

"The Bondage of the Will" is a 300-page book written by Martin Luther, and was Luther's side of a famous debate which Luther engaged in with Erasmus in 1537. Erasmus soon lost all relish for debate with the burly German, saying *"freedom of the will is a thorny question which it profits little to debate; let us leave it to professed theologians. But we can agree that man of his own power can do nothing and is wholly dependent on the mercy of God; that grace is of great value, a gift of the Holy Spirit, though we may have differences of opinion as to the precise mode of its operation."*

Nevertheless he answered Luther in two large volumes, a work bitter in tone – the *Hyperaspistes* – four times the volume of *The Enslavement of the Will*. It was a personal attack and an accusation in which Luther is depicted as the Destroyer of civil, religious, and all cultural harmony in society. Sound familiar? Preach the unvarnished Word of God, and all mankind will arise as one man and accuse you of destroying society's wonderful, civility and harmony. And, Beloved, get this. You're not going to believe this. Surprise! Surprise! I refer you to Translators J.I. Packer & O.R. Johnston; to wit: *"The work of Erasmus (pure Arminian heresy, start to finish); The work of Erasmus was well received by the Pope and the Emperor, and was praised by Henry VIII (Mr. Adulterer and the Royal Fornicator himself; and to whom Erasmus had sent a first draft before its publication)."*

Talk about a famous debate. Considering the time, it would be like a TV debate today. The general reading public — and we must not forget — that the Lutheran Reformation was the first historical movement to have nation-wide printing press and publicity, made possible by the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. Luther saw Erasmus as an enemy of God and the Christian religion, an Epicurean, and a serpent, – and he was not afraid to say so. The literary duel between Luther and Erasmus deals directly and uncompromisingly with the basic principles of religion — the nature of God and the nature of men — and as such led to the production of one of the enduring monuments of evangelical doctrine, a masterpiece in the realm of polemics, dogmatics, and exegesis.

The Bondage of the Will is the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen. And this is Luther's own opinion, expressed to his publisher, Capito, in a letter dated July 9, 1537; with reference to a suggested complete edition of all his works, he roundly affirmed that none of them deserved preservation save the little children's Catechism and *The Bondage of the Will*; for only they, in their different departments, were "right" (*justum*, just exactly right). Others have agreed with Luther in giving this treatise pride of place among his theological productions. B.B. Warfield, for instance, endorsing the description of it as a *"dialectic and polemic masterpiece,"* styles it *"the embodiment of Luther's Reformation conceptions, the nearest thing to a systemic statement of them that he ever made; it is in a true sense the manifesto of the Reformation."* And Prof. Rupp quotes with approval the description of the book as the *"finest of the finest and most powerful Soli Deo Gloria to be sung in the whole period of the Reformation."* In its fertility of thought, its vigor of language, its profound theological grasp, its sustained strength of argument and the grand sweep of its exposition, it stands unsurpassed among Luther's writings. It is the worthiest representative of his mature thought that he has left us, and is a far finer memorial of his theological prowess than are the smaller tracts of the preceding years, which are so much better known.

In a word, Luther stands in a class all alone; and *The Bondage of the Will* is the finest of all Luther's writings. Based on his own experiences of many years as a Roman Catholic monk attempting to work his way to Heaven by utilizing his "free-will" to try and make himself sinless. He would, for instance, spend hours climbing stairs on his knees as one painful exercise after another designed to bring under his body and keep it in sinless subjection. Finally, one day, while engaged in such torturous activity, the Holy Ghost impressed a short passage of Scripture upon his mind, which he quoted, leaping and shouting, to wit:

"THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH (!)" (Rom. 1:17)

Luther dated his own conversion from that incident, and thereafter wrote in "The Bondage of the Will":

"Of the comfort of knowing that salvation does not depend on 'free-will'; I frankly confess that, for myself, even if could be, I should not want 'free-will' to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my 'free-will' (for one devil is stronger than all men, and on these terms no man could be saved); but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labor, with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether he required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. 'No one' He says, 'shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father which gave them me is greater than all.' (John 10:28-29.) Thus it is that, if not all, yet some, indeed many, are saved; whereby, by the power of 'free-will', none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish. Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favor promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God. Beloved, we must always have utmost faith in the perfect justice of God in all His dealings with men. You may be worried that it is hard to defend the mercy and equity of God in damning the undeserving, that is, ungodly persons, who, being born in ungodliness, can by no means avoid being ungodly, and staying so, and being damned, but are compelled by natural necessity to sin and perish; as Paul says: 'We were all the children of wrath, even as others.' (Eph. 2:3.) Created such by God Himself from a seed that had been corrupted, by the sin of one man, Adam. But here God must be held in awe and reverence, as being most merciful to those whom He justified and saved in their own utter unworthiness; and we must show some measure of

