

# THE APPARENT FAILURE OF FREE WILL

THE subject of man's free will has much occupied the minds of thinking people on account of the evils resulting from implanted liberty of action. Superficially considered, it does look like failure certainly, and a groaning world of six thousand years seems to suggest that a Being of infinite wisdom and resource could have contrived some better plan.

In all the vast field of nature surrounding us, nothing possesses unlimited power of action. All the myriad forms that go to make up the earth and embellish its surface which have been endowed with energy have their energy subject to limits. "Thus far shalt thou go, and no further" is the divine fiat, and where spontaneity of action seems to arise from free and unconstrained power, if we trace the power far enough, we see it always results from fixed law.

The most charming results are secured by this method. Nature goes on her way unchanging and unchequered, without jar, or discord, or failure, until we come to man, God's noblest work. What ails creation here? For order, we find discord; for harmony, confusion. Instead of grand success, a stupendous failure, judging by present appearances.

Natural feeling queries from its own point of view, and says "If God's labour was such a success when He placed in nature a fixed quantity of power, why did He not follow the same plan with man? Why not have created him with fixed moral tendencies? Why create man with free will which might lead to disobedience, misery, and death? Why was man placed under restraint? Did not God thwart His own work by first giving free will, and then limit its action by bringing it under law?"

Such reasoning looks plausible, but is really very short-sighted, for as God has changed His method of dealing with man from that of His other works, He must have had some other end and aim in view for man than was intended in the mechanical direction of lower forms of matter, whose design is perfectly fulfilled in their evolution of harmony and beauty, and in their exhibition of divine power, by which they are a lasting pleasure to the Creator. But God needed something more than an exhibition of mechanical power to make this planet a chapter of joy. There was nothing responsive to God's pleasure, nothing among all His glorious works capable of reflecting the Creator's moral attributes of joy and wisdom; nothing sensible of the fact that "the hand that made it was divine."

This lack of appreciation was a yawning abyss of deep silence intervening between God and His works. A link was needed to take hold of nature and of nature's God, which God proposed to supply in the creation of a groundling, made in the divine image, who would reciprocate the pleasure the Deity felt in all His works. In fact, a companion of His joy and wisdom, of corresponding character, and capable in himself of apprehending the same sentiment of happiness as his Maker. This, then, was the design of man, and it is here we perceive the enormous gulf between man of "free will" and nature mechanically guided. There is nothing outside man capable of the wisdom and happiness that God

possesses. If these sentiments are to be perfect, they must be akin to those of the Deity, and only through the instrumentality of free will could they be attained.

When Adam and Eve were created with intellectual capacity, God-like and God-derived, they were made susceptible of happiness. But intelligence is not happiness. It is the channel of happiness. Happiness of the Divine order is character evolved from intelligence rightly directed. May we not venture to suppose that it is so with God, whose righteousness is inherent and wisdom infinite? Then there is no other method for us, for it is impossible to imagine the realisation of God-like joy on any other lines than of mind rightly controlled, which is only another way of expressing choice through the operation of "free will." The difference in this respect between the Creator and the creature lies in the fact that in the one case it flows from inherent wisdom, and in the other, the right guidance of intelligence is a development, by a process peculiar to the creature.

Keeping in view, then, that free will is the indispensable instrumentality of a moral nature, congenial to God and pleasant to man, the study of Adam's probation as the groundwork affords the most beautiful proof of divine skill, in the subtle and delicate handling of man at the start. All God's arrangements are beautiful, but this inception of them is overwhelmingly grand. We are so used to the simple narration as to be liable to overlook the treasures of wisdom it contains.

We first find Adam and Eve, two "very good" beings in Eden with their God-like faculties, awaiting some exciting cause to bring them into exercise. Coming fresh upon the scene, they could not understand anything around them apart from its action on their sense of taste, sight, smell, &c. As their instincts were a very small proportion of the mental apparatus with which they were furnished, it was necessary that something should be provided for the action of the higher faculties. The Elohim could, and perhaps did, inform them of the respective features of the garden and of the relation of one thing to another, but this was knowledge of a very superficial kind, as all thinking minds will say, for even in our much-vaunted nineteenth century, it is universally conceded that the great barrier to complete knowledge is man's ignorance of the first cause of all things. It is not likely that the angels in charge of Eden would overlook this first principle of knowledge, or neglect to direct man to contemplate God as the Author and First Cause. It was an undertaking of no mean order to initiate perfect novices into the ways of God in such a manner as to reflect his moral attributes by a voluntary recognition and perception on man's part of what God is. If the matter had been entrusted to human hands, probably lengthy dissertations on the subject would have been philosophically delivered, but such a mode would have failed to procure a voluntary recognition of God, in the absence of a presentment of an opposing view of God's relation to all things. The method would not have sufficiently attested to the Deity's supremacy, nor have afforded scope for choice or free will, and Adam would have remained in nature an intelligent automaton. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Truly it is, but how could fear be induced in the case of Adam? Look where we may and reason how we will, it is impossible to see how God could direct man to the contemplation of Himself as First Cause and Absolute Sovereign, except by giving some command that would illustrate His supremacy in requiring Adam's obedience. No gentler command could be conceived than that which said, "Thou shalt not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil." How else than by law could Adam recognize the supreme authority of his Maker? The nobility of which he was capable could find no expression until he acknowledged the absolute sovereignty of

God. This was the foundation stone of happiness, a key to unlock joy and make him a worshipful creature basking in the gratification of his highest faculty. It was an attitude in which he might draw near to God and God draw near to him. It was a sublime arrangement for the benefit of man.

