

BIBLE TRUTHS EXPLAINED

What the Bible Teaches About

FREE WILL

Revised Edition, 2026

GORDON LYONS

ESV Edition

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Bible Truths Explained

Free Will

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Free Will

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PART 1

Synopsis: Free Will

When God created man, he created him originally righteous and with complete freedom of the will. Adam had perfect liberty to choose between good and evil, and the ability to implement that choice. Indeed, since at this stage, Adam did not have a fallen sinful nature, and since he had no inward tendency to sin, it was as easy—if not easier—for him to choose good than evil. Because of the Fall, however, and the resulting corruption of his nature, Adam—and all mankind—lost the ability to do that which was good in God’s sight. In his or her fallen state, no one has the ability to live righteously. For the same reason, no one has the ability to exercise saving faith in Christ of his own free will. Unless, by the free and sovereign grace of God, the Holy Spirit draws a sinner to Christ, that person cannot be saved. Salvation, therefore, is not of man’s desire or effort, nor of man’s free will, but of God’s sovereign grace and mercy.

Note 1: Mankind’s Freedom of Choice

God made man in his own image. Included in this is the idea that man is a fully rational and intelligent being, with a moral nature and conscience that tells him right from wrong. In addition, God created man with complete freedom of the will, together with the ability to exercise his mind in making rational and intelligent choices. Man could choose, therefore, between good and evil, right and wrong. However, in choosing evil, Adam and Eve brought upon themselves and all their descendants (i.e. the whole human race) the corruption of their entire nature—including their free will. As a result of this corruption of his nature, man’s free will is now permanently averse to choosing good and much more inclined to choose evil. Furthermore, man’s corrupt nature renders him spiritually powerless; or, rather, spiritually dead. Consequently, mankind cannot live righteously, or in a manner acceptable and pleasing to God. Nevertheless, although insufficient to secure acceptance with God, fallen mankind can still perform a certain degree of moral (as opposed to spiritual) good.

Scripture References (ESV)

Mankind’s Freedom of Choice

The Exercise of Free Will in Doing Evil

Genesis 3:6

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,¹ she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Matthew 17:12

¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”

¹ *make one wise*: [Genesis 3:6](#); Or *to give insight* (ESV footnote)

The Powerlessness of Free Will in Living Righteously; Even after Regeneration or The New Birth

Romans 7:18

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

Galatians 5:17

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

The Exercise of Free Will in Yielding to Our Old Sinful Nature

Romans 7:25b

^{25b} ...So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

James 1:14-15

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Note 2: Mankind is Responsible and Accountable to God

We must not imagine, however, that the corruption of man's free will, and its permanent tendency toward evil, means that men and women can now claim an excuse for their inability to choose good. Their inability is a result of the misuse of their own free will—not only of Adam's sin. They have wilfully chosen to ignore God, or to reject him and his Son, instead of responding to God's command to repent and to seek his mercy. Notwithstanding their moral inability, all those who genuinely seek God's mercy will find God's mercy. Although a person is spiritually dead until regenerated by the Holy Spirit, he can—whenever the Spirit convicts him of his sin and need—still appeal to the Lord for deliverance. Thus, mankind has no excuse for failing to exercise his faculties in seeking the Lord. All men and women have some degree of free will remaining to them: sufficient indeed to render them fully responsible to God, and wholly accountable for all their attitudes, thoughts, words and deeds.

Scripture References (ESV)***Mankind is Responsible and Accountable to God******Call To Exercise Free Will In Repentance***

Acts 3:19-20a

¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out,
²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...

Acts 17:30-31

³⁰The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Call To Exercise Free Will In Responding By Faith

Isaiah 55:1

¹ “Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

John 7:37-38

³⁷On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

Revelation 22:17

¹⁷The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

Command To Exercise Free Will In Choosing Obedience to God

Deuteronomy 30:19

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,

1 Kings 18:21

²¹And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” And the people did not answer him a word.

