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Free Will and Calvinism

In 1902 a famous lawyer spoke at the Chicago County jail. He told the inmates, “There is no such thing as a crime as the word is generally understood. I do not believe there is any sort of distinction between the real moral condition of the people in and out of jail. One is just as good as the other. The people here can no more help being here than the people outside can avoid being outside. I do not believe that people are in jail because they deserve to be. They are in jail simply because they cannot avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible.”

That attorney later defended John T. Scopes in the famous evolution “Monkey” trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. His name was Clarence Darrow.

Do we choose between good and bad? Or does our environment cause us to behave as we do? Are we masters of the universe or victims of circumstance?

Men have debated the question of free will for thousands of years. In ancient Greece the Stoics believed that what people do is determined by the external world. But then they urged people to live a virtuous life and have an indifferent attitude toward the changing circumstances in life. That is quite absurd. How can people do either of these if they have no choice?

In the first century the Jewish historian Josephus said the Jews had different opinions about this issue. The Sadducees believed that all men have free will and choose what they do. The Essenes said everything is a matter of fate, not choice. The Pharisees said life is affected by fate but not controlled by it.

In modern times the debate continues. Humanistic psychology denies that we have free will. Pick up any psychology textbook and see if you can find anything in it on free will. In secular psychology, it’s all a matter of nature or nurture, heredity or environment—anything but free human choice. This leads us to ask: then why give students in these classes a grade? Why pass some and fail others? And why have rules about cheating on exams?

Atheists cannot believe in free will because they believe man has no soul. If we are just matter, then we can't choose. Rocks don't choose to fall. Birds don't decide to fly. The wind doesn't decide which direction it will blow. But honest people choose to tell the truth and liars choose to lie.

Antony Flew, the famous atheist who late in life changed his mind about the question of God, said one of the things that turned him away from atheism was the question of free will and determinism. He said it's obvious we have free will because we *can* refrain from doing things we *want* to do—like eating certain foods or spending money (*There is a God*, pp. 58-62).

But this question is not just a topic of debate in philosophy and science. It is also highly controversial in and between different kinds of churches. There are numerous theories and opinions about free will in both Protestant and Catholic traditions.

This series is about key teachings of Calvinism. Specifically, we're looking at what Calvin himself said about free will, not what different kinds of Calvinists teach today. We're going back to the pure form of Calvinism in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. That is where we find his denial of free will and his arguments against it. Since Calvin is the head of the stream, it makes sense to start with him.

This is more of a classical study of what John Calvin taught. It is not a historical survey of Calvinism or a critique of contemporary Calvinism. There are many different versions and degrees of Calvinism in churches today. And there are many schools of thought in Calvinism with each having its own vocabulary. I've chosen to go back to the original source, because I believe the arguments Calvin made are more thorough and coherent than those which Calvinists make today. If you can refute Calvin, you won't have any problem refuting his followers.

This will also help us to avoid a lot of technical language used in these discussions and get to the essence of Calvinistic reasoning.

So, in this discussion, we will look at some of the primary arguments Calvin made against free will. There are four lines of reasoning we will consider: **Slide 2**

1. Arguments based on Calvin's view of the nature of God
2. Arguments from verses that say God caused human behavior
3. Calvin's response to free will arguments
4. Arguments based on cases of beings who appear to be free yet not free

The first set of arguments goes to the heart of what Calvinism is all about: his concept of the nature of God. To understand Calvinism, you have to understand two things: Calvin's view of God and his view of man.

In the *Institutes* Calvin wastes no time in stating his case. In the opening line he says, "Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." These are the two pillars of Calvinism.

The most important attribute of God to Calvin is his sovereignty. **Slide 3** God is not simply omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal. He has rule and authority over His creation. His will is eternal and no man has the right to question it. The sovereignty of God is the most paramount feature of Calvin's theology.

There's no question about whether God is sovereign. The Bible teaches that Christ is "the blessed, and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen, or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power" (I Tim. 6:15-16). Paul said, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The Bible says, "Let God be true but every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4). God is certainly Lord over all.

But Calvin took this property of God to an extreme. In his thinking, the attributes of God are a kind of hierarchy with the sovereignty of God being at the very top and every other attribute being subservient to it. God's sovereign will—according to *how Calvin* defines it—overrides the other characteristics of God's being, even His love and justice.

According to Calvin, the sovereignty of God demands that *everything happens by His will*. Nothing happens without his will. He wrote, **slide 4** "God is the disposer and ruler of all things" and "from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was

to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed. Hence, we maintain that, by his providence, not heaven and earth, and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined” (*Institutes*, 1.16.8).

