

PRAYER AND THE WILL OF MAN

Part 2

The Great Divide



Last month we looked at a series of events that took place during a time of prosperity for ancient Israel, while God allowed its king, David, to go through a test that ushered in divine judgment on satanic strongholds, the king and the nation itself while at the same time preparing a place for God to dwell on earth. Even though many of us as believers in Christ are not Jewish, we are also God's covenant people. While we are termed as the body of Christ, we come from various tribes, nationalities and cultures. The Old Testament and all that Israel went through are examples for us today. We compared the loss of 70,000 lives (See 1 Chronicles 21:14) with the tragedy

and horrors of war in our day and age. Yet we also looked at the awesome wisdom of God in allowing the will of man to come to its end so that the will of God could be seen in all of His glory.

After reading these articles you may find yourself asking a question. If we're filled with the Holy Spirit and following the Lord, why don't we just pray what God wants prayed and do exactly as He wants us to do? The simplicity of this answer may not satisfy everyone's questions, but here it is: We are carnal creatures, born into sin. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are set free from the curse of sin and death. But we also have to be willing to repent of the sin we can still commit on a daily basis. Philippians 2:12, 13 describes this concept clearly: ". . . Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." When we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us about our disobedience, we can take an active part and repent of our unholy actions. The sad reality is that too often we refuse to look at what we're doing as disobedience. We then continue to believe we're okay. We build fortresses around our thoughts and attitudes. These thoughts, ideas and attitudes eventually become belief systems. We tend to fellowship with people who have the same belief systems. When our belief systems are based upon the love, mercy and holiness of the Bible, these fellowships can be healthy. When our belief systems are not based upon love, mercy and the holiness of the Bible, these fellowships will lead us

away from God, not toward Him, even though we 'believe' in Him. We tend to pray as we see others pray or we live as we see others live.

This is why our standard must always be the Bible in conjunction with the indwelling Holy Spirit. The precious Holy Spirit will reveal our sin to us if we will allow Him. Your next question might be, "Well, God is God. Why doesn't He just show up and stop us from being ungodly?" The answer to this question will reveal why I have titled part two of this series, "The Great Divide." I believe it is at the root of every schism in the body of Christ because it is an issue that the devil is able to use so well. Once we are divided on this one issue, other thoughts and ideas of mistrust in God, hatred and bitterness toward our fellow man will creep in. Once this takes place the devil has us plainly and squarely in his territory. It is this issue that is at the heart of our prayers. And it is this issue that will lead us to fellowship and pray with people we view as 'right' or refuse to fellowship with people we view as 'wrong.' (Even though they may, in fact be 'right.') What's the issue? What concept could be so BIG as to be so easily misunderstood that it could actually cause us to pray amiss or to believe things that may not even be biblical? *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility.* While we won't exhaust this subject in this article (It would take whole books to do so), we will go through a basic background.

First let's define the concept. All throughout the Scriptures we see what many people call paradoxes. (I will share in a moment why this is not an accurate word to use.) Have you ever had anyone tell you that the Bible is full of contradictions because of these 'paradoxes'? How about the word *anomaly*? Have you ever heard scientists describe some act of God as an anomaly? All of these words are attempts from human wisdom to describe the God of the Bible, who is not easily described. Since they are attempts from the mindset of human wisdom, as valiant as those attempts might be, they eventually lead us on a road lower than the road God would have us take to understand Him. (See Proverbs 8). How has He made Himself known? Throughout all the Scriptures, it has been through His Son, Jesus Christ (See Psalm 2; and 40:6,7; Hebrews 9; and 10:6,7; Colossians 2:8,9). Through our study of the Bible we see that God is One and He is also Three in One: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We see that Jesus Christ is 100 % God and 100 % man. We see that God is totally sovereign in all that He is and does and we, as humans are totally responsible for all that we do. We see that the Bible is the written Word of God and it is written by man. We see that God is outside of time and space, since He created it and yet He works within time and space as He so chooses. . . BUT Wait a minute, you say. Aren't you describing the contradictions and paradoxes and anomalies everybody talks about when they talk about God and the Bible? I realize many genuine Christians were raised in an environment that described these things as 'paradoxes.' But let's define

those words and then let's define what would describe some of the concepts I just listed. Once we do that, I believe we can all see why it's important not to use words like paradox or contradiction and anomaly and to be as accurate as we can here.

