ability to choose that makes man justly morally responsible.

### **WHERE DOES GOD FIT INTO THIS DEBATE?**

Our minds are tuned into the concept of cause and effect. We experience first hand in our lives, and in our observations of the universe around us, that events generally have readily traceable causes. On a fundamental level, for example, these words are readable by you because I typed them onto a computer keyboard. From there they were transferred to a printer, or perhaps to another computer (allowing you to read them on a screen right now). The printer produced written copies, which were then distributed in such a way that one came into your possession. Of course, we can trace down these causes too much deeper levels. For example, we could add that the keyboard on which I typed the words was one that was attached electronically to a microprocessor that turned each keystroke into computer language. Each of those levels can again be reduced further, and much like dividing fractions into smaller fractions, the process can almost seem unending. In math, we can divide  $\frac{1}{2}$  into two getting  $\frac{1}{4}$ . We can then divide  $\frac{1}{4}$  into two and get  $\frac{1}{8}$ . This process goes into infinity, never getting to an end point. In like manner, we can say that I am typing the words because I studied causality and then formed the words I wanted to type. I studied causality because there have been profound writers on the subject. This process arguably must have some starting point, but that starting point ultimately would not be achieved until reaching the start of the universe. From there, the debate can commence about who or what started the universe!

As we think through this, it should not come as any surprise that people have been writing and thinking about causality for thousands of years. Aristotle worked to classify the study of causes into categories. Many thinkers since Aristotle have continued to refine and define causes into types, orders of occurrence, and ways we rightly perceive them. Causality is part of the warp and woof of the universe's

fabric. The very laws of physics, on a human experiential level, deliver consistent principles of cause and effect. Humans find the universe to exist as a “consistent” cause and effect universe. By that, we mean it is not a magic universe. When a heavy item drops from the table, it always goes “down” according to the laws of gravity. It is not a magical universe where one day it goes down but under the exact same circumstances at another time floats up to the ceiling.

Because we live and experience cause and effect, every day, every hour, every minute and second, and because our universe exhibits cause and effect 24/7 as well, we are never satisfied simply saying something occurred. There are always traceable reasons. Even if the occurrence is an “accident,” there is a reason for the accident. Similarly we may deem the reason “chance,” but there are traceable causes of chance, and in one sense, chance itself is a cause. The roll of the dice? We might say they deliver chance results, but in truth, the way the dice were held, the force with which they were thrown, the rotation, the wind, the surface for landing, all these things cause the resulting position.

Why do we have the experiences of cause and effect? More importantly, are they so pervasive that everything can truly be traced back to the beginning of the universe with a full explanation existing simply in the laws of physics? Are the determinists right? Are we cogs in the cause and effect machinery of the world? Is there no real moral responsibility because there are no real choices made?

Our answer is unequivocally, “No!” We do live in a cause and effect world, but we posit that the wonderful creation of man allows man an ability to choose behaviors and ideas. Those choices *become one of the causes of effects*. Man is autonomous, albeit with limitations. Man is justly responsible for his moral choices. The world as we perceive it is recognizable and makes logical sense if we consider that (1) *we are a finite people* who (2) *live in a finite universe created* where (3) *laws of consistency in cause and effect exist*. Consider each element of this idea.

#### **Free will and the Bible**

“Free will” is not a Biblical term; it is a term of philosophers. Some philosophers define it in such a way that not even God has free will! For example, God is not “free” to sin. As discussed in the last chapter, sin is, by definition, what God *does not do!* The Biblical concept of man’s autonomous choices, what might commonly be termed “free will,” is that man is free to act within his nature. Everyone’s freedom has certain constraints. I am not free to make myself a frog, simply because I decide to. As discussed in a later call out box entitled Paul and Sin’s Power, this has implications for humanity and the sinful nature we all have.

(1) *“We are a finite people.”*

By this we mean that we have limits, both physically and chronologically. We exist in a space. I am here, not here and somewhere else. I may tell my wife, “I am out of town, but my heart is still at home!” But what I really mean is that I miss her. We also exist in a time. I am here today, but I was not here 100 years ago. Similarly, there will come a time where I, as I exist right now in this body, with these thoughts and limitations, will not exist, absent some intervening miracle of God. Our finite limitations are not only in areas of space and time. We are limited in what we know, limited in what we can do, limited in our relationships. In one sense, we are defined *by our limitations*. The limits of who we are and what we think define where we end and “that outside of us” begins.