Calvin asserted, **slide 5** “Men do nothing, save at the secret instigation of God, and do not discuss and deliberate on anything, but what he has previously decreed with himself, and brings to pass by his secret direction” (*Institutes*, 1.18.1).

This is the kind of thinking that caused Calvin to deny human free will. To him, if man has the power to make a decision on his own, without God, or especially against God, then God is not truly sovereign. In Calvinism, God’s sovereignty means man *cannot* have this power. If God is in control, then there is nothing outside of His control—even the behavior of mankind.

Calvin does not flinch at the implications of these statements. He says that when men do good, God is doing it, and when men do evil, God is doing it!

Usually our immediate response to this thinking is: how could God be a just God then? Wouldn’t this make God responsible for evil as well as for good? That logically follows. We will talk about this more in a few minutes. At this point I want you to see what led Calvin to such an extreme.

To Calvin, the sovereignty of God means that if anything could happen without God, then God is not really sovereign. That’s why he wouldn’t allow any room for human beings to have any real personal autonomy in anything they say, do, or think.

In another section of the *Institutes* Calvin responds to those who say that Adam *could have* chosen not to fall by his free will. He called this a “frigid fiction” and said if that is true, then “*where will be the omnipotence of God, by which, according to his secret counsel on which everything depends, he rules over all?*” (*Institutes*, 3.23.7).

But Calvin contradicts himself on this point. Earlier in the *Institutes* he talks about Adam’s condition before he sinned. He wrote, “In this upright state, man possessed freedom of will, by which, if he

chose, he was able to obtain eternal life” (I.15.8)). But that ability is the very thing Calvin argues so strongly against!

He said that the reason Adam fell was because “he had not received constancy to persevere” (I.15.8). This language is reminiscent of what Augustine said about the angels that fell. Calvin said that the only way Adam could have persevered was if God had *enabled* him to persevere. But He did not. That means it was God’s choice, not Adam’s. And yet Calvin said Adam “*was able to obtain eternal life*” by his free will. That is a plain contradiction. It basically amounts to saying that Adam was free but not free.

Still, according to Calvin, **Slide 6** if God is all-powerful, then man cannot decide his destiny; but if man decides his destiny, then God is not omnipotent.

Consider an extreme view that argues from a similar assumption: pantheism. **Slide 7** Pantheism says God is everything and everything is God.

It is important to understand the reasoning behind pantheism. Pantheists say if God is really God, then nothing can *exist* apart from God. If God is infinite, then nothing can exist that is distinct from God because then it would be something that God is not and God would not be infinite. That is the “logical” basis for pantheism.

Do you see the parallel between these two systems? Pantheism says if God *is* everything then nothing can *exist* that is not God. Calvinism says if God is sovereign then nothing can *happen* that God does not do. One is as “logical” as the other. In fact, if Calvinism is true on this point, then the implication would be pantheism!

This is not a slippery slope argument; I’m not saying that Calvinists tend to slide into pantheism. I am saying that this is the logical consequence of Calvinistic thinking.

Atheists use this same reasoning against Christians. They say we believe that God is omnipotent, that He is all-powerful and can do all things. Then they point out that we can do things God cannot: we can be mortal, we can sin and we die. Thus, skeptics tell us, your God is not omnipotent.

The thought of God creating things and beings that exist separately from Him is a stumbling block to some. Admittedly, it is profound beyond our comprehension. And, the thought of beings who can have the power to resist the omnipotent, sovereign God staggers our feeble minds. But the teaching of Scripture and the light of nature show that God is not man, and, consequently, that God does not decide what man does.

A variant of this reasoning is that free will robs God of His glory. **Slide 8** Calvin argued that if a man can do good without God doing it, then God is not needed for someone to do good. That person would receive the glory, he says, not God.

Calvin warns us not to “steal from the Lord even one particle of the praise of unmerited kindness” (*Institutes*, 3.13.1). The doctrine of free will, he says, “infringes” on the glory of God and “obscures” His glory.

He writes, “Let us remember, therefore, that in the whole discussion concerning justification, the great thing to be attended to is, that God’s glory be maintained entire and unimpaired” (*Institutes*, 3.13.2). Calvin then cited several verses to support his view, one of which is the often-misused statement of Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” In Calvin’s thinking, if man does *anything* to be saved, he robs God of His glory.