But here we are met with a difficulty. The position is the most intricate and perplexing that can be imagined. Assuming the essence of the command to be a call on Adam to recognise divine authority, of what use was such a command where authority was unchallenged? Adam being very good could not dispute it; the angels could not question it; there was no person in heaven nor on earth to oppose it. Acquiescence under such circumstances could not be a recognition of God on the part of Adam. The command would have had no force. On the other hand, assuming that Adam was forbidden to eat, as a test of obedience and placed under law for that purpose. Of what use was the prohibition unless there was a desire to eat? Adam being innocent did not desire to eat, and being very good, his mind could not incite to disobedience, so that the law was thus far a dead-letter and useless, as law must ever be where there is no evil, for as Paul says, the law was made for the disobedient, for the ungodly, and for sinners. Up to this point, then, Adam was precluded from the advantage of choosing to obey, and was therefore denied the joy of exercising a mental endowment of far-reaching capacity for wisdom and happiness. Though he had God-like faculties he was helpless to get from them any pleasure, either to himself or his Maker. The law did not afford scope for free will nor room for choice, and left his mind in the same nondescript state in which it found it. Was it then a failure? Shall we say that God could give a law, but could not make it effective?

What a splendid device to permit a subtle beast of the field to moralise on the situation “according to its light,” whose reasoning, according to appearances, made the law operative in bringing man within its grasp. The conception was sublime. It was perfect, not only as regards method, but as regards results, too, when we remember all what comes out of it. We see the absolute necessity of opposition coming from some source, if man was to have the power of choice. He could not evolve opposition, but he could perceive it, and when it appealed to his own personal advantage, he could either respond to it or restrain it, and in restraining, he would have obeyed and have bowed in worshipful subjection to the sovereignty of God. That such a result was possible is shown by the provision God made for it in the creation of a Tree of Life which was all sufficient as a means of imparting a change of physical nature. The moral nature being unsullied, needed no moral change. Adam and Eve would, therefore, have stepped to the higher platform of worshipping intelligence—nothing more—in perpetuity. This would have been to the glory of God and the gratification of Adam, and being the result aimed at in this incipient stage of probation, the success would have been commensurate with the design. It would have been a finished transaction. But it would not have been the completest form of success.

The character developed by Adam choosing to obey the simple command would have been limited to a recognition of God as a sovereign creator, and of himself as an obedient creature. Adam, as his own saviour, would worship without humility. He would admire without love. He would respect without awe. Surely this of itself is sufficient to justify the Deity’s wisdom in creating Adam with a mental balance in favour of using free will to disobey.

The serpent's specious assurance of immediate advantage to Eve completely mastered the warning of death. It was easy and pleasant to accept the serpent's reasoning, because Eve was capable of enjoying just the very things the serpent offered, and her whole nature was stirred at the discovery of her power of gratification. She fell a prey to the tempter's argument; she adopted his short-sighted view of the situation; she perceived the desirability of improving her state; she reasoned as he did, from instinct; and she gratified her selfish desires at the expense of God's command. It was a case of using her free will to surrender to that which was seen, sensual, devilish, as against the Deity's command. Two principles were enunciated in the transaction, the one of the flesh (or serpent), the other of the Spirit. Together they became the knowledge of good and evil, and Adam was driven from the presence of his Maker, a serpent reasoner, a dying rebel, with faculties aglow with aspiration, yet blighted with disappointment, with fervour for the spiritual, yet grovelling in the natural. Cannot we see in this newly-formed character more room for happiness than was possible in a state of innocence? Cannot we see in Adam a fitness for receiving that higher law of faith with its depths of wisdom whereby he was introduced to a scheme of redemption from the grave? Cannot we see how the free will of a rebel in choosing the things of the Spirit is as superior to the free will of an innocent man choosing the things of the Spirit, as the heaven is high above the earth? Cannot we trace the Creator's joy in this new unobstructed channel for his pity? What scope for mercy! What an opening for His love! What latitude for His wisdom! What a boundless field for grace! There is gladness even for the angels in this more excellent way, for "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance."

And as to man, his free will has found a greater and a nobler work in striving against sin than was possible in Eden. The battle fought and victory won brings joy to all eternity. A character developed by destroying sin through the eternal Spirit is worth ten thousand lives without the taint of sin. Do we not love that which is good all the more for hating evil than if we never knew evil? What sweetness comes from labour after righteousness. What humble gratitude for forgiveness. What thankfulness for mercy. What rapturous love we bear to him who serves us. And oh, surpassing all besides, is that final chord of praise which celebrates the love of God to us.

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