

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

F. The Creator-Creature Distinction

17. Human Freedom is Found in Dependence upon God

We continue our look at the Creator-Creature distinction by looking at what the Old Testament says about the dependence of humanity, and specifically, how human freedom fits in with the sovereignty of God.

Freedom is one of those words that seems to conjure up nothing but pleasant associations in our minds. We love freedom and we dislike or even hate the things that restrict it; at best we merely tolerate them. But what does freedom look like? What is the nature of human freedom? Our answers to these questions may vary, depending on our concept of what it means to be human. And our varying answers will inevitably find expression in the way that we live out our daily lives.

Many people in our world think that humans are pretty much animals who seek to find pleasure and avoid pain. In other words, we are guided by feelings and emotions. If it feels good, do it; if it feels bad, don't do it. Some people holding to this philosophy of life give up any natural sense of restraint they might have in events as diverse as rock concerts and natural disasters or riots. And there are too many contemporary TV sitcoms whose real or make-believe characters seem to have absolutely no concept of delayed gratification. They say and do whatever feel-good thing comes to their empty minds.

Now most people aren't that stupid. They know that pain, sometimes, if not a good thing, is at least necessary, and that unpleasant things, like going to work, may be necessary in order to get the money needed to supply life's pleasures. Even so, in practice many people see humans as pleasure seeking and pain avoiding animals, albeit with the ability to think and reason. Some of these think of themselves as just a part of nature, with no more right to exist than any other part of nature. They think it is arrogant when people assume that they have any special privileges or powers. This idea is what motivates some animal rights activists.

Strict behaviorists typically think there really is no such thing as freedom; they think that people are products of their genes and environment. If they have good genes and come from a good environment, they will be good; if genes and environment are bad, they will be bad.

On the other hand are those who think people have the incredible potential to be whatever they imagine they can be, limited only by their capacity to dream dreams, and their willpower to pursue those dreams. Some, in a New Age twist, would agree with the concept of unlimited potential, but think that it can be achieved only when people escape their imprisonment in a body of flesh and blood. In other words, humans have to repress, deny, or transcend the physical in order to attain godlike power.

There are undoubtedly more conceptions of what it means to be human to add to these different and conflicting opinions. But there is one conception in particular that is radically different. It believes that Scripture tells us what the God who created us has designed us to be. And it believes that it is only as we know and follow God's design that we can find true freedom. We've already seen that Scripture presents God as the Creator and Sovereign ruler of all humankind and the whole universe. From the outset, we know then, that who we think ourselves to be and where we think we can find freedom must always be in the context of God's sovereign purposes for us and his whole creation.

A strong indication of what God intends for us is found in the revelation that humans alone, of all God's creatures, are created in God's image. Gen 1:26-27 *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

"Man," as Genesis uses it, is in no way a sexist term, but a generic one that includes both sexes. Only together do Adam and Eve represent man made in the image of God. And man alone bears this distinction. That is, none of the plants or animals that God created and pronounced good are made in God's image. Instead they are subject to the rule of man.

However, although being created in the image of God is undoubtedly a very lofty privilege, man is not and can never be God; instead, we are subject to the rule of God. God is the Creator; man is the created. God calls the world into being out of nothing; man is made from the material of earth. God is independent; man, from the beginning, is dependent. From its very first page the Bible excludes the pagan themes of the hidden divinity and self-creation of man.

Genesis goes on to record man's rebellion against their created condition, and their subsequent troubles. But, the image of God in them, although damaged by sin, is not lost. Listen to Gen 9:6 - *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.* Here, murder is prohibited on the grounds that man was created in God's image. What God did earlier, in Eden, still has some effect in the world after the Fall. And indeed, no matter how terrible the crimes that a person may commit, and even if he deserves to pay with his own life, it still remains an awesome thing to take it because even murderers – even if they do not respect it in others – still bear in themselves the image of God.

While all that is involved in bearing the image of God may not be entirely clear, we can see ways in which humans uniquely reflect God's image.