The exact opposite is true. It is because we freely choose to love and obey God that we glorify him the most. What praise do we give to God when we only do what we must do?

Psalm 19:1 says the sun, moon and stars “declare the glory of God.” If these heavenly lights show rather than obscure the glory of God, then how much more do we magnify God with our lives when we obey the Lord’s words: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16)? Surely our faith in God gives more glory to Him than the existence of rocks and dirt!

Calvinism is an extreme doctrine. This is why Calvin redefines faith and repentance. He denies that we repent or believe by our own

choice. Calvin says the Holy Spirit creates both in our hearts. If we could bring ourselves to believe and repent, Calvin argues, then we wouldn't need God's help and that again would rob God of the glory He deserves.

But repentance is a *change of mind*. It means to turn from sin and turn to God. It is a command we can either obey or ignore. That is a decision. It is not something God does for some but not for others.

The same is true of faith. Faith is a choice. But in Calvinistic thinking, even faith is the work of God, not a decision.

The lengths to which preachers will go to deny this are astounding. In a debate on salvation in 1938, N. B. Hardeman once asked Ben Bogard, a Missionary Baptist preacher and debater, if faith itself is something that a person *does*. Bogard's incredible response was: "Faith is the only thing you can do without doing anything"!

To this day preachers who have been influenced by Calvinism, perhaps without realizing it, preach that "You can't 'do' anything to be saved. Christ did it all on the cross. The Holy Spirit has to move you and then all you have to do is trust Him to save you." And at the root of these sermons is the mistaken idea that any human effort in the salvation process is an affront to the glory and the sovereignty of God.

Now we turn to arguments Calvin made based on verses that state God's work in human actions (good or bad). These verses say that *God did* the things people are said to do. We're obviously getting into some fine matters of interpretation that are the crux of the controversy regarding Calvinism.

Calvin said, "Men do nothing save at the secret instigation of God, and do not discuss and deliberate on anything, but what he has previously decreed with himself, and brings to pass by his secret direction" (*Institutes*, 1.18.1). He denies that God merely *permits* evil; he says God *wills* it to happen.

Then he refers to Old Testament examples he says prove this point. Job chapter 1 says Satan caused Job to suffer. But Calvin appeals to what Job said about this in verse 21 **Slide 9**: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord." Calvin says, "God was the author of that trial" and "Satan and wicked robbers were

merely the instruments” (*Institutes*, 1.18.1). In that section, Calvin denies that God merely allows or permits evil to occur. He is trying to prove that God wills and causes evil.

But when Job said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,” he was reacting like godly people often respond. He had lost his livelihood and his ten children. Job was expressing the deep pain in his soul when he spoke these words. He lived his life in the fear of God each day. He was mindful of the hand of God in his life. So, naturally, his first response was to say that God did this.

Don’t we respond initially in the same way when something tragic happens in our lives by saying, “Why did you allow this to happen to me, God?” When God is at the center of our hearts and minds, it’s easy not only to give Him credit when something good happens, but also to think he caused something bad. When calamity strikes, we speak with our *feelings*. We’re not trying to state a theological dogma.

Job may have been saying that since God rules the world then He *allowed* this tragedy and in that sense the Lord had “taken away.”

But even if Job meant that God *caused* this to happen, that still doesn’t settle the question. Job didn’t have all the facts. He didn’t know Satan was behind his suffering. God never told him about the devil’s part. Job and his three friends never considered this as a possibility. So if Job meant that God decreed and caused his trials, then he was stating an opinion and that opinion was wrong.

Job was a good man, but he was wrong in some things he said about God in this book. The book of Job is inspired, but the Bible records the words of men who were not inspired or not inspired at the time. So in either case, Calvin took Job’s words out of context.

Calvin uses the story of Ahab’s fall in I Kings 22 as another example. Four hundred false prophets told Ahab to go to war with the Syrians at Ramoth-Gilead. But then a prophet of God named Micaiah came in. The prophet told this wicked king that he saw a vision of the Lord on His throne and all the host of heaven around Him.

Then “the Lord said, ‘Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?’ So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the

Lord, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The Lord said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And the Lord said, 'You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.' Therefore look! **Slide 10** The Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the Lord has declared disaster against you" (I Kings 22:20-23).

This passage has been used by skeptics for centuries as a case of a moral discrepancy in the Bible. How could a holy God put a lying spirit in these false prophets?

This is a vision. It is a parabolic vision. The scene is not literal. Ahab was wicked and deceived already—before the Syrians threatened the land. His wife persecuted the prophets of the Lord. Both of them used hundreds of false prophets. They were idolaters and murderers. The Bible says, “There was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up” (I Kings 21:25).