deference to His Divine wisdom by believing Him just when He to us seems unjust. If His justice were such as could be adjudged just by human reckoning, it clearly would not be Divine. It would in no way differ from human justice. But inasmuch as He is the one true God, incomprehensible; as Paul cries, saying, '**O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God ! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.**' (Rom. 11:33.) They would not, however, be unsearchable if we could at every point grasp the grounds on which they are just. What is man compared with God? How much can our power achieve compared with His power? What is our strength compared with His strength? What is our knowledge compared with His knowledge? What is our wisdom compared with His wisdom? What is our substance compared with His substance? In a word, what is all that we are, compared with all that He is? If, now, even nature teaches us to acknowledge that human power, strength, wisdom, knowledge and substance, and all that is ours, is as nothing compared with the Divine power, strength, wisdom, knowledge, and substance, what perversity is it on our part to worry at the justice and the judgment of the only God, and to arrogate so much to our own judgment as to presume to comprehend, judge, and evaluate God's judgment (!) Our judgment is nothing compared to God's? Ask Reason whether force of conviction does not compel her to acknowledge herself foolish and rash for not allowing God's judgment to be incomprehensible, when she confesses that all the other things of God are absolutely incomprehensible! (!) In everything else we allow God His Divine Majesty; in the single case of His Judgment, we are ready to deny it! To think that we cannot for a little while BELIEVE that He is just, when He has actually promised us that when He reveals His glory we shall all clearly SEE that He both was and is just (!) ! Now, Beloved, let us take this parallel case, in order to strengthen our faith in God's justice, and to reassure that 'evil eye' which holds Him under suspicion of injustice. Behold ! God governs all the external affairs of the whole world in such a way that, if you regard and follow the judgment of human reason, you are forced to say, either that there is no God, or that God is unjust; as the poet said: 'I am often tempted to think there are no gods.' See the great prosperity of the wicked, and by contrast, the great adversity of the good. Proverbs, and experience, the parent of proverbs, bear record that the more abandoned men are, the more successful they are. '**The tabernacles of robbers prosper,**' says Job (12:6), and Ps. 72 complains that sinners in the world are full of riches (Ps. 73:12). Is it not, pray, universally held to be most unjust that bad men should prosper, and good men be afflicted? Yet that is the way of the world. Hereupon some of the greatest minds have fallen into denying the existence of God, and imagining that Chance governs all things at random. Such were the Epicureans, and Pliny. And Aristotle, wishing to set his 'prime Being' free from misery, holds that he sees nothing but himself; for Aristotle supposes that it would be very irksome to such a Being to behold so many evils and injustices! And the Prophets, who believed in God's existence, were still more tempted concerning the injustice of God. Jeremiah, Job, David, Asaph and others are cases in point. What do you suppose Demosthenes and Cicero thought, when, having done all they could, they received as their reward an unhappy death? Yet all this, which looks so much like injustice in God, and is traduced as such by arguments which no reason or light of nature can resist, is most easily cleared up by the light of the gospel and the knowledge of grace, which teaches us

that though the wicked flourish in their bodies, yet they perish in their souls. And a summary explanation of this whole inexplicable problem is found in a single little word: 'There is a life after this life; and all that is not punished and repaid here will be punished and repaid there; for this life is nothing more than a precursor, or rather, a beginning, of the life that is to come.' If, now, this problem, which has been debated in every age but never solved, is swept away and settled so easily by the light of the Gospel, which shines only in the Word and to faith, how do you think it will be when the light of the Word and faith shall cease, and the real facts, and the Majesty of God, shall be revealed as they are? Do you not think that the light of glory will be able with the greatest ease to solve the problems that are insoluble in the light of the Word and grace, now that the light of grace has so easily solved this problem, which that was insoluble by the light of nature? Keep in view three great lights: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory (this is a common and a good distinction). By the light of nature, it is inexplicable that it should be just for the good to be afflicted, and the bad to prosper; but the light of grace explains it. By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God; nor can they judge otherwise of a God who crowns the ungodly freely, without merit, and does not crown, but damns another, who is perhaps less, and certainly not more, ungodly. But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God, to whom belongs a judgment, whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God Whose justice is most righteous and evident— provided only that in the meanwhile we believe it, as we are instructed and encouraged to do by the example of the light of grace explaining what was a puzzle of the same order to the light of nature. Beloved. God's elect will always yield to truth without stubborn resistance. For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He cannot be deceived or obstructed in His foreknowledge and predestination; and that nothing happens but at His will (which reason itself is compelled to grant); then, on reason's own testimony, there can be no 'free-will' in man, or angel, or in any creature. So, if we believe that Satan is the prince of this world, ever ensnaring and opposing the kingdom of Christ with all his strength, and that he does not let his prisoners go unless he is driven out by the power of the Divine Spirit, it is again apparent that there can be no 'free-will'. So, if we believe that original sin has ruined us to such an extent that even in the godly, who are led by the Spirit, it causes abundance of trouble by striving against good, it is clear that in a man who lacks the Spirit nothing is left that can turn itself to good, but only to evil. Fallen man only has 'free-will' to do evil. So, if the Jews, who followed after righteousness, with all their powers, fell into unrighteousness instead; while the Gentiles, who followed after unrighteousness attained to an un-hoped-for righteousness, by God's free gift, it is equally apparent from their very works and experience that man without grace can will nothing but evil. And, finally, if we believe that Christ redeemed men by His blood, we are forced to confess that all of man was lost; otherwise, we make Christ either superfluous, or else the Redeemer of the least valuable part of man only; which is blasphemy, and sacrilege."

I love you. Amen.