- We are creative beings—obviously, not in the sense of being able to make something from nothing as God did, but able to use what God has created in creative and inventive ways.
- We are moral beings with a sense of right and wrong, and uniquely accountable for choosing the wrong.
- We are able to be purposeful in our thinking, reflecting, communicating, organizing, governing, and forming relationships in ways that are exponentially greater than any of God's non-human creatures are able to do.
- Finally, all living things struggle for life and against death, but humans alone understand somehow that we were made for more than this present life, undoubtedly, as Eccl 3:11 poetically puts it, because God "has set eternity in the human heart."

God has created us in his image so that we may be successful in the mandate he has given us, summarized in Gen. 1:28 as: *"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."* We'll have more to say about this mandate in the next lecture. But, for now, let me emphasize that our unique status as image bearers of God is not so that we can become emancipated from our Creator but so that we can use our abilities to serve and honor him by fulfilling our God-given mandate in his world.

Human authority and freedom is always subject to, and found within, the sovereign purposes of the Creator. To go against this is as foolish as it would be for a fish to seek freedom outside of the water in which it is able to move and breathe. That is the opposite of freedom; it is enslavement, and ultimately, death.

Cain was warned of this very thing after he became angry that God had not accepted his sacrifice, but had, the one his brother Abel offered (Gen. 4:6-7): *Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."* The problem with Cain's offering was one thing, but what made it worse was that he did not accept responsibility for his own failure, but became angry at his brother for the favor the Lord showed Abel.

Cain did not heed God's warning—confirmation of his wrong motives—but persisted in his anger, and ended up murdering his brother. He spent the rest of his life in unrepentant rebellion against God, and trained his descendants in the same attitude. By resisting God's gracious initiative and refusing to give him the service he required, Cain could not find true freedom, but ended up in slavery to sin.

There is another important story in the book of Exodus that contributes to our understanding of the nature of human freedom. The first part of the book describes Israel's attempt to get free of the slavery under which they were held in Egypt. How the Israelites yearned for freedom; it had been a century at least since their people had been free to come and go as they pleased. Finally, God raised up Moses to lead his people to freedom. At first glance, the subsequent story of their exodus from Egypt appears to be typical of history's stories of national drives for independence. But on closer examination, it becomes clear that Israel's desire for freedom, while it involved a declaration of independence from Pharaoh, was not a seeking of the right to self-determination, but a declaration of dependence on another ruler--Yahweh.

Pharaoh, the master of Egypt, had laid claim to the service of the people of Israel, whom God had claimed as his own since the time of his work with their ancestor, Abraham. So he sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, *This is what Yahweh, the God of Israel says, "Let my people go that they may hold a festival to me in the desert."*

That was laughable to Pharaoh. What did he care if Israel's priests wanted a special occasion to worship their god. Besides, he already knew something of the truth of a statement Jesus would make famous 2000 years later, *No man can serve two masters*. Pharaoh knew that if he wanted to keep Israel in service to Egypt, he could not allow their god to demand such all-encompassing service to himself. So, he impatiently dismissed Moses, until Yahweh showed his power over Egypt in a series of plagues, each more severe than the previous, increasing judgment upon Pharaoh for his stubborn resistance to God's claim. The tenth and final plague completed the breakdown of Pharaoh's resistance. He finally let the people go, and after a final attempt to get them back, lost his army in the Red Sea by the power of Yahweh.

But Israel's freedom did not simply involve escape from an oppressive ruler; it involved whole-hearted allegiance to the rightful ruler. That's why God next led his people to Mt. Sinai where he gave them the constitution of his kingdom. He began with a reminder of his authority to propose a constitution: his power exercised on their behalf to deliver them from Egyptian slavery.

Then he continued by outlining their obligation to obey him and a promise to accompany that obedience (Ex. 19:5-6): *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*

God made it clear that the freedom he had given Israel imposed on them an obligation to obey him. What God set up here was not a democracy (rule by the people), but a theocracy (rule by God himself). In other words, Israel's freedom was incomplete after their successful declaration of independence from Pharaoh, and it became complete only by a corresponding declaration of dependence upon their Creator and deliverer.

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, there is no freedom apart from dependence—dependence upon the one and only Creator and Redeemer of the world.