This is not a story of God deceiving a good man. Ahab was evil. He was determined to do what he wanted and nothing Micaiah said could change that.

Ahab heard both sides: the side of error that the false prophets taught, and the side of truth that Micaiah spoke. It was Ahab's *choice* as to which one he believed. The false prophets had an influence on Ahab, but Ahab made the final decision.

The vision of Micaiah symbolized his rejection of the truth. Earlier Ahab rejected the words of the prophet Elijah. That was his choice, not something a spirit literally possessed him to do and certainly not something God made him do. He reacted the same way to Micaiah's warning.

Calvin even pointed to the adultery of David's son Absalom as an example. He says, **Slide 11** “Absalom incestuously defiling his father's bed perpetrates a detestable crime. God, however, declares that it was his work; for the words are, ‘thou didst it secretly, but I will do this before all Israel, and before the sun’” (II Sam. 12:12).

This is what I mean by pure Calvinism. It means that God doesn't just allow or permit evil. It means God decrees evil and makes it

happen! In the case of Ahab, Calvin says God was the author of lying, which is impossible for God to do (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

Now, in the case of Absalom, Calvin says God was the author of adultery, which the Lord had said was to be punished by death (Lev. 20:10)! How could God justly decree by His immutable will that a man would commit adultery and at the same time give the death penalty for something he could not avoid doing?

This verse (II Sam. 12:12) *cannot* literally mean that God condoned adultery. It surely does not mean that God decreed it! It simply means that God loosened the reins on a man who was already evil and in so doing punished David for the same sin. Exactly how God opens doors to evil men without infringing upon their free will is a line only God knows. But it is a fact of Scripture.

Think of what Calvinism asks us to believe. It claims that God makes everything happen. That would mean that God decreed that David would commit adultery with Bathsheba. Then He decreed that his son would commit adultery to punish his father for what God had willed for David to do!

Yet Calvinists press these points on their opponents, hoping to convert them. The truth is, they end up driving some people into atheism. Some just say, “If that’s who God is, I don’t want anything to do with Him.”

This also explains why some atheists accuse God of being arbitrary and unjust. It’s obvious when you listen to them that they’re talking about *Calvin’s view* of God. And, mistakenly and regrettably, they sometimes assume that the rest of us accept Calvin’s view of God’s sovereignty and predestination.

Calvin then points to the cursing of Shimei in II Samuel 16. When Absalom attempted a coup, David had to escape for his life. Suddenly the king didn’t seem to have much power. The crisis brought out the worst in people. Men who had feelings against David felt bold enough to rail at him openly. Shimei cursed David and threw rocks at him. When one of his soldiers volunteered to kill Shimei, David said, **Slide 12** “Let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, ‘Curse David’” (II Sam. 16:10).

Calvin says the curses of Shimei were uttered by the Lord's orders. Moses had written in Exodus 22:28: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people." But Calvin says the same God who condemned this in one verse now commands it in another!

David said these words in a time of great distress. He had trouble for years knowing that he was paying for his sins. At this low point in life he is speaking with intense anguish in his soul. Shimei was just one more reminder that all this was happening because of what he did with Bathsheba. When David said that God told Shimei to curse him, he didn't mean directly—as if God spoke by revelation to this worthless man.

David is not speaking literally. He is using a hyperbole to say that the Lord brought disruption and disorder in David's family as punishment for his sin—again, in such a way as not to violate the free will of Shimei or anyone else involved.

Let's compare the language in verses Calvin uses to build his case to similar statements in the Bible. King Manasseh "made Judah sin with his idols" (II Kings 21:11). Did the people of Judah make a choice? Jeroboam also "made Israel sin" (I Kings 14:16; this is the Hebrew word *asah* which means to do or make). Did the Israelites have free will in this? The man who unscripturally divorces his wife in Matthew 5:32 "causes her to commit adultery." Did she have a choice? Of course she did.

Here's another example: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy...For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" (I Cor. 7:14, 16).

Notice these words: the unbelieving husband is *sanctified by the wife*, and the unbelieving wife is *sanctified by the husband*. No Calvinist would say a Christian *directly sanctifies* an unbelieving spouse. And we would agree. Paul means that the influence of the good life of a Christian can lead an unbelieving spouse to obey the Lord and become a Christian. This is what Peter taught in I Peter 3:1: unbelieving husbands

“may be won by the conduct of their wives.” They can be won by the good example of a Christian wife *if they choose to convert*. Peter is certainly not saying a Christian wife can convert her husband without any decision on his part.