Note 3: Man's Free Will Not Independent of God's Sovereignty

The Bible always closely connects man's free will with man's responsibility, and with God's sovereignty. A person cannot exercise his free will independently of either of these—although he may desire to do so. Nevertheless, although God exercises sovereign control over his entire creation, he does not thereby prevent men and women from making their own choices—for good or bad. Ultimately, God could, and sometimes does, override, thwart or hinder the evil intentions of men and women. He may do this to prevent or curtail the suffering of others, or for some other reason consistent with his infinite wisdom and glory. God must ever remain in sovereign control of his creation. However, he permits mankind to make full use of the faculties he has given him. Usually, God does this without intervening directly. Yet, mankind cannot exercise his faculties or abilities apart from God's full knowledge. Nor can mankind do anything that God's will prevents. At all times, God retains the right and the ability to exercise his sovereign power over mankind's actions. Ultimately, God's concern is for his own glory, and for his church comprising his redeemed and holy people. By his almighty hand, therefore, God guides all events in creation—including the actions of men and nations—toward the fulfilment of his sovereign and eternal purposes for his redeemed children.

Scripture References (ESV)***Free Will Cannot Be Exercised Independently******Free Will Cannot Be Exercised Independently Of Man's Responsibility or Of God's Sovereign Purposes***

Acts 2:23

²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [*God's sovereignty*] you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. [*man's responsibility*]

Acts 4:28

²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. [*man's free will governed by God's sovereignty*].

Man's Free Will In Repentance and Faith Cannot Be Exercised Independently Of God's Sovereign Grace in Election

John 6:37

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

John 6:44

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

John 6:65

⁶⁵And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

Romans 9:16

¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

PART 2

Summary of Free Will

We may summarise man's free will (or liberty) as follows:

1. Before the Fall, man's free will was accompanied by the ability either to sin, or not to sin. In other words, it was as easy—if not easier—for him to obey God and live, as it was to disobey and die.
2. Since the Fall, man's free will gives him the ability to sin, but not the ability to do good in a manner pleasing to God. Fallen man finds it easy to sin: but he finds it impossible to live in perfect obedience to God.
3. The glorified believers in heaven have the free will *and the ability* to do good, but not to do evil. Their old sinful natures no longer exist. They have been perfected in holiness; i.e. glorified.²

Free Will and Ability

Loss of Ability

If we are to understand properly the teaching of the Bible concerning man's free will, man's responsibility, and God's sovereignty, then it is very important that we recognise the distinction between free will and ability. Fallen man has *free will*, but he does not have the *ability* to exercise free will in obeying God perfectly. Mankind's ability to do good in a manner that is acceptable to God, and to live righteously at all times, was lost by the Fall. If this point—the loss of ability to live righteously—is not fully understood, then there will be some degree of misunderstanding of the Scriptures, or misinterpretation of certain passages.

Concerning man's loss of ability to live righteously, the Scriptures say:

Psalms 14:2-3

² The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one. (See v.1; cf. Rom. 3:10-18)

Ecclesiastes 7:20

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never
sins.

² Cf. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977 reprint] p.292.

Ecclesiastes 7:29

²⁹See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Isaiah 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (See vv.4,5)

PART 3

Mistaken Beliefs Regarding Man's Ability

Many people find difficulty in grasping the point that fallen mankind has *lost the ability* to live righteously; i.e. to live in a manner pleasing to God, and that earns God's approval and blessing. Because of this fundamental misunderstanding, very many people—particularly, among the unregenerate—believe that they can merit God's favour by good works, 'upright' living or 'righteous' acts. However, the Scriptures make it abundantly plain that our sin, and sinful nature, contaminates even our best works or endeavours. All our righteous acts are vile in the sight of God.

To this end, God's Word says:

Isaiah 1:4-6

⁴ Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.
⁵ Why will you still be struck down?
Why will you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.
⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
or softened with oil. (See vv.1-9)

Isaiah 64:6

⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
(See v.7; cf. Phil. 3:4-9)

Fallen mankind lacks the ability to do good in a manner acceptable to God. This is one of the reasons why salvation must be by grace, and not by works of merit or righteousness.

As God's Word says:

Titus 3:5-7

⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (See vv.3-4)

The Holy Spirit Must Effectually Call

People sometimes believe or teach that—in some way or another—a person can co-operate in effecting his or her redemption. However, before the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, that person has neither the desire nor the ability to co-operate. The Holy Spirit must first create this desire for salvation within a sinner's heart; i.e. God's Spirit must cause that person to thirst after righteousness. However, even after God creates this spiritual thirst within a sinner's soul, the sinner lacks the ability to satisfy that thirst. God must impart to the sinner the 'water of life' (i.e. the Holy Spirit in regeneration) before that person's inward spiritual thirst can be quenched.

Concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling, the Scripture says:

John 3:3-5

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again³ he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (See vv.1-8; cf. v.5 with Eph. 5:25-27; Titus 3:5)

John 4:13-14

¹³ Jesus said to her,⁴ "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.⁵ The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (See vv.4-26)

John 7:37-39

³⁷ On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes

³ [John 3:3](#) Or *from above*; the Greek is purposely ambiguous and can mean both *again* and *from above*; also verse [7](#) (ESV footnote)

⁴ *said to her*: [John 4:13](#); The woman at the well in Samaria.

⁵ [John 4:14](#) Greek *forever*. (ESV footnote)

in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (Cf. v.38 with Isa. 12:3; 44:3)

Even Believers Lack the Ability to Live Perfectly

Some Christians believe that they can attain to perfection during this life. However, if they are honest with themselves, every believer must be acutely aware that they lack the ability to live perfectly. This ability will not be fully restored until God finally completes our sanctification in glorification. Until that time, we will always need to resort to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness and cleansing. Concerning these things, God's Word says:

Philippians 3:12

¹² Not that I [Paul] have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. (See vv.13-16)

1 John 1:8-10

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 2:1-2

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate⁶ with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation⁷ for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

⁶ *advocate*: 1 John 2:1; Or *counsellor*, *helper* or *intercessor*. This is a term normally applied to the Holy Spirit. The attribution here to the Lord Jesus indicates that the Son of God operates through the Spirit of God.

⁷ *propitiation*: 1 John 2:2; The atoning sacrifice of Christ that reconciles men and women to God. The Lord Jesus accomplished atonement for all who believe on him, through his sacrificial death for sinners on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. In his exalted and glorified position at the right hand of the Father, the Lord Jesus now intercedes for all his redeemed people, pleading the merits of his precious blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness and reconciliation of repentant sinners to God. (Heb. 7:25; 9:11-28)

PART 4

Without Ability, Free Will is Powerless

Many people suppose that a sinner can exercise free will in accepting Christ as his Saviour. However, with the exception of those whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated and has enabled to exercise saving faith in Christ freely and willingly, this is contrary to the teaching of God's Word. In relation to those still in their sins and still unregenerate, the Scriptures make it very plain that man exercises free will in practising his sin. However, in relation to salvation, sinful and spiritually dead men and women are totally helpless to achieve for themselves any spiritual advantage. Without ability, free will is powerless to lead anyone to God.

Morally Helpless and Spiritually Dead

A man cast into the middle of an ocean is totally unable to save himself from eventual drowning. The distance is so great that he cannot possibly hope to reach the shore by his own efforts. Nor, if he has been long exposed to the elements, is he able to assist in his rescue—if it comes. In his physically weakened state, he is entirely dependent on the help and strength of others. He may desire earnestly to be rescued, but the exercise of his free will cannot effect that rescue. In his helpless condition, he *lacks all ability* to save himself or to co-operate in his rescue.

What applies in the physical realm, applies also in the moral and spiritual realm. In our unregenerate state, we had been cast, as it were, into an ocean of sin and moral corruption; i.e. we were by nature morally depraved human beings. Our sin placed us at such a great distance from God that we had no hope of reaching the safety of God's salvation by our own efforts. Though, physically, we may have been strong; yet—while we remained outside of Christ—we were morally weak and helpless.

However, besides our *moral weakness* and helplessness, we were *spiritually dead* in our trespasses and sins. In every respect, therefore, we were totally without strength; indeed, we were dead spiritually, and therefore wholly incapable (i.e. *without any spiritual life or ability whatever*) to save ourselves or to assist in our deliverance.

Ultimately, and at the right time, Christ came to deliver us. However, the credit for our deliverance does not rest in whole or in part with our desire or effort. The exercise of our free will could not save us. It was wholly the work of God's Son and God's Spirit, and none of self.

God Effects a Sinner's Salvation

Scripture References (ESV)

God Effects a Sinner's Salvation

Concerning the fact that—from beginning to end—God effects our salvation, the Scripture says:

Romans 5:6

⁶ For while we were still weak,⁸ at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:7-8

⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (See vv.9,10)

Ephesians 2:4-9

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (See v.10)

Romans 9:14-16

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." {*Exodus 33:19*} ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (See vv.6-18)

What applies to us, applies to all mankind. For—outside of Christ—all mankind is lost and destined to perish, unless, in grace and mercy, the delivering hand of God reaches out to them first.