A contradiction is to assert the opposite; to deny the statement of (a person); to declare to be false or incorrect. Let me ask a question. Is God opposed to Himself; has He denied His Word or ever declared Himself false? You can see that obviously the word contradiction is not the right word to use about God and the Bible. How about a paradox? A paradox is defined as something that is contradictory or unbelievable or absurd but that may actually be true. It is defined as something that is inconsistent with common experiences. From its definition we may like to use this word to describe some of the concepts I listed. A paradox is one-sided and many times it is used to imply only apparent contradictions. It is often used for verbal contradictions. In a paradox if you change the situation or wording you can eliminate the problem. If you say, "I have nothing in the natural, but I have everything in Christ;" all you have to do to solve the issue is say, "The less I have the more I rely on Jesus." But the concepts that we're discussing here that affect our prayer life and understanding about God; namely, that God is Three and yet One is not solved by rewording it. Nor is it solved by lifting one side of the concept up over the other. It is not one-sided. If you lift up His Oneness over the fact that He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, (Three, yet One) you deny

who He is. If you say that these things are anomalies then you would be saying that these concepts are abnormal and that they deviate from the regular or general rule. Well, that also does not apply to God since God is not abnormal. He lives in a realm that is quite normal to Him. He is the one that makes the rules (gravity, space, sowing and reaping, etc.). He can't possibly deviate from His 'regular or normal' rule, since He made it.

So what are we looking at here? Obviously we are looking at two equally true concepts that must be taken together as a whole. One may not be lifted up against the other or be 'one-sided,' but that when we take them together as equals or as a whole, it goes against the law of our human reasoning. What do I mean? Jesus is 100 percent God, right? Yet He is also 100 percent man. According to my human reasoning something cannot be 100 and 100 of anything. It has to be 50/50 in order to make 100. But 50/50 is not how Jesus purchased our redemption. Because He was God incarnate in human flesh, He suffered and died as a man and yet as the perfect divine sacrifice who was totally able to purchase redemption for all mankind because of His total divinity and total humanity. No other human could do so for no other human is God. From before the foundation of the world the Scriptures point to this (See John 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:18-20). If you try to lift His divinity up over His humanity you run into trouble because eventually the thinking will be, "Well, of course Jesus was perfect. He was God. I could never be that perfect

because I'm human." When, in fact, it was Christ's total obedience as a human, even to the point of the cross that purchased our redemption. All of us as humans can be obedient in whatever way God calls us to. We can see from this simple exercise that we cannot compromise either side of these concepts in order to force them to be taken together as a whole. The early Gnostics tried to solve them and it led to such error within the church that Paul spent almost as much time addressing their thinking in the New Testament as he did about law and grace. The other apostles addressed similar issues in order to birth the church in doctrinal purity.

How about the concept of Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How can God be One through all eternity and yet be Three (the Trinity)? Here is where many of the Jewish faith as well as Muslims have a hard time with the Christian faith. It really is in our effort to 'solve' these concepts that we lift one side up over the other and fall into controversy (this is what defining them as a paradox will eventually do). These concepts are not made to be 'solved' by the reasoning of human beings. So what are we to do? The reality is more promising than many realize. We can accept them. It is precisely because the God we serve is so awesome that we cannot always fathom Him or reason Him out. If we served a God that was always easy to explain and never went against our human reasoning, would you believe He was truly God? Remember that this is the God who made the universe and flung the stars and planets out into space. The Bible makes it

clear that the Scriptures were written by men as the Holy Spirit spoke to them (See 2 Peter 1:21). Isaiah 55:8-9 says that God's ways are higher than our ways and that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Many other philosophies and ideas just try to solve the God of the Bible by creating a system that's easier to follow than the one laid out for us by Him in the Scriptures. Even professing Christians can fall prey to this trap. Immanuel Kant was a professor and philosopher in the 18th Century. When he tried to make 'religious' empirical formulas in an effort to classify these truths, they eventually became a part of Kantian philosophy which eventually became the structure upon which Marxism was built. Even in our own efforts today of sharing the Gospel and explaining God to people that have never gone to a church or experienced Him, we forget to let folks know that God Almighty is the one who reveals Himself. It is by revelation that we begin to understand Him, not because we can 'reason' who He is. He doesn't send anomalies or contradictions. He may challenge us with who He is. Actually it is because of how awesome He is that makes these things so challenging to us.

So you might ask, what has all this got to do with prayer? My answer would be this: How do you view God? Do you view Him as possibly the 18th Century philosopher viewed Him through an empirical formula? Your prayer life will be as dry as a bone. The Holy Spirit isn't a formula that can be solved easily by a certain number of prayers over a certain number of hours. Will you

view Him as contradictory or able to send 'anomalies'? Because spiritual experiences can be viewed as an anomaly or abnormal, very normal Christian experiences of prayer and communion with God may be viewed as confusing or always needing to be explained away because they are somehow 'abnormal.' The Bible is replete with prayer experiences that were supernatural, but not necessarily easily explained and certainly not abnormal to God (See Luke 1:8-22). How about the seemingly 'safer' approach of seeing God as sending paradoxes? Even if other aspects of your views of God might be correct, eventually what I call the 'trust' level will break down. You will always feel the need to fix what God is doing, either by prayer or some other human action.