And what about the word save in verse 16? First Corinthians 7:16 speaks of a Christian *saving* an unbelieving spouse. “How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” Does any Calvinist believe Paul taught that one person can literally save another? Yet the Bible often says Christians “save” the lost (I Cor. 9:22; I Tim. 4:16; James 5:20). No Calvinist would say that a Christian can save an unbelieving spouse without that spouse’s choice.

How did Calvin respond? Here again we see how desperate he was to hold on to his teaching. In his commentary on I Corinthians 7:16, he wrote, “But his statement that ‘a husband can be saved by his wife’ is really not strictly correct, for Paul makes man do what only God can do”!

Calvinists do not interpret these verses literally. And yet they interpret the same kind of language literally in verses that say God caused people to do something!

This is the recurring issue when we are dealing with Calvinism: Are the passages in question to be understood as God acting literally and directly or accommodatively and indirectly?

Calvin also pointed to verses in the book of Proverbs. For instance, in Proverbs 21:1 the Bible says, “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

There are other proverbs that use the same kind of language. In Proverbs 16 we find these words: “The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord” (v. 1); “The Lord has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom” (v. 4); “A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (v.9); “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (v. 33).

In the book of Proverbs there is usually very little if any surrounding context of a particular verse. That means we must take into

account the nature of the book itself and the context of other verses of Scripture.

These are proverbs. That means they are general statement of truth, not universal or blanket statements that are intended to cover every situation. They certainly don't contain qualifications or exceptions in the wording. We have to rely on the rest of the Bible to put them in context.

When Proverbs 21:1 says that God turns the heart of the king, it means that God affects the choices of kings for His own purposes. He can limit the options before a ruler. He can increase the alternatives. He can keep him from certain temptations while not preventing him from all temptations. He can remove barriers to a temptation. In any case, God does not remove free will; He merely adjusts the possible ways it may be expressed. There are many ways that God can influence a man's decisions without determining those decisions. Our inability to understand how He does this is not a valid argument against it.

The verses in Proverbs 16 are to be understood in this light as well. They do not refer to everything a person does. They refer to those things which the Lord uses to bring about His broader, ultimate will. Proverbs 16:1 means the Lord uses our heart and tongue, but certainly not in every case. The Lord sometimes keeps us from going in a certain direction according to Proverbs 16:9, but He does not make us robots and decide every step we make.

The same principle of interpretation applies to the other verses in Proverbs 16. They are proverbs and must be interpreted that way. Proverbs 3:1-2 says if you keep the commandments, you will live a long life. That statement is true in its context as a proverb. Proverbs 22:6 says if you train a child right he will not go astray when he is old. But Solomon says in Proverbs 4 that his father taught him the right way, and yet he went astray when he was old (I Kings 11).

These statements are true in the area to which they apply, but they were never intended as universal descriptions. These verses are not universal statements about every thought, word and deed of every person on earth, good or bad. That is what pure Calvinism would have us to believe, but it is not biblical. There are simply too many passages that directly affirm free will in the Scriptures.

In Joshua 24:15 the leader of Israel said, “And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, **Slide 14** choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

The question for Calvinists is: Did Joshua tell them to do something they couldn't do? How would you answer—yes or no? But then again, if you are a true Calvinist, you cannot even make that call!

Moses told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 30:19, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore **Slide 15** choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.”

Pro-life groups use the words “choose life” to stress the sanctity of life in the womb. But if Calvinism is true, the designations “pro-life” and “pro-choice” are meaningless!

Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but **Slide 16** you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37).

Jesus was God in the flesh. Yet He said what *He wanted* and what *they wanted* were two different things!

The book of Hebrews says, **Slide 17** “By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:24-25).

James wrote, **Slide 18** “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:13-14).

At the close of the Bible, John pleads, “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. **Slide 19** Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17).

Then there is the entire chapter of Ezekiel 18. It shows that every individual even in the same family is responsible for his own choices between good and evil. There are many other verses that could be cited, but these are more than enough.

Another favorite of Calvin is the example of God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Calvin mentions this several times in the *Institutes*. He says that Exodus 4:21 clearly shows that God was not merely allowing Pharaoh to harden his heart but rather that He literally hardened his heart irrespective of anything Pharaoh did. That verse says (and Calvin emphasizes this), "I will harden his heart."

