

ONE TREE
ONE CHOICE
REAL
CONSEQUENCES

A WORLD
CHANGED
—
A HUMANITY
STILL DECIDING

THE COST OF KNOWING

— THE GREAT DEBATE —

TRUTH?
EVOLUTION?
DETERMINISM?
FREE WILL?
WHO TOLD YOU?

LIFE?
DEATH?
MEANING?
HOPE?

GOOD
RELATIONSHIP
PROVISION
PEACE
LIFE

SHAME
VIOLENCE
TOIL
SUFFERING
DEATH

PERCEPTION

INTERPRETATION

JUDGMENT

ACTION

CONSEQUENCE

**WHO
TOLD YOU?**
GENESIS 3:11

I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU
LIFE AND DEATH...
THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE...
DEUTERONOMY 30:19

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE. PURSUING THE TRUTH. CHOOSING LIFE.

A P WATCH

THE COST OF KNOWING

The Great Debate

A Conversation Between an Atheist and a Believer

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The Question

Atheist: I cannot understand how Christians can seriously defend free will. I did not choose to be born. I did not choose my parents, genetics, body, century, culture, or the experiences that shaped my mind. According to Christianity, I was born into a fallen creation because of something humanity did before I existed. I did not choose suffering or death. Yet I am told that I am free. Free to do what?

Believer: Perhaps our first mistake is assuming that freedom means choosing reality itself. Freedom may instead be the capacity to respond meaningfully to the reality in which we find ourselves. Neither you nor I chose to be born. We did not establish gravity, mortality, or Truth. Free will was never sovereignty.

Atheist: Then I am not truly free.

Believer: Only if freedom requires omnipotence. Freedom permits a choice; it does not give us authority to bend reality around that choice.

The Garden - What Is the Story Telling Us?

Atheist: Here is where you are going to lose me. You are going to ask me to believe in a garden, two trees, a talking serpent, and two people whose decision somehow changed the entire world.

Believer: Actually, no. For the moment, I am asking you to believe none of those things.

Atheist: That is an unusual response from a Christian.

Believer: Before arguing about the vessel carrying the message, I want to know whether the message itself tells us something true about being human. You do not have to settle the historical mechanics of Genesis before asking what truth its account carries. That does not diminish the vessel; it keeps us from becoming so occupied with the vessel that we miss its message. So ask first: does Genesis describe something recognizable about us?

Atheist: Fair enough. What does the garden carry conceptually?

Believer: Humanity receives existence. They did not create themselves or establish reality. They awaken within something already given to them, and God declares it very good. Neither you nor I chose existence either. We woke up here. Reality preceded us.

Atheist: I do not necessarily believe somebody created it.

Believer: You do not need to settle that yet. We can agree on something simpler: reality preceded both of us. Gravity does not ask our permission. Our bodies have limits. Actions have consequences. Other people possess wills we cannot completely control. Whether you call it creation, nature, or the universe, it was not established by our individual wills. Genesis therefore gives us a first proposition: freedom exists within reality; freedom does not create reality.

The Tree - Freedom Is Not Sovereignty Over Truth

Atheist: Then what does the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil carry?

Believer: Begin with its name. Throughout Genesis 1, God sees and calls things good. Then the serpent says, “ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5), and the woman “saw that the tree was good” (Genesis 3:6). The deeper issue is not merely fruit. It is the creature assuming the judge's seat.

Atheist: But independent thought is good.

Believer: Examination is good. The issue is whether my freedom to form a judgment gives that judgment authority over Truth. If I call gravity evil, gravity does not change. If I call hatred love, hatred does not become loving.

Atheist: Agreed.

Believer: Then the freedom to judge does not guarantee that our judgment corresponds to reality. Genesis asks a still-relevant question: what happens when a conscious creature mistakes freedom to judge for authority to determine Truth?

The Serpent - A Competing Interpretation

Atheist: And now I suppose I need to believe in a talking snake.

Believer: First ask what the serpent does in the account. It speaks. It presents another interpretation: “Yea, hath God said...?” It questions the Word, the consequence - “Ye shall not surely die” - and God's motives. It does not physically force the woman. It supplies competing testimony.

Atheist: That sounds remarkably ordinary.

Believer: Exactly. We all encounter competing interpretations: You are not enough. That person hates you. If God existed, He could not be good. Nothing matters because you will die. Do whatever you want; consequences are somebody else's problem. The first question is not where a voice came from, but whether what it tells us is true. Genesis gives humanity competing testimony, and humanity judges between the voices. That is a courtroom.

Who Told You?

Believer: Then comes one of Genesis's most penetrating questions: "Who told thee that thou wast naked?" (Genesis 3:11). Before the choice, nakedness carries no shame. Afterward, the same physical condition is interpreted through shame, fear, covering, and hiding.