⁸ *weak*: Romans 5:6; Greek, ἀσθενής **asthenēs**, *powerless, weak, feeble, or infirm*.

Repentance and Faith

But does not the Lord Jesus command people to repent and believe the Gospel?

As the Scripture says:

Mark 1:14-15

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

God requires all people everywhere to repent.

Thus, the Scripture says:

Acts 17:30-31

³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (See vv.22-29)

Acts 26:19-20

¹⁹ “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I [Paul] was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. (See vv.15-18)

And are not repentance and faith exercises of our own free will?

We will consider this question in the section that follows.

PART 5

The Work of The Holy Spirit in Effectual Calling

The Holy Spirit Must Open a Sinner's Eyes

God commands all people everywhere to repent. However, no-one anywhere is capable of repenting, until, by God's sovereign grace, the Holy Spirit draws that person to Christ. God requires all people to believe. But no person is capable of exercising saving faith in the Son of God, until—by the Spirit—his or her spiritual eyes are opened and sight is restored.

A blind man cannot see, nor can he heal himself. Though he earnestly desires his sight, yet he cannot make himself see, merely by the exercise of his own free will. Of himself, he does not possess the ability to effect his healing. Nor can he do anything that contributes toward the restoration of his sight. If he is to be healed, someone else must heal him. If he is to see, someone else must restore to him his sight. All the blind man can 'do' is to entrust himself entirely to the healing skill of another person.

So it was with us. We, who once were spiritually blind, could not see the Light of the World (Jesus). In our darkness, we could not understand the truths of the gospel. Nor could we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ by any effort of our own free will. If we were to see and believe, someone else—the Son of God—had to restore spiritual life and sight to us. Only then, could we begin to understand spiritual things. Christ did this by drawing us to himself by his Word and by his Spirit. He healed us. He enabled us to repent and believe. In gratitude, we received him—freely and willingly. Therefore, salvation is all of grace, and none of self.⁹

The Holy Spirit Must Reveal the Truth

Scripture References (ESV)

The Holy Spirit Must Reveal the Truth

Concerning the necessity of the work of the Spirit in imparting spiritual sight, insight or understanding, God's Word says:

1 Corinthians 2:12-13

¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.¹⁰ (See vv.1-11)

⁹ See *Bible Truths Explained: Predestination; Faith; Regeneration*.

¹⁰ [1 Corinthians 2:13](#) Or *interpreting spiritual truths in spiritual language, or comparing spiritual things with spiritual*. (ESV footnote)

1 Corinthians 2:14-15

¹⁴The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. (See v.16)

The Holy Spirit Must Lead a Person to Christ

Scripture References (ESV)

The Holy Spirit Must Lead a Person to Christ

Concerning the necessity of the work of the Spirit in drawing men and women to Christ, God's Word says:

John 12:32-33

³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. (See vv.27-31; cf. v.32 with Num. 21:8; John 3:14)

John 12:36-38

³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"
{*Isaiah 53:1*} (See vv.34-35)

John 12:39-40

³⁹Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

⁴⁰"He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them." {*Isaiah 6:8-10*} (See vv.41-43)

John 12:46-48

⁴⁶I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (See vv.44-50; cf. v.48 with Mark 16:16; Luke 10:16)

The Holy Spirit Convicts, Convinces and Converts

Scripture References (ESV)

The Holy Spirit Convicts, Convinces and Converts

God draws people to himself, through his Holy Spirit in effectual calling. The Spirit creates conviction of sin in their hearts, and brings them to repentance and faith—both of which are gifts of God’s grace. Thus, to the people of Israel, Peter said:

Acts 2:36-39

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (See vv.14-35)

Acts 2:47b

^{47b}...And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 11:17-18

¹⁷If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”

¹⁸When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also **God has granted repentance** that leads to life.” (See vv.1-16) (*bold emphasis added*)

Limitations of Free Will

Free will has limitations. It has limitations in that there are some things that a free agent cannot do—even if he possessed the necessary ability. For instance, although God is a free agent, he cannot do evil. Again, although Satan is a free agent, he cannot—by the exercise of his free will—recover his lost inheritance in holiness. Similarly, although men and women are free agents, they cannot—by the exercise of their free will—change the inward evil desires of their hearts or minds. Free will does not provide the necessary power or ability.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. C. Hodge, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2 p.293.