But the Bible also says that **Slide 20** Pharaoh hardened his heart in Exodus 8:15, 32 and 34. Skeptics have used this as an example of an alleged contradiction in the Bible for centuries. The Bible says God hardened Pharaoh's heart and yet the Bible says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Both are true. In a direct sense Pharaoh hardened his heart; in an indirect sense God hardened his heart.

How did God do this? The Lord sent Aaron and Moses to Pharaoh. When they told him God said to let His people go, Pharaoh refused. God's word in that way hardened Pharaoh. When Moses did signs before Pharaoh and he still refused to let the Israelites go free, those miracles from the Lord hardened his heart. The words and wonders were God's, but the choice was Pharaoh's.

Many through the centuries have used the illustration of the sun. The same sun that softens a ball of wax hardens a ball of clay.

There are other verses that speak of God hardening people's hearts. Joshua 11:20 says God hardened the hearts of the Canaanites. John 12:40 teaches that the Lord hardened the hearts of the Jews in Jesus' day. The same principles which resolve the question of Pharaoh also settle these cases. God uses accommodative language to help us understand.

There are many other verses that Calvin used, but these should illustrate the need to interpret the Bible in light of the Bible which is always the key, especially in the study of Calvinism.

You may be saying, "But his theology goes against so many plain teachings of the Bible. How could we choose between good and evil if this is true? Why would God exhort us to do good if we don't have a

choice? Why would He warn us not to do wrong if the decision is already made?”

Calvin had already considered these objections 500 years ago. He was trained as a lawyer as well as a theologian, so naturally he anticipates counterarguments and responds to them. In the *Institutes* we find a section entitled “The Arguments Usually Alleged in Support of Free Will Refuted” (*Institutes*, II.5). Let’s see what those arguments are and how he answered them.

One of the objections that we still make against Calvinism is that it is unjust. How could God reward or punish a man if he doesn’t choose to be good or evil? Even human laws which are based on the moral teachings of the Bible reflect this common sense truth. We believe that the guilty should be punished and the innocent should be cleared. Calvin himself punished people for all kinds of vices and crimes when he was the ruler of Geneva.

But Calvin says his theology is not unjust. He says we are all guilty, and not by choice. When Adam sinned, we all sinned with Him; and at birth we inherited a corrupt nature that is detestable to God. I have already addressed that part of his doctrine in a previous lesson so I won’t repeat it here.

But there is no way Calvin or any Calvinist can avoid this charge. Calvinism is *unjust*.

What was Calvin’s response? He quoted Jerome once and then quoted Augustine four times! Then he fell back to his favorite doctrine: predestination (as he defined it).

Does God reward and punish based on what we do? The Bible says He does. In Romans 2 Paul wrote that God **Slide 21** “will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2:6-11).

Paul does not change or contradict this fundamental truth later in this book. These verses are the foundation of what he unfolds by inspiration in the chapters that follow.

What about the exhortations and warnings in the Bible? If we don't really choose, then why does God talk to us as if we have a choice?

Calvin said those exhortations and warnings are there to strike guilt in the heart of sinners in this lifetime and to be "a testimony against them when they stand at the judgment seat of God" (*Institutes*, II. 5.5).

How absurd! According to Calvin, God is just playing games with people. He tells us to do good when we really can't do good, and he tells us not to sin when we really can't avoid it!

This is just one example of how extreme this doctrine is. Calvinists have to say things like this while the people around them scratch their heads. They have to twist verses at every turn to get them to fit with their concept of divine sovereignty.

James wrote, **Slide 22** "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:7-8). Each of these is a choice, and it is preposterous to deny this. Consider what James said just in this one passage.

He said, "Submit to God." Submission is a choice. If anything is an act of the will, submitting is. The Bible tells us that we are to submit to rulers (I Pet. 2:13-17; Rom. 13:1-7). Wives are to submit to husbands, children are to submit to parents, and church members are to submit to elders (Eph. 5:22-33; Eph. 6:1-3; Heb. 13:17). According to Calvin, someone who obeys these commands is no different from a person who rebels against them. They're both just doing what they're programmed to do!

James said to resist the devil. How can we if we have no choice in the matter?

He said to draw near to God and God will draw near to you. There is a clear distinction here between our response to God and his response to us. God's drawing near to us depends on whether we draw near to

God. But again, why would the Lord put countless admonitions like this in the Bible if we have no choice in the matter?

The Bible says, “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God” (Deut. 11:26-28). But Calvinism would have us believe that God blesses those whom He made to obey Him and curses those who are sinners before they ever commit sin!