(2) *“We live in a finite universe.”*

There are limitations in the things around us. We can see where this line begins and ends. While the night sky seems to stretch on forever, we know that it is not unending. Certainly the universe contains the concept of infinity; we know that is true in mathematics. But in objective experience, everything we experience and touch, everything that is physical in the universe is finite. Now there is some fraying about the edges of this truth in the debates of some. Some will say, “But the universe did not arise from nothing, so the universe is unlimited in time.” But that debate will rage on because it derives not from observation, but the presuppositions of the people arguing. Some cannot imagine anything without a cause or beginning and are content with assigning the beginning of things to something wholly outside the scope of finiteness and the universe, while others will never want to credit something with starting or creating a universe.

(3) *“In our universe, the laws of consistency in cause and effect exist.”*

This is the core truth of cause and effect. We live in a universe where there are consistencies that enable us to learn and live. We can fly in an airplane because the air flowing past the top of the wing is moving faster than the air flowing past the bottom. This results in lower pressure above the wing and higher pressure below. That forces the wing up towards the lower pressure. This is not magic; it is an expression of a consistent principle of moving gases and fluids pioneered in the thoughts of Swiss mathematician and physicist Daniel Bernoulli (1700-1782).

Contrast our ideas of man and the universe with God. God is different than man in that God is infinite. The finite universe and its laws of consistency in cause and effect reflect an important aspect of God’s nature.

*God is not man; infinite God does not have man’s limitations*



God is not man. He is not a super-sized version of man. He is not just a stronger, longer living, collection of stronger material substance that has greater powers. God is God, and as we have already seen, much greater in form, substance, and ability, than anything man can even ponder.

In our last chapter, we discussed man as the image-bearer of God. There is a difference between bearing an image of another and being identical to another. My son bears an image or resemblance to me. Many of our features and personality are remarkably similar. Yet we are certainly different people with different limitations and features. As image bearers of God, we have similarities with him, yet there are certainly distinctions as well. One noteworthy similarity we discussed last chapter is the morality and value system. Man shares the moral values of God's moral nature. A noteworthy distinction between man and God is on the level of finiteness.

Man is finite, but God is not. God is infinite. He does not have the limitations of man in this universe. God is not limited by space or time. We do not find him in one place to the exclusion of another, nor do we find him existing at one time but not another. Thousands of years ago, the Psalmist remarked upon this profundity in a very personal and practical manner. Psalm 139:7-12 proclaims God's infinite presence in space,

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

The same Psalm recounts God's infinite presence in time. God is not limited to the here and now of each moment unfolding.

Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely...  
Your eyes saw my unformed body;

all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.  
How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand  
(Psalm 139:4, 16-18).

God has existence, not only in the universe, but also outside of it. He is the infinite beyond.

Understanding this, many then begin to see God as the ultimate cause. This has an element of truth, but it is not fully accurate. Historically, this debate quickly unfolds into a discussion of whether that makes God the source of evil. (Two related questions for discussion center on whether God could have made a better universe and whether salvation is a matter of predestination. On the predestination topic, see the addendum after the endnotes of this chapter.) Here, we need to integrate the picture between God and man. While God is infinite, man is not. While God is morally perfect, man is not. These pieces of the puzzle fit together and form a whole only if certain other pieces are added. The key piece that gives this puzzle definition is man's ability to make choices.

Scripture teaches that man as an image bearer, even though finite, has an ability to choose and effect change. As an image bearer of God, man is, in his limited space and time, a "creator." God is not the source of evil, unless "source" is used in a limited sense of God being the source of humanity who were created in a way that allowed humanity the ability to choose evil. Man is a true cause in the chain of cause and effect.

The last book in the Bible is a revelation John had while on the island of Patmos. That revelation included letters written for seven churches, including the church in the Asia Minor town of Laodicea. The letter directly speaks of the "works" of the church. These were not simply effects and predetermined actions, they were choices being made by the church that were not aligned with God's will:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!"