Maybe you've never thought of these issues. Maybe, like most of us, you need a job or one of your family members is sick and they need healing or maybe some other difficult situation has come into your life. You've heard God answers prayer and you're desperate enough to ask. I've got Good News. He does answer prayer. **And frankly, it doesn't depend upon us! He does come in glory and it has nothing to do with us.** But for you to develop a deep relationship with Jesus you have to know who it is you are trusting. For prayer to be a two-way street instead of a one-way petition exercise, how you view Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit does matter. Were you raised in an abusive setting? If you were, it's possible that God will always be viewed as someone with a big stick ready to punish any slight mistake that you make. As a result you will

be compelled to be ready to do the same to anyone you view (correctly or incorrectly) as making the same mistake. Were you raised with little or no supervision, though you were loved? You may find Godly discipline and any form of correction too challenging. I share all of this because many times we form relationships and fellowships based upon our view of God. This is why I talked about the Trinity and Jesus. As I shared before, another one of these concepts that can form our ideas and influence our prayer life is the concept of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. In the same way that we can get bogged down by viewing Jesus incorrectly or God improperly, when we view our responsibility to God and His sovereign actions incorrectly, we can also pray ‘amiss.’

Centuries ago these two concepts challenged the church. To explain what happened back then in a nut shell, an overemphasis was placed on divine sovereignty in what we’ll call ultra-Calvinism. On the other side of the aisle the overemphasis placed on human responsibility gave us extreme forms of Arminianism (or we could say ultra-Arminianism). Because of the length of the debate, there is no way we could exhaust all aspects in one page. To explain a proper view of divine sovereignty, we see the fact throughout the Bible that God is able to do anything that He desires: “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all their depths.” (See Psalm 135:6; Job 42:2). “Have you not heard? Long ago I did it; from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass.”

(See 2 Kings 19:25; Numbers 23:19) To explain human responsibility, we see equally throughout the Scriptures that it is man’s responsibility to obey and receive what God says and does. We are free to obey or not to obey. When we do not act responsibly, there are consequences that are already put into motion. Concerning King Saul, he was given the choice to act responsibly as king over Israel. In fact, the promise to him was an everlasting kingdom (See 1 Samuel 13:13). Because of the fact that humans are given a free will, the Lord makes this statement after Saul exercises his free will to disobey God, “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” (See 1 Samuel 15:11) We quoted Philipians 2:12, 13 earlier. In this portion of Scripture we can see human responsibility in exercising our free will in verse 12, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed---not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence---continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. . .” Here we are commanded to work, be responsible and exercise an action toward our salvation. In verse 13 we see the sovereignty of God at work: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”

If we choose to lift up either of these two concepts, while diminishing the other we can wind up with ideas about witnessing and salvation that can lead us to error. We can begin to say things like this, “Well if God is sovereign, then He knows everyone who will ever be saved, and I never have to share

Jesus with anyone, they’ll be saved anyway.” Or we can develop a mentality of ‘if I don’t do it, God won’t do it.’ We can eventually have the need to control all aspects of a service and never trust God to do anything outside our arena of responsibility, unless He asks us. This can extend to churches. We can believe because God is sovereign and Godly things like preaching and serving are done, that everything that is done and said is ‘all’ God and nothing that is ever said or done thereafter comes from the will of man. It can also affect our prayer life. If we dwell on divine sovereignty too long, we can begin to say, “Why bother praying, God knows what’s going to happen, so He’ll do it any way.” God invites us into the equation when we pray. This is not a game or a sham on God’s part. If it were, there would be no need for us to pray the salvation prayer (See Romans 10:9, 10). All we would have to do was ‘think’ salvation thoughts. But God tells us to actively confess (pray) with our mouths, while we also believe in our heart. Jesus was genuinely troubled when the disciples fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane and did not continue in prayer (See Mark 14:32-41). If their prayers did not matter, why would He have been concerned? On the other hand, if we dwell on our responsibility as humans for too long, we will feel that if we don’t pray about something, it won’t get done. If we don’t speak about an issue, God won’t do it. Eventually we will become self-centered and our world must revolve around us. Prayer will concern our desires, worship will be about our songs, preaching will be about

our sermons and serving will be about what we do.