Atheist: So the condition did not change, but its meaning did.

Believer: Exactly. God interrogates the source of Adam's judgment: Who told you? Who told you what makes you valuable? Who told you suffering makes existence meaningless? Who told you death makes life worthless? Who told you there is no God? Who told you consciousness is entirely deterministic? Who told you that because you did not choose to be born, you cannot meaningfully choose how you live?

Atheist: Including Christian claims?

Believer: Especially Christian claims. If Christians inherited false ideas about God, those ideas belong in the courtroom too. Truth does not become true because a preacher said it. Atheism does not become true because a philosopher said it. Something does not become true merely because I thought it. Every messenger must testify.

The Fall as Something We Can Observe

Atheist: Describe the Fall without requiring religious terminology.

Believer: A conscious creature awakens within a reality it did not create. It can perceive, interpret, judge, and choose. Because it can interpret, it can misinterpret. Because it can judge, it can misjudge. Because it can choose, it can act from mistaken judgments. And because choices are consequential, those judgments can enter shared reality through speech and action.

Atheist: Give me an example.

Believer: A person believes another race is inferior. Interpretation becomes conviction; conviction becomes speech; speech influences others; belief becomes policy; policy becomes oppression; oppression becomes suffering. Children are then born into consequences produced by judgments made before they existed.

Atheist: That has undeniably happened.

Believer: Exactly. We do not need Genesis to prove that mechanism exists. We can observe it. Genesis gives it theological meaning: Perception -> Interpretation -> Judgment -> Choice -> Speech/Action -> Consequence -> Fruit. Consequences can outlive the original chooser. A fallen world becomes less mysterious when we see how accumulated choices can shape the world inherited by later generations.

The Courtroom of Understanding

Atheist: Then put God on trial.

Believer: Agreed. If God is Truth, Truth has nothing to fear from examination. Scripture says, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and “O taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). Bring the accusation.

Atheist: Children suffer. People murder one another. Wars destroy families. Floods drown people. Earthquakes bury them. Disease kills them. Everyone dies. And you tell me God is good?

Believer: The proposition “God is good” must be examined. But so must the proposition “suffering proves God is evil.” Painful, unwanted, and grievous do not automatically mean morally evil. Who told us those categories were identical?

The Cost of Freedom

Atheist: Why permit suffering at all?

Believer: Suppose you and I possess meaningful freedom. I can love you, but I can also reject, deceive, betray, or harm you. The cost of my freedom is responsibility for what I do with it. The cost of your freedom is that I cannot dictate what you do with yours.

Atheist: God could intervene every time somebody makes a terrible choice.

Believer: Then we must ask how consequential the choice remains. If every harmful act is automatically prevented or reversed, choices may become intentions that never meaningfully enter shared reality. Meaningful relational freedom creates vulnerability.

Atheist: So suffering is the price of free will?

Believer: Some suffering clearly is the consequence of meaningful freedom interacting with other meaningful freedom. Choices propagate beyond the chooser.

Birth Itself Demonstrates the Problem

Believer: Consider physical birth. Neither of us chose our first entrance into the world. Before we made a conscious choice, we were already living within consequences that preceded us. Our existence demonstrates that freedom operates inside a reality we receive rather than one we created.

Atheist: And someone can perceive that birth negatively.

Believer: Exactly. Job and Jeremiah can curse the day of their birth. Ecclesiastes can say of an untimely birth, “he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other” (Ecclesiastes 6:5). Scripture allows suffering people to speak. But a person's painful perception of existence does not automatically establish the ultimate meaning of existence.

Creation Bears the Consequences

Atheist: Human choice might explain murder. It does not explain earthquakes, floods, lightning, disease, or death.

Believer: That is a strong objection. Scripture nevertheless connects humanity's condition with creation's condition. Genesis says, “cursed is the ground for thy sake” and speaks of thorns (Genesis 3:17–18). Paul says “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together” (Romans 8:22).

Atheist: Are you claiming Adam caused every earthquake?

Believer: No. Scripture does not give us enough evidence to make that geological claim. It does give us testimony that humanity's disorder and creation's bondage are related. Nor should we automatically call every force of nature morally evil. Water can sustain or drown; fire can warm or burn; lightning and earthquakes have no moral intention.

We Left Our Place

Believer: Genesis presents humanity in extraordinary provision and relationship. After humanity chooses contrary to the established order, it is sent from Eden. Provision gives way to toil; naked openness to covering and fear; one flesh is followed by domination; the ground yields thorns. Humanity's relationship with God, self, neighbour, and creation has changed.