PART 6

Man is Fully Responsible

Sin is a result of man's wilful abuse of his free will. Mankind's entire nature has been corrupted by the Fall—including his free will.

Although unregenerate mankind cannot exercise free will in a sense that is pleasing to God, he can still choose—in a limited sense—between good and evil. His total inability in the *spiritual* realm does not prevent him from exercising a considerable degree of ability in the *moral* realm. To a greater or lesser extent, man still possesses moral values, although these cannot aid him in being reconciled to God. Nevertheless, the fact that unregenerate man is incapable of exercising free will—in the sense of living righteously—does not absolve him of his responsibility. He is still fully accountable to God for all his thoughts, words and actions, and the Lord will judge him accordingly; i.e. according to his works or deeds.

Man's Will is Inclined Toward Evil

Scripture References (ESV)

Man's Will is Inclined Toward Evil

That man's free will is permanently inclined toward evil is amply illustrated by Eve's deliberate choice of the forbidden fruit. Thus, the Scripture says:

Genesis 3:6

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (See vv.1-7)

Genesis 6:5

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (See vv.1-8)

Genesis 8:21a

^{21a}And when the LORD smelt the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth¹² ... (See vv.20-22)

¹² *youth*: [Genesis 8:21](#); Hebrew, נְעוּרִים *nē'ûrîm*, meaning, *childhood, boyhood, or youth*.

Again, that man's free will is permanently inclined toward evil, is demonstrated by the Lord Jesus' own words:

Mark 7:20-23

²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (See vv.1-19)

Man is Fully Responsible for his Actions

Scripture References (ESV)

Man is Fully Responsible for his Actions

Regarding the fact that man is fully responsible for all his thoughts, attitudes, words and deeds, and that the Lord will judge him accordingly, the Scripture says:

Ecclesiastes 12:14

¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (See v.13)

Romans 14:10-12

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." {*Isaiah 45:23*}

¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (See vv.1-13)

2 Corinthians 5:10

¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (See v.11)

Revelation 20:12

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (See vv.11-15; cf. Rev. 21:8,27)

PART 7

Free Will and The Believer

Yielding to Sin

If the believer walks by the Spirit, he will not gratify the desires of the old sinful nature, which is still within him. However, if he fails to walk by the Spirit, then he will be much more inclined to yield himself to sin. To see the truth of this, we need only consider the number of times we deliberately choose wrong instead of right, or evil instead of good. Again, we can see this truth in the times we harbour sinful thoughts in our hearts—and continue to dwell on them—instead of dismissing them from our minds. We see it, too, in the times we seek *our* will, instead of *God's* will. All these are deliberate exercises of our free will. They demonstrate that the old sinful nature is still very much present within us. They illustrate our constant need of the Holy Spirit's sanctification, and of the cleansing blood of Christ in continuing within us the work of redemption.

Acts of the Sinful Nature

God's Word tells us to put to death the deeds of the sinful nature (or the 'flesh'). To this end, the Scripture says:

Colossians 3:5

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (See vv.1-4)

Colossians 3:8-10

⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Cf. v.10 with Eph. 4:23-24)

These are just some of the acts of the sinful nature of which we can be guilty—in thought, attitude, word or deed—by the exercise of our free will. However, the Scripture also says:

Galatians 5:13-14

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh,¹³ but through love serve one another.

¹³ *the flesh*: [Galatians 5:13](#); That is, *the sinful nature*.

¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” {*Lev. 19:18*} (See vv.1-15)

These Will Not Inherit God’s Kingdom

The Scripture goes on to warn that those who persist in exercising their free will to indulge the sinful nature will not inherit the kingdom of God. Thus, God’s Word says:

Galatians 5:19-21

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh¹⁴ are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (See vv.16-18; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:5; Rev. 21:7-8)

Putting to Death Sinful Desires

Again, God’s Word says:

Galatians 5:24-25

²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.
(See vv.22-26; cf. vv.24-25 with Rom. 6:6-7,11-14; 8:8-10)

Of course, we cannot crucify the desires of the sinful nature merely by our own strength or ability. However, we must endeavour to do it by relying upon the power and ability of the Holy Spirit who indwells and works within us.