Jesus said, “The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29). But Calvinism says they don’t actually do good or evil and that they cannot avoid eternal life or everlasting damnation!

Calvinism reduces the great commission to puppets on a stage. Jesus told the disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” Mark 16:15-16).

I was talking with a preacher who asked me, “Do you believe a man can be saved anytime he wants to?” I told him that, according to the Bible, a man who believes and obeys the truth will be saved and when he does it is his decision. That preacher replied, “Then what do you do with John 6:44?” He then quoted part of that verse: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” But he didn’t quote all that Jesus said. The next verse, verse 45, explains what verse 44 means.

What Jesus said was this: **Slide 23** “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.” This verse doesn’t say God draws us in some secret, mysterious way. Jesus said He draws us by His Word. He said when a person has been *taught* and has *heard* and *learned* then that person comes to the Father.

That harmonizes perfectly with Romans 10:13-17. Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

It is also exemplified numerous times in the book of Acts when thousands heard the gospel, believed it, and obeyed it of their own accord. And it fits with what Jesus said in John 12:32-33: “‘And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.”

Calvin cited the same passage—John 6:44—to say that man doesn’t make a choice to be saved (*Institutes*, II.5.5; III.2.34).

This brings us to another type of argument Calvin was fond of making. This line of reasoning takes us deeper into the nature of free will. He said there’s no contradiction in saying that you voluntarily do what you must necessarily do. In fact, he said to his opponents: You believe this too.

For instance, Calvin asks, **Slide 24** do you believe the devil has free will? If you say the devil does have free will, then do you believe it’s possible for him to repent? If free will means there must be a choice between right and wrong, then is it *possible* for him to be good?

Must Satan do evil? Calvin says there is a sense in which he wills to be evil but at the same time he cannot avoid it. He sins necessarily and voluntarily at the same time, Calvin argues. Therefore, Calvin insists, it is not contradictory to say that a free will being must do what he does.

Calvin hangs himself when he opens up this topic. His view of the sovereignty of God means that it was God’s will for Satan to rebel. If Calvinism is true, then God predetermined the fall of the devil and the other angels that sinned. Remember that this doesn’t mean simply that God allowed or permitted Satan to sin. Calvin’s view of the sovereignty of God and predestination means that God decreed his fall and that Satan could not avoid it.

But that’s not all. Calvin’s doctrine means that everything Satan is doing now has been decreed by God from eternity. When the devil told Eve that God had lied to her in Genesis 3, he was carrying out the will of God. When he argued with God in Job 1-2, Satan was doing what God intended for him to do. When he walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour in I Peter 5:8, he is just doing the will of God.

When the devil tempts people to lie and murder and curse God, he

is doing what God predestined him to do. Again, Calvin does not simply say that God permits Satan to do these things. He *wills* that Satan should do them!

These are some logical implications of Calvinism. Calvinists have to blind themselves to the plain import of these passages. They are forced to say that things like hate and idolatry and pedophilia are in the plan of the Almighty! That is how ugly this system of belief is.

Notice some things Jesus said about Satan and see if you can find room for Calvinism. He said to the scornful Jews in John eight, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44).

Calvinism says Satan was a murderer from the beginning because that’s the way God planned it. Jesus said the devil is the father of lies, but Calvinism says God is the real author of lying which the Bible says He cannot do (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

The truth is that God gave Satan free will and Satan abused it. If that is too simple for Calvinistic imagination, then so be it.

Calvin recognized that other angels rebelled against God as well (II Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). He made the same argument concerning them. He said that they turned against God of their own will, and yet they cannot use that same will to turn back to him.

The Bible teaches that once those angels sinned they could not be redeemed. Hebrews 2:16 says, “He does not give aid to angels.” The context is about spiritual help—the grace of God that forgives sin. The verse says, “For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham”—the spiritual descendants of Abraham. The angels were so superior in knowledge and power that they were not given a period of probation like God gives to us. Their punishment was immediate and irrevocable.

How would we answer Calvin? Does Satan have free will? Do evil angels have free will? The answer is yes.

The Bible teaches that even human beings can harden their hearts beyond the point of repentance. The Jews in John 12:39 “could not

believe” because their hearts were so calloused. It was “impossible” for the apostates in Hebrews 6:1-6 to repent for the same reason. Sinners can reach the point where their conscience is “past feeling” (Eph. 4:19) because it has been “seared with a hot iron” (I Tim. 4:2). If men can reach this condition, it is no surprise that angels did.