The choices being made were deliberate and optional. The people could choose:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

How does man exercise these choices? Where does the choice come from? How do we understand it in light of the chemistry of the brain and the mechanics of the laws of nature? Some think it may actually be a physical process that is not yet discerned by science, that allows an ability to make non-determined choices. Earlier we referenced M.I.T.'s Noah Chomsky's critique of Skinner. Chomsky questioned whether science might unfold such a truth:

Suppose that in fact the human brain operates by physical principles (perhaps now unknown) that provide for free choice, appropriate to situations but only marginally affected by environmental contingencies.

Perhaps it is another process that we must assign at this point to a mystery of human existence. Scholars have long focused on things that can be affirmatively proven while others things are best known by negative proof. In other words, not always can we build an understanding of what things are; sometimes we need to build our understanding by eliminating what things are not. Because we can see cause and effect readily around us, and because our DNA certainly is *a* cause in how we think, and because our environment is similarly *a* cause in how we think, it does not mean that they are the only two causes. There can be a real choice that is made even within the confines of contributing causes of genetics and environment. Because I have the genetic ability to process the proteins from a nice piece of fish, and because I have experienced how tasty the fish can be when prepared properly, I might choose to eat it. However, the genetic and environmental causes do not preclude the idea that I still choose to eat it. Those causes can all intermingle and work together.

The Biblical principles explain not only the ability of man to choose, but also the moral responsibility that corresponds to that choice. If we return to the letter to the church at Laodicea, then we see that the church was living in the riches of the world, rather than the riches of God's will in their lives.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:17).

The people were urged to think through their decisions and make a different choice out of their own volition:

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see (Rev. 3:18).

Paul taught people similarly about their choices in life. They could choose to “walk by the Spirit” or to gratify the “desires of the flesh.” Christian people are “free” to make those choices!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another... But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:13-16).

Jesus similarly spoke of the will of man, distinguishing the choices of man from those of God. As Jesus looked upon the city of Jerusalem, about to enter it and meet his death, he exclaimed,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Matt. 23:37).

These passages reference real choices made by real people. People are not simply machines following their determined paths with no independent or autonomous choice in the matter. They bear moral responsibility for their choices.

### **Paul and Sin’s Power**

Some reading this chapter might exclaim, “But doesn’t Paul note that he was often doing the very thing he did not want to do?” Paul does, in fact, say this very thing. The ability to choose should never be construed as a Biblical argument that man can be perfect, if only man chooses right. Paul consistently pointed out that the condition of humanity is one of “sin.” In Romans 5, Paul spoke of sin reigning in the world having its inception with Adam, even though everyone’s sinning was not just like the transgression of Adam. Not only is no one possessing will power enough to avoid sin, but sin also does have a causative effect upon behavior. In Romans 6, Paul speaks of sin reigning in one’s mortal body and making one obey its passions. In Romans 7, Paul writes about his inability to do as he wanted,

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

### **Paul and Sin's Power (Cont'd)**

Paul is not speaking of determinism here. In fact, Paul repeatedly speaks of the importance of choosing to walk after the Spirit rather than the flesh. Paul speaks in Romans 7 of the struggle that people have in trying to walk right before God. If people did not have the freedom to choose, then Paul's entire debate is misleading and irrelevant.

Here we return to the idea of a previous call out box on "Free will and the Bible." Scripture does teach that man does not have the ability to pull himself out of his sinful nature, but man does have the ability to make choices that merit man's personal responsibility for his actions.

*The laws of consistency in cause and effect reflect an important aspect of God's nature*

We noted in the last chapter that God is a moral being, and that the values expressed through his morality are unchanging. Paul wrote to the Roman church about God's nature or character being expressed in his creation:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:20).

Everything made exhibits consistency, especially in cause and effect. These attributes are both manifested in God, as Scripture adds in other places. In Hebrew 13:8, we read of God (Jesus) as "the same yesterday and today and forever." This consistency is also seen in the cause and effect of God's nature. God's pure nature does not tolerate impurity. God's morality does not incorporate immorality. Paul explained it further in Romans 1. Noting the divine nature of God as clearly perceived in the things made, Paul noted that many have chosen a course of ungodliness, walking contrary to the nature and morality of God. Paul then assigns effects that followed from this ungodly course of action. Three times Paul says, "God gave them up," listing various results. They were given up to impurity, to dishonorable passions, and to a debased mind that would do what should not be done. "Claiming to be wise," these people "became fools." Paul emphasized that God's "righteous decree" was that people who did such things "deserve to die." Paul continued his linking of cause and effect related to sin in chapter two to the word "judgment."

