

Free Will or God in Our Lives, or Both?

Brian Williamson, 2015

We look at the terrible things that happen in our world, and those that happen to us as individuals, and we say, "Where is God?"

In this cry, we fail to fully understand the gift of freedom of choice, or free will that we all have been given.

True freedom encompasses not only the little things we do day to day, but also the bigger picture of the freedom for all humankind to do whatever we want. This includes choices about where we live, the things we invent or create, the experiments we undertake, what we say and do to others, and all sorts of other things we don't even think about as "freedom of choice."

We need to think about it!

And we need to reflect on what we have done and do, as a species and as individuals. And the consequences of our free choices.

I once asked God, "Why did you give me free will, when it gets me into so much trouble?" God's reply to my spirit was, "I gave you free will so that you could give it back to me."

It seems to me that if we want God's help, we need to give ourselves over to his care (surrender!); and allow him into our lives so that he can help us! Otherwise we are just saying, "I want your help, God, but I'll just see if I can handle it myself first." God's only reply can be, "Well, you have freedom to do what you want, so off you go. But you can't blame me if it doesn't work out!"

Everything we think or do is our free choice! It does not, necessarily, include God's help!

Bad things, like wars, accidents, family problems, addictions ... happen because *we choose* to do things that cause them! Good things, like success at work, marriage, children, me writing this essay (☺) ..., also happen because of *our free choices*.

So, where is God in all this?

Paul the Apostle gets to it when he says:

"Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." (Romans 8:5-7)

When Paul talks about "flesh", he means things that we think and do without bringing God into the equation.

And if we bring God into our lives, and give him back our free will, and ask him to help and guide our thoughts and action, then, Paul says:

"Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, (Father)." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (Rm 8:14-15)

Love

The Third Step of Alcoholics Anonymous says, "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him." The prayer that goes with it says:

"God, I offer myself to you- To build with me and to do with me as you wish. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of your Power, your Love, and your Way of life. May I do your will always!"

All very nice and sweet, but what is God's will; and how do we turn ours over to him?

Jesus says:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Mt 22:37-39)

So, this is God's will: Love God, love yourself, and love everyone else, as though they were you!

Big ask! But what is "love"?

Paul, again:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (1 Cor 13:4-8)

Back to free will! Love is a decision, a choice! We have to work at it and on a daily basis.

Here are some practical tips

- *Love yourself.* You can't decide to love another until you can decide to love yourself.
- *Let go of the little things.*
- *Give more than you take in your relationships.*
- *Love without strings attached.*
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate!* Especially with those you hold dear.
- *Before you blame, examine yourself first.*
- *Let it be okay that you don't see eye-to-eye on everything.* Sometimes you just have to agree to disagree.
- *Accept and celebrate other's differences and uniqueness.* Face it—you can't change them, but you can change your attitude about their quirks.
- *Laugh.* A lot.
- *Apologise.* And mean it.
- *Forgive.* And mean it.

(Edited extract from "Love is a Choice", Cynthia Hughes Lynch)

Surrender

Unfortunately, no matter how hard we try, constant love of God, ourselves, and others seems like a battle that we keep on losing!

We try to turn our will and our lives over to God, so that he can lead and guide us, but we keep taking it back! We fail to realise that God will not force us against our free will. And then we find that we're on our own. Surrender is hard – even for those close to God!

Here's Paul, again:

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rm 7:15, 24, 25)

So here it is, whether we like it or not!

Doing things "*in the flesh*" as Paul calls it, gets us into a heap of trouble, because, despite our best efforts, we constantly let ourselves down. Our *fleshly*, or human, nature fails us time and again. Our "free will" seems to become more like a prison, or, at least, shackles that we can't seem to get out of. It's insane!

Step Two of Alcoholics Anonymous:

"We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

How does that actually work? Well, it starts off by our genuine admission that we can't do it on our own! We proved it over our life's journey. Frankly, we are not made to do it alone. But we try to believe we can, because, *surrender* is a word which we have been taught is equivalent to *failure*! And nobody wants to be seen as a failure.

Webster's Dictionary has a number of definitions for "surrender", and some can seem like failure. But, in the context of turning over to "a Power greater than ourselves", I like this one:

"To agree to stop fighting, hiding, resisting, etc., because you know that you will not win or succeed." (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/surrender)

It's an agreement! I choose, of my own free will, to make an agreement with God that says something like this:

1. I've tried to do things on my own and it doesn't work;
2. I believe that you, God, have the power to help me get my act together;
3. I am prepared to give you a go at helping me to succeed;
4. You (God) agree to uphold me with your powerful Spirit, and I agree to follow your guidance;
5. I know that I can walk away from this agreement at any time;
6. I also know that we can renew this agreement on a daily basis.

There are two important parts to this agreement: First, I believe that God has the power that I don't have, and second, I only have to make the agreement one day at a time.

Let's deal with each of these parts.

The Power of God

Like it or not, we human beings are comprised of four separate entities that need to work together:

1. We have an individual **spirit** (some people call it a soul): The thing that makes us different from all other animals and has a direct connection to a Power greater than ourselves (whether that be God, the Universal Spirit, or, at least, something outside of ourselves that we see as being more powerful than we are);
2. We have a **will**: This enables us to choose what we want to do;
3. We have a **mind**: This enables us to process our choices in the light of our experiences;
4. We have a **body**: This is the robot that does what the others tell it to do.

