

Growing in Christ

Part 17: 'Coins and Railways'

I want to address what is a difficult, confusing and controversial issue facing the people of God. It's a really important issue because it touches every other doctrine and it affects everything we think, say and do as believers today. So obviously this is an issue we need to wrap our heads and hearts around if we truly desire to grow in Christ and navigate our dual journey in the kingdom of God and the kingdom this world.

We all know about balance in so many areas of life. The balance of weight on a see-saw which is necessary for it to work properly; keeping our balance on a bicycle or motorcycle and not leaning too far one way or the other, lest we fall and injure ourselves; balancing our time between work and home, to name just a few. There are so many examples in life of the need for balance.

When 'balance' is mentioned in regard to the Christian faith and particularly in reference to the Bible, the meaning is not as clear but it is just as important. What is it that we need to 'balance' in the Bible and our understanding of God? Basically we need to accept the fact that the Bible and the theology we draw from it has many facets, somewhat like a diamond. Each part of the truth is valid, acceptable and necessary for us to see the 'big picture'.

That is why there are many 'doctrines' or 'theological perspectives' which have emerged over the years. Each one is valid and each one needs to be clearly understood, but kept in balance with all the others. This has often been referred to as interpreting Scripture through Scripture. In other words, we need to be careful not to emphasise a particular perspective or truth from the Bible so that it conflicts with another truth in the Bible. Like a diamond, all the facets remain together to produce the whole. They are not to be viewed in isolation.

Two of the most important and foundational 'facets' or truths of the Christian faith are the ones I wish to address here: The Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man. These are two truths taught all the way through the Bible and which need to be firmly grasped by any sincere believer who desires to worship and serve God in a manner which is consistent with His revealed will and purpose. Taken in isolation, or separated too far from each other, either of these truths can lead us into error. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the further you separate these two equally important truths from each other, the closer each one comes to being heresy and false teaching.

Let's loosely define the terms first. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God teaches that God is all powerful and can do anything He wishes, when He wishes, how He wishes and He is not accountable to anyone and does not need to explain His actions to anyone. He is totally in control of the universe and everything in it. He may choose to limit or channel that control as He gives us, His special creation, certain freedom and responsibility, but at no point is He not sovereign. At no point is His hand not at work in some way in all the circumstance of life - good or bad.

The doctrine of the responsibility of man teaches that God has bestowed free choice upon us and He has set us totally and utterly free in Christ by His glorious mercy and grace. We are responsible for all the choices we make and those choices have consequences - good and bad. More than that, God has actually given us many exhortations to do certain things and live a certain way in order to participate more fully in His divine plan to save His lost children.

There are many statements in the Bible in which God effectively says: "*If my people will do this ... then I will do that.*" The obvious inference is that if we don't - He won't. There are many Scriptures which seem to support that truth. So we have this apparent tension all the way through the Bible between these two truths which seem to be opposed to each other: (a) God can do what God wants to do no matter what we do or don't do - because He is sovereign, and (b) God at times chooses not to do what He wants to do until we do what He has called us to do - because we are responsible.

If you have been a Christian for very long you will most certainly have run up against this tension. I see it all the time - not just in the Bible but in our prayers and our discussions. I could sit in any group of Christians during a discussion on any issue and I would be able to see people coming from both of these perspectives. That is OK if we take all those views together to formulate our 'big picture' of God. However, it is possible for us, depending on our life's experience and the teaching we have had, to venture down one of these two roads a little too far without acknowledging the balancing of an equally valid truth. This is where all heresies, cults and dangerous sects have come from. Most of them begin with solid, Biblical, irrefutable truth. If that truth is held in tension or balanced with other equally valid truths then all is well. It is when one truth is elevated or emphasised at the expense of the other that we run into error and the results can be devastating.

I have experienced this in my life as I have wrestled with God's Word and sought to know the whole truth about God. I remember my days as a young Christian when I would passionately argue the Sovereignty of God at the expense of everything else and I upset and probably confused people around me. Thankfully I wasn't in the pulpit very often back then, so the fallout was not that high. I had taken a solid, Biblical truth and removed it from its wider context, amplifying it in such a way as to produce a half-truth and a half-truth can be more damaging than an outright lie because it is more believable.

This tension exists all the way through the Bible. There are passages from cover to cover which emphasise the sovereignty of God and there are just as many passages which emphasis the freedom and responsibility of man. Some days, to our tiny, finite minds, these passages appear to contradict one another but they are actually part of the same story, the same truth, the same reality.

This is where the title of this sermon will make sense. *Coins and Railways* both come to mind when I think of these two truths in the Bible. If you study one side of a coin you will notice every letter, word, picture, dent etc. When you turn the coin over you are faced with an entirely new picture - so different, in fact, that it is like you are looking at a totally different coin. Yet this is actually one coin, not two and even though the two sides are very different, they are in fact part of each other and can never be separated. Even if you found a way to separate the two sides, the coin would be destroyed. So too with the God's sovereignty and our responsibility. They are the two sides of the same coin. They are both the truth and if you separate them, you have a half-truth, which, in reality, is a lie.