It is remarkable that many today do not understand why God would be so strict in holding sinners accountable for their sin. They see a world where actions always have consequences, where cause and effect are so interrelated that the best human minds have spent thousands of years trying to give strict definition and understanding to causality, and are still unable to do so with accuracy. This is a world set up by God, which reflects his nature, and yet people fail to see him as a being that manifests these very traits of reliability and consistency.

### **Works and Righteousness**

Some reading this might be left with an impression that righteousness before God is based on the proper exercise of free will resulting in actions of purity and a relatively sinless life. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul is emphatic that no one has the ability to measure up to God's purity. This point was made in the last chapter. God's purity is such that no man is good.

It is the fact of consistent and reliable cause and effect that necessitates condemnation and death for the immorality and impurity that run rampant among humanity. In Romans 2:2, Paul adds that,

the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

It "rightly falls" because it is the consistent cause and effect. The question for humanity is whether there is a way out of the moral death trap, out of what Paul in Romans 8:1 calls "the law of sin and death"? Here we anticipate the next chapter, descriptively entitled, "The Audacity of the Resurrection!"

## **CONCLUSION**

There is something innate in man that screams, "I have a choice!" It is the reason we instinctively hold people accountable for bad deeds, even though they might argue that their actions were determined, and therefore, they have no true moral responsibility. Not surprisingly, millennia of thinkers have contemplated the choices and free will of humanity. Even among groups who hold to determinism, who hold that the laws of physics dictate each motion and decision of each person, there are compatibilists who hold some measure of human responsibility and free will.

Skinner attempted to dislodge freedom and dignity, but his shortcomings of science, logic, and his alleged but not provable presuppositions, all persuade

against his conclusions. Man is not a predetermined machine without moral responsibility. Man can make choices. Man can make decisions. There is something about man that is autonomous and free. As such, man has true moral responsibility for the choices he has made. The truth and consistency of cause and effect, both contribute to a valid confirmation of the revelation of Scripture that God must account for sin and unrighteousness in a just consequential manner. Exactly how God has done so will be subject of the next chapter.

### *Endnotes*

---

<sup>1</sup> Skinner, B. F., *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, (Knopf 1971), at 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, at 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, at 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 104.

<sup>5</sup> Haggbloom, Steven J.; Warnick, Renee; Warnick, Jason E.; Jones, Vinessa K.; Yarbrough, Gary L.; Russell, Tenea M.; Borecky, Chris M.; McGahhey, Reagan; Powell III, John L.; Beavers, Jamie; Monte, Emmanuelle, *Review of General Psychology*, Vol 6(2), Jun 2002, 139-152.

<sup>6</sup> Chomsky, Noam, "The Case Against B. F. Skinner," *The New York Review of Books*, (Dec. 30, 1971).

## **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. "*Where can I flee from your presence?*" (Psalm 139:7).

God does not suffer the finiteness of humans. God is infinite in place and time. There is no place he is not present, neither is there any time existing beyond him. The infinite God is an ultimate stopping point for causation. He is an uncaused cause, entirely existing without a beginning or an end. God is. Period. This means every closed eye or heart, every muted mouth or action, every covered sin and unholiness is open and present before God.

- 
2. *“Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called”* (Eph. 4:1).

Paul gave solace to those wondering about God’s love and commitment, but he pulled no punches on those who might ever take advantage of God’s love. Paul knew that we have choices on what we do. God did not create machines; he created free will beings in his image. Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit; God did not force them. Now we, their descendants, are born into a sin and depravity they did not have before eating the off limit fruit. However, we are still creatures with the abilities to choose. So, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to live up to the calling! In other words, God chose you, so act like it! Now before one raises a hand in contradiction saying, “but if God chose us, then God is the cause, not our free will!” This is no contradiction, however, but misplaced reasoning. There can certainly be more than one cause! Consider this statement: I am tired because I woke up too early! Contrast that statement with this second statement: I am tired because my nap was interrupted! Both statements give a cause for fatigue. One was waking up early and the second was an inadequate nap. Can both of these be true at the same time? Of course!

3. *“...the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things”* (Rom. 2:2).