Lifting up one concept over another can also get us into trouble when it comes to the question of evil on the face of the earth. We can begin to ask questions like, "Well, if God is so sovereign then why does He allow evil?" Let's look at the Scriptures. I think most of us would agree that it was envy and evil in the heart of Judas Iscariot that drove him to betray Christ. But in Acts 2:23 it says, "This man (meaning Jesus) was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge (His sovereignty); and you, with the help of wicked men, (human responsibility) put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross." We see here that it was God's purpose and plan to hand Jesus over in order to purchase mankind's redemption, but look at Luke 22:22. Here we see that even though it was God's plan, Judas would still be judged for exercising his free will to do evil: "The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays Him." We see two types of evil on earth: natural evil, as in beast hurting beast and the devastation of hurricanes, disease, plagues or earthquakes and then we see moral evil. Moral evil would be all evil committed against another person or a person against an animal. Since God never created any part of His creation to be evil, but gave Lucifer, the angels and mankind a choice to follow Him, God can never be blamed for the evil that has transpired because of Lucifer's decision to rebel (along with the angels that followed him) or mankind's decision to rebel. (See 1 John

1:5; Genesis 1:31) Even the evil we see in the animal kingdom is as a result of mankind's decision to rebel against God. (See Genesis 3:14-19) Because of man's rebellion, death spread to all mankind (See Romans 5:12, 19).

The reality of two equally true concepts (divine sovereignty and human responsibility) being seen all throughout Scripture and coming together as one picture (which when we take them together as one goes against our human understanding) is a concept all the early prophets and the New Testament writers always spoke from. It is because they spoke from this reality that they always seemed to talk past their listeners or over their heads. It is why many of their listeners called them false prophets. They spoke from a place where God dwelled. Centuries later we can read these passages a lot easier because we are not directly being confronted with our own areas of responsibility. But take a short exercise with me from Jeremiah 18:1-12. Suppose you were a church leader and you really felt as if God told you to do a thing that seemed perfectly normal and righteous to everyone around you. All of a sudden this guy named Jeremiah comes along and says you're clay in God's hands, turn from your wicked ways. Strange, right? Or maybe it's God! Look at Isaiah 63:7 through to Isaiah 65:2. To read this portion of Scripture and to place yourself in the shoes of the prophet is like taking an emotional roller coaster ride through the toil of human suffering. Yet from God's perspective it is because of human rebellion that this takes place. God

has held out His hands all day long to people that claim they want Him, but their actions and their heart condition says otherwise (See Isaiah 58:2). As a prophet Isaiah sees this and gets the opportunity to feel and know as God does but since he is human, he also experiences the anguish of the human heart. And just think about it, this is prophecy! This is why true prophecy usually confronts all who hear or read it. It is precisely because God is in control and totally sovereign, while human responsibility and free will are exercised equally on the other side of the scales that boggles our minds. Thank God we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit today to help us with these concepts. In the New Testament the prophet Agabus tells Paul that he will be bound if he goes to Jerusalem. (See Acts 21:10-14). Because the Holy Spirit is dwelling in Paul, the apostle understands the principles we have been discussing here. He knows that it's God's will. He may not understand it, but he does not fight it. As a result of Paul's willingness, we have almost half of the New Testament in print that we otherwise may not have had. Paul could not see our need some 2000 years later, but God could. All Paul had to be was willing.

Because God sees and lives and moves from a place that sees, knows and understands all, it messes with my mind. I can make two choices. I can choose to believe Him or choose not to believe Him. The choice is mine. God gives us as human beings that choice. While I can't attempt to make the two equally true concepts of divine sovereignty and human responsibility

resolve themselves as one so as to fit my understanding, I do know that together they make a whole concept of who God is as they relate to salvation and evil on the earth. I also know that in the end God will reconcile all of this (See Revelation 21:22-27; 22:3; Romans 8:18-23) because He already saw it coming and sent Christ as a ransom ahead of time. I realize our brief study here is nowhere near complete. But you can see, even from this short look at these concepts, that quite a lot can influence our view of God and as a result, influence our prayer life. It's not easy for us as finite human beings to view the infinite God of the universe as He really is. We have to change, be molded and get a new mind (See Romans 12:1-3). Thank God He doesn't wait for us to be perfect to join Him through a prayer of repentance. That's the first step (See the link on this web site, 'Who is Jesus'). If we invite Him to change us, He will love on us and show us areas in which we need to change. All of this is done through prayer. To begin this journey, all it takes is a prayer. Log on next month for more. . . .



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