War Between Old and New Natures

During our life on earth, a constant conflict or spiritual warfare will always exist between the desires of the sinful nature (the old man), and the desires of the Spirit of holiness. Thus, God’s Word says:

Romans 7:14-20

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to

¹⁴ *flesh*: Galatians 5:19; Greek, σάρξ **sarx**, meaning, *flesh, body, or sinful nature*.

carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (See vv.1-13)

Romans 7:21-25

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (See Rom. 8:1-9)

To the same purpose, the apostle Paul says to the believers at Galatia:

Galatians 5:16-17

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (See v.18; cf. Rom. 6:15-23; 8:1-17)

PART 8

Free Will Involves Deliberate Choice

As we have noted above, the deliberate choice of sin instead of righteousness is an exercise of our free will. However, every exercise of our free will involves responsibility for our actions. We are fully responsible to God for every choice we make. At the last day, the Lord will judge all our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions. Thus, God's Word says:

Matthew 12:36-37

³⁶I tell you, on the day of judgement people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (See vv.31-35)

Romans 14:10-12

¹⁰Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God; ¹¹for it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." {*Isaiah 45:23; Phil. 2:10,11*}

¹²So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (See vv.1-23)

2 Corinthians 5:10

¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (See vv.1-11)

Revelation 20:12

¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (See vv.11-15)

Believers Lack the Ability to Obey Completely

Even in the regenerate (those who have been born again), free will does not enable a person to live righteously at all times. The believer still lacks ability: the ability to obey God completely. Thus, as we have seen, the apostle Paul declares:

Romans 7:18-19

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (See vv.1-25; Rom. 8:1-9)

Galatians 5:16-17

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (See vv.13-18)

Christ Saves the Foremost of Sinners

In spite of our many shortcomings, however, we have these precious assurances from the Word of God:

2 Thessalonians 3:3

³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.¹⁵

1 Timothy 1:15-16

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (See vv.12-17)

In God's sight, the believer stands clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ—a righteousness that God has imputed or credited to every redeemed and justified sinner. However, *imputed* righteousness does not make a person *inherently* righteous; i.e. it does not change that person's character, thereby making him holy in all manner of life. The believer's character is still inherently sinful. It will not be completely free from sin until the Holy Spirit completes the work of sanctification in that person's life, and God then receives him, glorified, into his presence. Only in heaven itself, will the image of God in the believer be fully restored. Only then will the believer possess the full ability to exercise free will in doing good, but not in doing evil.¹⁶

¹⁵ [2 Thessalonians 3:3](#) Or *evil* (ESV footnote)

¹⁶ See *Bible Truths Explained: Justification; Sanctification; Heaven*.

God Imputes or Credits Christ's Righteousness to the Believer

Concerning imputed righteousness, God's Word says:

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (See v.19)

Colossians 1:21-23

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation¹⁷ under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Daily Transformed into Christ's Likeness

Regarding the progressive nature of sanctification,¹⁸ the Scriptures say:

2 Corinthians 3:18

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,¹⁹ are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (See vv.5-17)

Philippians 3:12-14

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (See vv.7-16)

¹⁷ [Colossians 1:23](#) Or *to every creature* [i.e. to every human being...] (ESV footnote)

¹⁸ *Sanctification*: The process whereby a believer's character and conduct is being changed daily, from one degree of glory to another. The Holy Spirit's work of sanctification in a believer's life continues for as long as that person lives. At the end of his or her life, that believer will be received into the presence of the Lord Jesus, at which point the believer will be glorified and presented absolutely perfect or blameless before their Father in heaven. (See further on *Bible Truths Explained: Sanctification*.)

¹⁹ [2 Corinthians 3:18](#) Or *reflecting the glory of the Lord*. (ESV footnote)

Translated and Glorified

There will be no perfection in *this* life. Nor will a believer experience perfection of character or conduct at any time before their translation and glorification in the life to come. This thought is presented by the apostle Paul in his discussion about the resurrection. Thus, God’s Word says:

1 Corinthians 15:49-50

⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust,²⁰ we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (See vv.35-48)

1 Corinthians 15:51-53

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (See vv.55-58)

1 Corinthians 15:54

⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

Regarding the image of God being fully restored to the believer in glory, the Scripture says:

Romans 8:29

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn²¹ among many brothers.²² (See vv.28-30)

²⁰ *man of dust*: [1 Corinthians 15:49](#); Greek, χοϊκός **choikos**, *earthly man*. [i.e. fallen, sinful, and mortal man]

²¹ *firstborn*: [Romans 8:29](#); Greek, πρωτότοκος **prōtotokos**. Usually means ‘firstborn child in a family’. In the present context, however, the apostle Paul is using *firstborn* metaphorically—not literally. In this sense, the meaning is ‘first in rank, office, or status’ or ‘pre-eminent’. Paul is saying that God’s Son is the uniquely pre-eminent or supreme One among many brothers.