The consistency of God, combined with the purity of God discussed in the prior chapter, does not simply excuse or allow, it mandates the judgment of God upon those who live ungodly lives. Moral responsibility cannot be sidestepped by blaming another, by writing it off to a poor past, or by chalking it up to a tough life. We see God’s righteous judgment rightly fall on humanity. There must be an appropriate response from the consistent cause-and-effect God.

#### ADDENDUM ON PREDESTINATION AND FREE CHOICE

Christian thought has a historical chain to it. Each generation builds on the chain that was there from earlier generations. Admittedly, some times the efforts of the Christians are to try and restore the beliefs of earlier chain links, if we keep with that analogy. Yet even then, the theology and thoughts of the 40 some odd generations that have passed before us have a strong influence.

This is important because when we discuss eternal predestination and choice, we



---

are asking a question Biblical writers did not ask. We are attempting to glean answers to our questions out of writings that were written for a different purpose.

That does not mean our task is useless, but it does mean that we need to first do the homework to understand what, for example, Paul was saying, and why he was saying it, before we then try to subject his writings as proofs of what we do or do not believe.

We start then, with Paul's world, and the reasons he wrote as he did. We can get a view of Paul's world by reading from a contemporary of his, Pliny the Elder. Pliny was a bit younger than Paul. Pliny was born in 23 AD. Before he died in the eruption of Vesuvius (79 AD), Pliny wrote *Natural History*, a collection of 37 books that worked through history and the world in which he lived. In book 2, Pliny wrote on the universe, especially from the perspective of mathematics and weather. In chapter 5, he discourses on god(s). This is useful for us in showing the perception of god(s) by this military man/government administrator.

Consider these three quotes:

That that supreme being, whate'er it be, pays heed to man's affairs is a ridiculous notion. Can we believe that it would not be defiled by so gloomy and so multifarious a duty? (Verse 20).

We are so much at the mercy of chance that Chance herself, by whom God is proved uncertain, takes the place of God. (Verse 22).

This series of instances entangles unforeseeing mortality, so that among these things but one thing is in the certain – that nothing certain exists, and that nothing is more pitiable, or more presumptuous, than man! (Verse 25).

Writings like these prompt scholars to note the pessimism and despair of Paul's time and the failure of Roman/Greek religion to furnish any assurances of divine caring. R.P. Martin wrote of this time:

Men and women were made to feel impotent and helpless, and religion was marked by a failure of nerve. (*Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (IVP 1993) at 984).

W. A. Elwell wrote similarly:

They lived in a world influenced by skepticism and uncertainty about life's meaning and the ability of the gods to control evil and answer questions about human destiny. (*Ibid.* at 225.)

---

Paul's world was one of fear and uncertainty where divinity was concerned. His Gentile readers came from religious roots of god(s) who were impotent and withdrawn, not really caring too much in the affairs of man. God(s) were unreliable and unpredictable.

Into this worldview came Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul knew the one God, and the true God, was not at all what the Gentile world thought. Their gods were much too small! Invading the Roman worldview, Paul wrote of the true God. Consider in this vein the following verses:

- **Ephesians 1:4-6** ... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace
- **1 Thessalonians 1:4** For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.
- **Romans 8:28-30** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
- **Romans 9:14-21** What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

Paul wrote to his readers addressing their needs and their concerns of life. His readers were not carrying on a debate about whether they were saved by their own volition or by the overwhelming irrefutable actions of God Almighty. Paul's readers carried the insecurities and doubts that came from their upbringing, from

---

their parents, and from their communities. Did God even care? Was God involved? Was God reliable?

Paul gave his flock the answers! God did care. He cared enough to come into the world and call each believer. He cared enough to reach down in grace and adopt his children, choosing to do so before he even created the world. God was and is involved. God is working all things out for the good among those who love him – those he has called. God was and is thoroughly reliable. He knew us before he made us. He predestined us to be in the image of his Son. We have the assurance that as he justified us (declared us “not guilty”) he also glorifies us, making us what we were meant to be.

Paul saw the world in terms of the believers God called into a way of life that God set out ahead of time. If we lose track of this original context, we lose track of a great assurance that Paul had for his flock, and that God would have us hear today.

Before we address our questions of predestination, we should take Paul at his word and appreciate his message. To those who wonder if God cares, to those who wonder if God can or will hold onto them and reliably honor their love, even though it is feeble, Paul shouts, “YES!” To those who sing the prayer of that beautiful hymn, *O Sacred Head*, as it asks, “O let me never outlive my love to thee,” we hear Paul speaking comfort.