Building a railway line is another excellent example. Everyone knows that you need two tracks for a standard railway and that those two tracks must be exactly the same length, height and size, and perfectly parallel, otherwise the train will be de-railed and tragedy will befall everyone on board. Each railway track is vitally and equally important. It would be silly to debate whether the left track or the right track was more important - they are a set. They belong together and must remain together at all times. They should never been seen as being in opposition to each other and they should never cross each other. In fact even the slightest movement away from being exactly parallel and perfectly balanced will result in a catastrophe.

Can you see why this is such a clear analogy for us today? There are two equally important and vital truths running parallel to each other all the way through the Bible and throughout the history of human experience. These are the 'tracks' upon which the whole Christian Church runs, if you like.

One track declares powerfully that God is sovereign and He can do whatever He wants to do - with us - without us - through us - or in spite of us. He is God and we are not and He will do whatever He wants and He is not answerable to anyone and will, in fact, often do very strange things (from our perspective) and not explain Himself to anyone. The sovereignty of God is one track.

The other equally important track upon which our entire Christian experience rests, declares that God has set us completely and wonderfully free by the power of His glorious Grace and we are therefore able to choose good or evil, right or wrong and our choices have a direct and deliberate bearing on what God then does. If we do certain things, He responds in certain ways. Our personal responsibility is the other track.

In our tiny, finite minds these two truths appear to cross each other and mankind has struggled with this tension from the beginning of time. Scholars and theologians have locked horns and argued against each other trying to push one view further than the other, implying that they are incompatible. This is understandable - for it is really hard for our tiny minds to work out how these two truths can co-exist. We will see in a moment why this tension has been the most difficult and controversial struggle in the history of the Church. As we look at some Scriptures, you will see why the railway and coin analogies are so applicable.

You see, you cannot have one side of the coin without the other. In the manufacturing process, they are both produced together. So too with a railway line. When you construct a railway line, you don't lay one track for miles and miles and then come back and lay the second track. Both tracks must be laid together and if you have ever seen them building a new railway line you will notice that one track is never more than a metre or two ahead of the other. They grow together.

I would suggest to you that this is exactly how we should build our theology - our view of God and His children and this world. These two truths need to be established side by side and kept parallel at all times. However, many of us don't enjoy that privilege and often we find that one track is way ahead of the other - so far ahead for some people that they are not even aware that there are supposed to be two tracks!

So let's look at some Scriptures and see if we can keep them in balance as we construct this theological railway. Just remember, these verses are not meant to cancel each other out or counter each other. These are all true, in an of themselves. This is the Word of God. However, they are meant to be kept in tension; they must be balanced; they have equal importance; they are parallel. Even if we cannot understand how that can be, it MUST be, if we are to know the full truth.

TRACK 1 - God is Sovereign

John 6:44: No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Daniel 4:35: All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

Romans 11:33-36: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Psalms 115:3: Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. Isaiah 46:10: I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

TRACK 2 - Man is Responsible

Matthew 23:37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

James 5:16: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

2 Chronicles 7:14: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

James 4:3: When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Matthew 7:7-8: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Romans 9:20-21: But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Ephesians 1:11: In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ...

Matthew 10:29: Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

Acts 17:26: From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10: But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Job 42:2: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

John 9:2-3: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

Romans 8:18-20: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

Romans 8:28-31: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

1 Timothy 6:11,12: But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Matthew 18:19-20; 21:22: I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

John 15:7: If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

James 1:5-7: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

Romans 10:13-15: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?

And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

Luke 13:24: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

Ephesians 4:3: Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

2 Peter 1:5-10; 3:14: For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

Hebrews 12:14: Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Can you see why it is so important to build this railway two tracks at a time? The above list of passages all come from God's Word and yet if you cover up one side and read down one column only, then do the same for the other column, they will be as different as two sides of the same coin.

So how does this relate to the real world each day? Well, the most obvious area in which we need to make sure both tracks are firmly in place is prayer. God has made it abundantly clear that our responsibility in prayer is very real and that there will be certain things He chooses not to do unless we pray. We have a huge responsibility in that regard and a wonderful privilege to be part of God's redemptive plan on earth.

However with both railway tracks firmly in place we must understand that God is not compelled, bound or forced to say yes to any of our prayers and in fact He will often say no. Sometimes we later see the reason for Him saying no. God saw the big picture and His will was fulfilled better for us and His kingdom by not granting our request. Yet at other times we have no idea why He said no and have no right to complain, because God is sovereign He can do whatever He chooses. We also must understand that because God chooses to not act at times unless we pray, that does not mean that He cannot act without us. To say that God won't do something unless we do our part is very different to saying that God can't do something unless we do our part.

The whole issue of healing and suffering is a classic example. If these two tracks are not firmly in place and exactly parallel in our minds as we pray for the sick and ask God to relieve people's suffering, we are in for a really tough time.