²² *brothers*: [Romans 8:29](#); Greek, ἀδελφός **adelphos**. Can mean ‘brothers’ (only), but very often is used inclusively to mean both *brothers and sisters*—as here.

Philippians 3:20-21

²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (See vv.17-19)

1 John 3:2

²Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (See vv.1,3)

Jude 1:24-25

²⁴Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.

PART 9

Free Will Yielded to God's Will

We each have free will, and God requires that we use that free will wisely and responsibly. This is especially true of those who belong to the Lord. We are the Lord's holy people—his saints. The word *saints* means 'set apart ones', 'sanctified ones', or 'those consecrated to God'. The Lord Jesus has set us free from sin's guilt, bondage, and corruption. He has separated us from the world, and set us apart to God. Again, we are the Lord's slaves (Greek, *doulos*). Being the Lord's slaves, however, does not deprive us of our free will or liberty in Christ.

The Lord has redeemed us; and, in his Word, he has set before us his will and his ways for our lives. As his redeemed people, we are each responsible to God for obeying his will, and following his ways. We must exercise our free will in a manner that is glorifying to God, and that is in full accordance with his purposes for our lives.

Free will (or liberty) is not licence. We have free will, but we do not have the freedom to do as we please this would be an abuse of our free will, and a deliberate sin against the Lord. The Lord requires trust, honour, and obedience. We can only fully trust, honour, and obey the Lord when we make our (free) will subject to God's will for our lives. We have free will; but our will can never be truly free until we surrender it to God's will. We will always experience conflict and frustration in our lives, until our will and desires are in complete harmony with God's will and desires for us.

Those who endeavour to resist the will of God cannot hope to win.

Regarding the responsibility we are under to submit our will to the will of God, the Scripture says:

Romans 12:1-2

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers,²³ by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world,²⁴ but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.²⁵ (See vv.3-21)

²³ *brothers*: [Romans 12:1](#) Or *brothers and sisters*. (ESV footnote)

²⁴ *world*: [Romans 12:2](#) Greek, *age*. (ESV footnote)

²⁵ *perfect*: [Romans 12:2](#) Or *what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*. (ESV footnote)

Bought At a Price

We are not our own. Our whole self—body and soul—is the redeemed possession of the Lord. Therefore, we must surrender ourselves totally to his control. As God’s Word says:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (See vv.12-18)

God works within us, by his Word and by his Spirit, to accomplish his will and purposes for our lives. Therefore, the Scripture says:

Philippians 2:12-13

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (See vv.1-11)

Philippians 2:14-16

¹⁴Do all things without grumbling or questioning, ¹⁵that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. (See vv.17-18)

Led by The Spirit of God

At all times, we should submit our will to the will of God’s Holy Spirit; i.e. we should be led by the Spirit, and not by the desires of our old sinful nature. Thus, God’s Word says:

Romans 8:1-4

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.²⁶ ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin,²⁷ he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (See Rom. 7:12-25)

²⁶ *in Christ Jesus: [Romans 8:1](#) Some manuscripts add who walk not according to the flesh (but according to the Spirit. (ESV footnote)*

²⁷ *for sin: [Romans 8:3](#) Or and as a sin offering. (ESV footnote)*

Romans 8:5-8

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh²⁸ set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:9-11

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:12-15

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons²⁹ of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba!" ³⁰ Father!" (See vv.16,17)

²⁸ *flesh*: [Romans 8:5](#); Greek, σάρξ **sarx**, *sinful nature*. The word 'flesh' in this and the following verses means, 'those who live according to the *sinful nature*'.

²⁹ *sons of God*: [Romans 8:14](#); Greek, υἱός **huios**, *children* [of God]. The Greek here translates as '*children of God*', including both sons and daughters.

³⁰ *Abba*: [Romans 8:15](#); Aramaic for Father.