Paul’s writings on this idea not only answered the doubting and fearful Gentiles, but they also spoke an important message to many of his Jewish readers. A real problem with many of the Jews that Paul encountered was their confidence before God that grew out of their deeds and holiness. Paul writes in a way that denies this pride as well.

Paul’s passages that emphasize God’s election take away any bragging by anyone. How dare anyone claim God’s love and attention because of their own deeds? God’s love is from God’s choice. Mankind’s goodness in deed and thought comes from God, not from man. There is no basis for boasting at all!

For a moment, let us lay aside this assurance and understanding of the context of Paul’s writings on *predestination* and let us turn to the other end of the spectrum. When people were running from godliness and holy behavior, Paul was never one to offer an excuse. Paul knew, believed in, and taught human responsibility for actions big and small.

In Galatians, Paul begins the letter “astonished” that the Galatians “are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). Paul then announces a curse on anyone preaching a contrary gospel. In the close of the letter, Paul urges that if anyone is caught in a

---

transgression then “you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Gal. 6:1).

Similarly, in the well known passage of Ephesians 2:8-10, while Paul writes of our salvation as “not your own doing,” as “the gift of God,” and “not a result of works,” he does not end it there. Paul adds that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we *should* walk in them.” Paul does not say we *must* walk in them; he says we *should*!

Paul later *urges* the Ephesians to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

This gives us the other end of the spectrum in Paul’s writings. When people were in danger of walking away from God and God’s calling, Paul wrote, encouraged, exhorted, and even threatened people to keep them *choosing* God and his will.

So the two ends of the spectrum, both of which we arrive at by reading Paul in context, are as follows:

To those in doubt, worried, or fearful, Paul offers the assurance that God has chosen them and will not stop loving them.



To those in danger of turning their back on the gospel or on their responsibilities as a child of God, Paul gives stern rebukes and warnings

Our questions are not necessarily answered by simply putting Paul’s teachings into this context. We turn now to address some modern questions a bit more carefully.

## PAUL’S RESPONSE TO OUR GENERATION

I am going to try and offer some insight that I think is fair from studying Paul on questions that I find we are asking today in our age. I do so with the trepidation and warning that scholars have struggled with these concepts for centuries and have debated the nuances of these passages. I do not reasonably anticipate fully, completely, and adequately answering this question in the next few pages. I do anticipate giving some reasonable ideas for you to study further. In doing so, my goal is to foster further study. In all candor, the riches of God and his majestic plan to bring all of this world to an ending for which he has already planned are deep enough to keep us reflecting and thinking all the way into eternity!

---

We shall approach this in a Question and Answer format, appealing to Scripture as we are able.

**Question: Does God pick out who goes to heaven?**

Answer: Yes and no! There is a Greek verb Paul uses five times: *pro-orizo* (προωρίζω). The word is not used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”) and it is very rarely used in secular Greek. Paul has put together two Greek words: *pro*, meaning “before” and *orizo*, meaning, “to appoint or determine.” This is the word Paul uses in Romans 8:29 when writing that, “those whom he foreknew he also *predestined (pro-orizo)*” (Paul uses it also in the following verse adding that, “those whom he predestined (*pro-orizo*) he also called”). Paul uses it a third time in 1 Cor. 2:7, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed (*pro-orizo*) before the ages for our glory.” In Ephesians 1, Paul uses it twice, in verse 5 (“he predestined (*pro-orizo*) us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ”) and verse 11 (“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined (*pro-orizo*) according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”)

Absent other good sources to understand greater nuances of this rare word, we are left trying to understand it from the context where Paul uses it. Perhaps it is clearest in Romans 8:29 and 30. God foreknew some whom he chose to predestine, justify, and glorify. Paul does not tell us what God’s foreknowledge was, and scholars fairly debate that point. Some think God foreknew how one would respond to the gospel, predestining those who would respond positively. Others believe the foreknowledge is a reference to God’s intimacy and relationship with us as part of God’s own decision. Douglas Moo makes this point asserting Paul does not write that God knew *about us* before hand, but rather that he knew *us* (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans 1996) at 532). Others believe that Paul was speaking about the church being predestined, rather than an individual.