There is no question that God heals and wants to heal. There is no question that God's original plan for us never included sickness, disease, suffering or death. But it is also clear that the freedom He gave humans included the freedom to open the door to the enemy of God to bring all that stuff into our lives. We rebelled against God at the beginning and have paid the price for that rebellion ever since.

So along comes Jesus and redeems us. He deals with the problem of sin and ushers in the Kingdom of Heaven. But the ongoing consequences of the fall, of man's sin, remain in this world in which we live. Yes, our eternal souls are in the kingdom of Heaven and we are experiencing more and more of that reality as His Kingdom comes and His will is done and that certainly includes healing. But we still reside in the kingdom of this world in which sin, sickness and suffering will remain until the end of time.

It is the 'now, but not yet' reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the two kingdoms eclipsing like planets and we are caught in the middle with this dual citizenship. We are resident in this world where Satan reigns as the 'Prince of the Power of the Air' and yet our eternal citizenship is in the Kingdom of God where God is all-powerful and sovereign and where there is no sin, sickness, suffering or death.

That is why we will experience the realities of both kingdoms - all the time. Sickness will still be a reality - so will supernatural healing. The more the kingdom of Heaven pushes against, advances into the kingdom of this world, then the more we will see the realities of heaven emerge. But we will not see them all the time. We will pray for people to get better and they will not. We will pray for others and they will be instantly healed. A lot of this is just the reality of living in a war zone. There are casualties and we cannot predict who will get hit or when or how hard.

However, the truth remains that even in this unpredictable war zone, God is still in control. He can, and often does, override the powers of darkness in this world and we see amazing things happen. At other times He does the exact opposite. He chooses to work in and through the bad things in this world for His glory. Joni Earekson-Tada is a classic example. Paralysed in a diving accident as a teenager, Joni had Christians everywhere praying for her healing. Could God have healed her? Of course. Was there enough faith floating around in her and others around her to believe for that healing? Absolutely! So what happened? The simple answer is God chose to work through her suffering and disability rather than to remove it. That woman has now touched millions and millions of people across the world with an amazing ministry spanning 40 years and she has only been able to do that because God did not heal her all those years ago.

I don't have a problem with that picture. It fits very well on the two railway tracks God has given us. It just doesn't fit well on the single track that some people run on. I know God can and does heal and save and restore when we pray. I have seen many miracles unfold before my eyes in answer to prayers I have prayed. I have also watched people die as I pray for their healing. I have felt the conviction of God to believe for healing for people and not stop praying and I have heard the voice of God say, *"Stop. This is my plan for this person for now. Pray for strength and insight, not for healing."*

I know many would think that God would never say that but that is exactly what He said about Joni and thousands like her who have touched more people through their suffering and infirmity than they ever would have if they had been healed. God did not send that tragedy upon them any more than He is the author of sin. But in His sovereignty, He will at times choose to NOT heal if He can bring greater glory to His name.

His ways are higher than ours and He remains a sovereign God Who can and will do whatever He chooses. We are grateful that He often chooses to do things through us, in answer to our prayers and that is a wonderful privilege for us, nothing more - nothing less. It's a privilege, not a right, not a guarantee and not currency with which we buy the favour of God.

The only guarantee God gives us is that whatever we ask in accordance with His will, as it is being played out that day and that hour, He will do it. We just have to accept that there are times when we just do not know or understand His will and His higher purposes. Yet we will continue to ask, all the time, for He has encouraged us to do just that.

I am sure people wondered why Jesus walked right past so many desperately sick people beside the pool of Bethesda that day and picked on one man only and healed him. I think even Jesus may have wondered, but He only did what He saw the Father doing and that day God wanted to heal one man beside that pool and one man only. On another day, like on the Island of Malta years later, God chose to heal everybody in sight and He did so through the Apostle Paul. God can do that, because He is God and He doesn't have to answer to us.

I want to encourage you to read through all the Scriptures listed above (even though they are only a small selection) and allow God to firmly lay both tracks, firmly instil both truths deep in your heart. He calls us to trust Him and believe that He can and will do mighty and wonderful things through our prayers and obedience and service and surrender. He calls us to work with Him and be available for Him to channel His life-changing power through us as we touch the lives of others. But He also calls us to remember that He alone is the source of all power and all authority and He will pour that out upon His people as and when He chooses and that we are not calling the shots, God is and sometimes God will act in ways we neither like nor understand.

Yet, if our personal relationship with Him is growing stronger and stronger each day; if that is our highest priority at all times - drawing near to God and relating to Him in the most intimate, personal way possible; if that is our main agenda at all times, then we will not be confused or concerned when things do not work out the way we would like because our faith in our living, personal God is far greater than our faith in His ability to answer our prayers and give us what we want. We will be confident that He will always hear us and always answer us and we will be equally confident that His answers are the best ones for us, for His kingdom and for His glory.