But men or angels reach this point by their own free will! Satan and his angels made a *choice* to rebel against God to begin with! They have the faculty of free will, but now they have no remorse for sin or desire to change. But if Calvinism is true, then they didn’t have the power in themselves to rebel against God to start with.

Calvin mentions the elect angels and says this shows that God willed that some angels would fall and others would persevere. The Bible does talk about the “elect angels” in I Timothy 5:21. He says they have a will but they will not and cannot fall. Thus, he argues, they endure by their own choice but yet their destiny is set.

The same question arises when we think about the saved in heaven. Will they have free will? If they do, is it possible that they will fall just like some angels fell?

Saying that the devil won’t be in heaven to tempt us anymore will not solve this issue. It helps, but it does not take into consideration the fact that the devil and his angels sinned without being tempted by some “tempter.”

God punished the angels that sinned and delivered them into chains of darkness to *tartarus* (II Pet. 2:4). We cannot fathom the terror and awe that must have struck the other angels. The sin of these angels was great and their punishment was great. The good angels witnessed a penalty that was so swift and severe that it left an indelible impression on them.

The saved see the consequences of sin in this life. They experience the forgiveness of sins. They will carry those memories with them beyond the grave. They will stand before God and hear Jesus say to the wicked, “Depart from me you cursed.” They will hear the judgment of God upon sinners. Those experiences will leave an everlasting impression on our souls so that, although we will be free in heaven, we will not sin.

So Calvin fails in his attempt to disprove free will by using these cases as parallels. But there is one other example he uses that is somewhat harder to answer. **Slide 25** Is God a free moral agent? If we say yes, then, Calvin says we've admitted that free will and determinism are not necessarily contradictory since God is free and yet He *must* act according to His will.

God has free will in the sense that He is not under any outside compulsion to act. There is no one equal to or above God. But there is more. God's will cannot be separated from His being or essence. His essence is goodness. There is no trace of evil in God and thus there is no possibility that God can do evil.

Whatever we might say about God and free will, we have to admit that our free will is not the same as God's. We have free will to choose between good and evil. But God cannot even be tempted by evil (James 1:13). He always does what is good. Our free will is not parallel to God's will. We are not God. Again, Calvin uses a false analogy in this argument.

Calvin has a rigid view of God's will to say the least. But here is something to consider. In a book called *The Will of God* Leslie D. Weatherhead proposed three senses of God's will. First, there is the *intentional will* of God. His ideal will is that man should not sin. That will is found in I John 2:1—"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin." Second, there is the *circumstantial will* of God. When man sins, God wills that he should repent, obey and be saved. His will is that all should come to repentance (II Pet. 3:9) and be saved (I Tim. 2:4). Man can resist the first and second will of God. He has given us free will to make a decision for or against Him. That is incomprehensible to us, but it is a fact of Scripture. But man cannot evade the third sense of the will of God—His *ultimate will*. In the end God will execute justice. He will right all wrongs and render to every man according to his deeds (Rom. 2:6-11).

Slide 26 But what about God's foreknowledge and predestination? How is free will possible with either of these? If God already knows what we will do, then how can we choose? And what does the Bible mean when it says that God has *predestined* Christians? Does

predestination leave any room for free will? That will be the topic of the next lesson.

There is a story about an old wise man who lived at the top of a hill. Two boys devised a plan to fool the old man. They caught a small bird and carried it with them. One of the boys hid the bird by clasping it with both hands. He would ask the old man whether it was alive or dead. If the man said it was dead, the boy would open his hands and let the bird fly away. If the old man said it was alive, the boy would squeeze his hands and kill it. Either way, they would prove the old man wrong.

When they reached the top of the hill, they saw the old man and confidently asked, "We have a bird. Tell us, is it alive or dead?" To their surprise, the old man said, "The answer is in your hands."

God has placed in our hands one of the most remarkable and powerful forces we know: free will. With it we make choices that affect the rest of our lives. But more importantly, we choose where we will spend eternity.

This is an awesome responsibility. God gave us this power. He didn't give it to animals. We are not animals who act by instinct or robots who are programmed. We choose our destiny. In a day when many refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, the last thing we need is a theology that tells people that God has decided whether they are good or bad and there is nothing they can do about it.

Thank God He loves us and has given us the freedom to love Him. And that is one of the main reasons Calvinism is false. It goes against the very nature of love because love is a choice. And the Bible says in I John 4:8, "God is love."

For further reading on the nature of free will: Kerry Duke, *God at a Distance*, pp. 71-80.