What we can confidently say, however, is that on some level, we are God’s because God chose to make us his. This is the assurance from the early part of this lesson. Beyond that, we can also say that Paul never held a theology that precluded him from charging individuals with responsibility to hear and answer God’s call. Indeed, Paul spent most of his life as a missionary in the mission field seeking to bring the gospel to all who might listen.

I would urge us to leave a bit here to the mystery of God. God has somehow predestined the believer, and yet left the believer with an exercisable choice.

**Question: Is there any point in evangelizing?**

---

Answer: Absolutely! This is true regardless of where one lands on the question of predestination. God has called his people to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God has told us to spread his word. As Paul said:

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:13-17).

We should never ask, "Why should we do or not do what God has told us to do/not do?" It is always enough that God has instructed us, whether we understand all his reasons or not.

As we set out these verses, we should add another note on the complexity of this issue from Paul's mind. Paul wrote the above in Romans 10, which is in the flow of Romans 8 ("those he predestined...") and Romans 9 ("I will have mercy on whom I have mercy..."). In the flow of those ideas, we read Paul emphasizing, "Everyone who calls...will be saved," Yet to "call," one must "believe." To "believe," one must hear, and to hear requires "preaching." This is personal choice and responsibility in action, both as to preaching and as to receiving and calling on the name of the Lord. Paul does not write, "Everyone God forces to call will be saved."

**Question: But what about Scriptures that indicate God keeps people from hearing the truth and believing?**

Answer: We need to take those Scriptures into account, but understand them in light of the full counsel of God's word. So for example, consider Paul's writing in Romans 11:1-8:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven

---

thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."

At first blush this passage seems to only be one side of the coin. It is as if Paul is writing that God forces some to reject him, giving them a "spirit of stupor" and "eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear." Yet, this passage does not negate the personal choices of these people. Paul quotes God saying to Elijah that the idolaters themselves "bowed the knee to Baal." God rejected those who rejected God. God did not choose those who chose Baal. Instead, they got the spirit of stupor from God that they chose for themselves.

We see this repeatedly in the Old Testament. God chooses a person-Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jacob, David, Pharaoh, Isaiah *etc.* God knows them, initiates the call, equips the called, and disciplines the chosen but disobedient one. All are examples of predestination-people that God first called but that also were completely responsible for their actions.

**Question: How can God be fair and send people to hell?**

Answer: No one in hell will have an excuse. Paul said that people were without an excuse in rebelling against God:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20).

Paul then says that God has given such up to "a debased mind," to "dishonorable passions," and to "the lusts of their hearts." Again, this was not an action God did simply out of his own volition. Paul clearly links these decisions on God's part to the just reaction to man's willful decision not to honor God as God. This is simple cause and effect.

Paul also provides a seemingly harsh answer to those who might protest God's fairness later in Romans 9:19-21:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like

---

this?"

In the analysis and words of Elwell, Paul answered in a sharp way adding:

For those who so misunderstand God as to imagine that God works arbitrarily and on no moral basis whatsoever, let such an answer suffice. (Ewell at 228).

**Question: What happens to the native Amazonian that will live and die never hearing about the work of Christ?**

Answer: Scripture (and Paul) does not directly give the answer to this question. We do learn important things from Scripture and from the Holy Spirit through the pen of Paul that we can consider on this point. First, we know that apart from Christ and his sacrifice, no one can be saved. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through him (Jn 14:6). We know this verse to be true for all, regardless of geography, age, mental acuity, or sophistication. God has to pay the sacrifice for sin, or there is no atonement. God paid this sacrifice once, for everyone in Christ. ("Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" 1 Pet. 3:18).

We also know that God reckons faith as righteousness. This faith is based on the knowledge and understanding of the believer. For Abraham, that level of trusting faith no doubt had a different level of understanding than it does for those of us who see the deeds of the Lord upon the cross. Yet, the faith was still reckoned as righteousness, for Paul uses Abraham as the example of faith's role in salvation in Romans 4.

Where does this leave the infant who dies? Or, the person with severe mental limitations? Or, the person who lives an entire life outside the hearing of the gospel? We do not know for certain. Does God see that person's dependence and trust upon whatever level of revelation is there? We do not know. What we do know is that we are charged to take the gospel to all corners of the world. We also know that "whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).