This is what Dallas Willard and John Ortberg (Christian counsellors) say about these entities:

"The will is very good at making simple and large commitments like getting married, or deciding to move someplace. ... But it is very bad at trying to override habits and patterns and attitudes that are deeply rooted in us. If you try to improve your soul by willpower, you will exhaust yourself and everyone around you." ...

"The next part of the person is the mind. In the ancient world, the mind referred to both a person's thoughts and their feelings. By thoughts I mean all the ways a person is conscious of things." ...

"The body is our little kingdom. That's the one place in all the universe where our tiny wills have a chance to be in charge." ...

"The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single, whole life. It is something like a program that runs a computer; you don't usually notice it unless it messes up." ...

Your soul is what integrates your will (your intentions), your mind (your thoughts and feelings, your values and conscience), and your body (your face, body language, and actions) into a single life. A soul is healthy — well-ordered — when there is harmony between these three entities and God's intent for all creation. When you are connected with God and other people in life, you have a healthy soul.

- Ortberg, John. *Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You* (p. 42, 43). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. (my underlining)

OK, so that's the blueprint of our make-up. The soul (or, as I like to call it, the spirit) is the central component. It is the essence of our humanness and the component that connects us to our Higher Power – God as we understand God.

All the great religions, and even the theory of evolution, agree that there is "something out there" that is more powerful than we are. At the crux of what that "something" is, is our belief system – how we rationalise the questions of "why am I here?" and "what is the meaning of life?"

I am personally drawn to the Christian belief structure, because I have had spiritual experiences that lead me to believe that this structure is the closest to what I call the Truth of Being. How I came to that belief is too detailed to be part of this essay. But, at the end of the day, and what really matters, is that it has enabled me to break through the mistakes of my life and to live as an individual who is conscious of his position in the Circle of Life.

Thus, I believe in the Power of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit Guide of my life.

You can use your free will to believe what you like. But, in the end, there is no doubt, at least in my mind, that we all need a Power greater than ourselves to help us through the storms and trials of our lives. Do you believe that? If so read on. If not, then off you go, but don't blame anyone else, or anything else, for the choices you make and the consequences of those choices.

If, then, you believe that there is a Power greater than you, which can help you to become a better spiritual entity, you need to be prepared to allow that Power into your decision-making processes. As I said, I choose to call this Power "God," and this is my belief:

- God created everything that there is;
- God created human beings to be the highest pinnacle of creation (at least on this planet) with freedom for choice as to how they live, under God's guidance;
- Humans used their free will to decide that they didn't need God to guide them;
- This decision broke the spiritual connection between humans and God;
- God knew that this was a *Great Mistake* and decided to come to earth as a human (in the person of Jesus of Nazareth) to correct the mistake;
- In order to correct the *Great Mistake*, Jesus had to take it on as his personal responsibility;
- Jesus died as a consequence of this decision;
- Using his Power as God, Jesus came back to life to show that, as a man he had to die as the consequence of the *Great Mistake*, but as God he could wipe out the *Great Mistake* in his Power over all things;
- Thus the spiritual connection was restored and we have regained the ability to seek the guidance of God in our free-will decision making;
- If we do this in all openness, honesty, and willingness, we are able to become the people that God created us to be in the first place.

This promise from God is summarised by Paul:

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
(Ephesians 2:8-10)

Jesus said when talking to God on the night he was to be arrested and condemned to death:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:15-17)

Now, you don't have to believe this. But why not give it a go? Doing on your own hasn't worked and it works for me!

As I meditate on God's promises and as I talk to God (pray) in my spirit, I find that my life is turned around and that I am able to make spirit-focussed decisions for my life, which I could never do prior to this spiritual experience.

There are stories all over the world of people who came to know God when they were in all kinds of bondage. Some were alcoholics; some were prostitutes; some couldn't keep their anger under control; and some were deeply wounded because of the pain of their past. These people are now completely transformed because they were willing to go to God as they were. When people will come as they are, God will work miracles. – Joyce Meyer, Love Out Loud, 2011

One Day at a Time

And the best part is that I only have to do it today, because that is really all I have to worry about.

The Dalai Lama has said, "*There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called yesterday and the other is tomorrow. So today is the right day to love, believe, do and mostly live.*"

Charles Dederich, a reformed alcoholic and a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, is quoted as saying "*Today is the first day of the rest of your life.*"

Jesus said, "*So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*" (Matthew 6:31-34)

This doesn't mean that I shouldn't remember the past and take lessons from it, or that I shouldn't plan for the future. These things are taken into account as I focus on what I need to do today to enhance my spirit and ensure my spiritual connection to God.

My free will allows me to make choices. God calls on me to make those choices in love and through his guidance.

My day, therefore, starts with recognition that he has given me this day. I thank him for it, first off. I then turn my will and my life over to his care and ask him to connect me with his Spirit. I spend my day having a conscious contact with him in all my important decisions. At the end of the day, I thank him for what we have achieved together and ask him to guard my spirit during the night.

When I live in this way, I find that my obsessions are not as obsessive as they used to be. And because I ask for God's help and strength, I am able to deal with them in a calmer way. I find that I am making God my obsession! And that is good because the more I give of myself to him, the more he can give of himself to me.

That makes me very happy and my free will is released from its prison and soars in real freedom!



God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that you will make all things right If I surrender to your Will; So that I may be reasonably happy in this life And supremely happy with you forever and ever in the next. Amen