What God told Israel is reminiscent of what he told Adam and Eve in the beginning. Then, he had outlined the conditions by which they could fulfill their immense potential as image-bearers and servants of their Creator and be richly blessed in doing so. Of course, Adam and Eve opted for the illusory freedom of independence and found only slavery to sin.

But at Sinai God gave people another chance. Israel's world was not free of sin like the original one, but God repeated the conditions under which they might continue in the freedom into which he had brought them by grace. "Obey me fully and keep my covenant" was simply another way of God telling Israel to be his obedient servants in filling the earth and subduing it and ruling over the rest of his creation that all of it might declare the glory of God. Afterward, he would lead them to another Paradise, not a sinless one like the first, but God's foothold in redeeming the whole of his creation.

The constitution God gave to govern his people in this enterprise is summarized in the Ten Commandments. In a way, this covenant or constitution, like all constitutions, was a legal document. But God always intended that obedience to his law be more than attention to the letter of his laws; he wanted the hearts of his people. That's why the whole law can be captured, as it was in Deut. 6:5, in the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Or as Jesus summarized it: "You shall love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself."

The rest of Israel's history shows the continuing difficulties they had in believing what God had told them about how they might remain in the freedom into which he had delivered them. That should not be too surprising, for Satan's temptations are always designed to make it appear as though people are missing out on something by a life of obedience to God.

Trusting God's direction over human instincts and impulses is hard enough. But what makes obedience even harder is the difficulty of self-denial, especially when it appears that the choice is between freedom and a difficult obedience rather than a choice between masters.

I mentioned this before in speaking of Israel's transition from the mastery of Pharaoh and the mastery of Yahweh. But it bears repeating. The lesson that the Bible repeatedly teaches is that there is no such thing as absolute freedom for humankind. We have only the choice of who we serve, whether the God who created us for service to himself, or some false god.

Some of the favorite false gods in Old Testament times were the Canaanite fertility gods, Baal and Asherah. But plenty of people back then also served one or more of the gods popular today: power, fame, and fortune, which are all forms of self-worship. Indeed, every form of false worship says an outright or implied “No” to what God created humans to be: His servants entrusted to care for and develop his creation, loving him above all and our neighbors as ourselves. And every form of false worship ends up not in freedom, but in slavery. Or, if one insists on calling it freedom, it is merely the freedom to suffer the consequences of sin.

Jeremiah 34:17 speaks in this very way giving the Lord’s message to his disobedient people: “You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the LORD—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth.” Failure to find freedom in the service of the Lord results only in the freedom to suffer the consequences of sin

The Lord’s message through Jeremiah was illustrated many times in Israel’s history. One of the best known was how King David’s indulgence of the sin of lust led to the sin of adultery, and afterwards, to lying and murder. His original act looked like freedom to him, but it brought severe consequences to himself as well as others, and finally also resulted in the death of the son born of his illicit affair.

Sin always parades itself as ultimate freedom and self-expression, but to serve and worship another god besides the one true God, is not freedom, but slavery to a false and destructive master. Slaves to sin are not in control. They can choose only what to dream of, what delusions to entertain. They are controlled. Like smiling drug addicts who pretend power and choice, so those who reject God’s way become addicted to sin and lose control. No wonder Jesus said we’d be better off chopping off a hand than having that hand lead us into sin.

The apostle Paul writes in Rom 6:16, *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?*

Commenting on this, John Stott says that "conversion involves an exchange of slaveries."* Each slavery— slavery to sin, and slavery to God—is a kind of freedom, but the one is true slavery while the other is actually liberating. Also, each freedom is a kind of slavery, but the one—the freedom to sin—is degrading, resulting in all sorts of bad fruit, including guilt and death. The freedom of service to God, on the other hand, is ennobling, and the fruit it yields includes holiness in the present and in the end, eternal life with God in heaven. Stott, *Book on Romans*, 183-186.

Slavery is not the perfect metaphor for the Christian life. It doesn't do justice, eg., to the love or gentleness of the Master, nor to the fulfillment there is in serving him. However it does serve well to remind people that we can only have one Master. And it serves well to remind us of the quality of service to the only one in whom true freedom is found.