Atheist: So humanity left its proper place.

Believer: That is a useful way to describe the relational disorder, provided we remember that Genesis says God sends humanity from the garden after its choice. Freedom does not make the creature the Creator, nor does it give us authority to redefine our relationship to Truth.

God Enters the Consequences

Atheist: Then what does God do about the consequences?

Believer: Christianity makes an astonishing claim: God in Christ enters the consequences of human choices. Humanity produces accusation; Christ is falsely accused. Humanity produces domination; Christ serves. Humanity produces violence; Christ receives violence. Genesis produces thorns; Christ wears them. Humanity suffers; Christ suffers. Humanity dies; Christ enters death.

Atheist: But that does not undo what happened.

Believer: No. Something remarkable happens first. Human beings determine what happens to Christ, but they do not determine what comes out of Christ. They give hatred; He gives love. They accuse; He forgives. They dominate; He serves. They kill; death encounters Life.

Perhaps That Is Freedom

Atheist: You are redefining free will.

Believer: Perhaps we are defining it more carefully. Freedom cannot mean that nothing influences me. Nor can it mean that I determine reality or escape every unwanted consequence. Mature freedom may include this: I cannot always choose what enters my life through another person's freedom, but I can increasingly become free concerning what comes out of me in response.

Atheist: Then renewing the mind matters to freedom.

Believer: Exactly. So does refinement of the heart. Jesus says, “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Truth and freedom are connected because false interpretation can become bondage.

The Great Debate Within

Believer: A thought, desire, accusation, fear, or interpretation can arise without becoming our master. Paul speaks of “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). What arises within us can be examined before it is given form in speech or action.

Atheist: So the great debate is not merely atheist against Christian.

Believer: Exactly. It occurs within every human being. One voice says God cannot be trusted; another says, “taste and see that the LORD is good.” One says you are worthless; God asks, “Who told you?” One says return violence for violence; Christ answers violence with forgiveness. One says death wins; resurrection says, look again.

Life and Death Coexist

Atheist: But death still exists.

Believer: Yes. So does life. Darkness and light, bondage and liberty, suffering and joy can coexist within present reality without being equally ultimate. Deuteronomy says, “I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). The existence of both possibilities does not eliminate freedom; it gives choice meaningful content.

Atheist: Choosing life does not immediately erase death.

Believer: Correct. Freedom does not bend reality. Yet Scripture describes a path in which death is finally defeated: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). Present reality is not necessarily final reality.

Creation Is Waiting

Believer: Romans 8 then becomes central. “The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19), and creation itself is to be delivered “into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

Atheist: So humanity's restoration and creation's restoration are connected?

Believer: That is Paul's picture. Romans 12 speaks of transformation through the renewing of the mind; the prophets speak of a new heart. Humanity does not become powerful enough to invent reality. Humanity awakens to Truth, chooses Life, and begins to participate rightly in reality.

The Cost of Knowing

Atheist: Then what was the cost of knowing?

Believer: Humanity reached for the knowledge of good and evil and discovered that knowledge carries judgment, responsibility, consequence, and the possibility of error. We did not merely become observers of reality; we became interpreters who could call good evil and evil good.

Atheist: And you think God still permits us to choose?

Believer: Yes. The answer to destructive freedom is not necessarily the destruction of freedom. God places Life before us again. He reveals His character in Christ, exposes our judgments to Truth, renews the mind, refines the heart, and says: choose life.

Atheist: But what if I remain unconvinced?

Believer: Then keep examining. A courtroom worthy of Truth cannot fear a sincere question. But examine your own premises with the same rigor you demand of mine. Do not assume suffering proves God evil. Do not assume influence proves determinism. Do not assume that being born into circumstances you did not choose means you have no meaningful choices concerning how you respond to them. And do not assume that because you did not choose to enter reality, you have no meaningful choice concerning how you will walk within it.

Atheist: So your answer to the problem of free will is not, “I can do whatever I want.”

Believer: No. It is almost the opposite. I am free, but I am not God. I can choose, but I cannot redefine Truth. I can act, but I cannot demand that reality erase the consequences. I can suffer because of another person's freedom, yet their choice need not dictate what comes out of me. And when my understanding proves false, I can repent, renew my mind, refine my heart, and choose again.

Atheist: Then perhaps the question is not simply whether we are free.

Believer: Perhaps the greater question is: What will we do with the freedom we have?

Atheist: And your answer?

Believer: Watch. Test. Walk. Witness. Bring every judgment into the light. Hear the witnesses. Refuse to make appearance your final judge. Taste and see whether the Lord is good. And when Life and Death stand before you—choose Life.

“Examining the evidence. Pursuing the Truth. Choosing Life.”

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