

Life: Bold and spicy

The Secret to Bold Living – Part 1

Acts 1:22-39

September 16, 2007

Someone gave us a free subscription to the magazine *Real Simple*. As you can see, this is not a simple magazine: it takes 400 pages every month to tell me how to simplify my life. But this month an article caught my eye: “Fear Factor: Facts, tips and tactics to help you cope with the things that scare you the most.” It provides a chart with 16 of the most common fears – snakes, flying, water, bees, clowns, germs, public speaking spiders, dogs, dentists – and then describes a simple strategy for “how to deal” with each fear. It does not mention some of my favorite fears - death, death of a loved one, cancer or another disease, terrorist attacks, rejection, abandonment, failure, etc. As I read the article, it struck me that we’re very fearful people. There are so many things that can hurt us. And there are so many things that can cripple our confidence, causing us to live in fear, terror, and bitterness rather than trust and love and faith.

But as I open the fifth book of the New Testament – the Acts of the Apostles – and read the story of those first followers of Jesus –I’m struck by this reality: they aren’t afraid – at least fear doesn’t run their lives. They live with confidence and boldness. They are ordinary, unsophisticated, ill-equipped men and women. And they *should* be afraid. Jesus has just ascended to heaven (see Acts 1:9-10). Before he left, he gave them an outlandish assignment: bring the Good News about Jesus to “ends of the earth” starting where you live – i.e. in your own Jerusalem. Powerful people will oppose them, and threaten them with imprisonment and bodily harm, but they keep exuding confidence. Bad people will beat them, deride them, disappoint them and intimidated them, but they respond with boldness, forgiveness and a fierce and wild love even for their enemies. Actually, their enemies were stunned by their boldness (see 4:13). So how did they do it? What was their secret to confident, bold, adventurous living marked by trust and obedience to the Lord?

This week I want to explore one secret to spiritual confidence: it’s called the sovereignty of God. If that’s a new concept for you, let me define it and then give a few examples. The sovereignty of God means that God rules or reigns over the circumstances of our lives, so that His good purposes are accomplished for us and for His creation. For those who trust Him as Lord and Father, for those who trust in God’s provision of forgiveness and new life in Jesus, God takes all the pieces of our lives and weaves them together into a purposeful, redemptive work of art. Nothing gets wasted. And all the pieces of our lives – even the dark, painful, confusing pieces – are fitted together by a loving Father for God’s glory, our good and for the world’s redemption. The brilliant writer Isak Dinesen once said, “All sorrows can be borne, if you put them into a story.” The sovereignty of God means that God, as our loving and competent heavenly Father, is writing a coherent

story in our lives and God is writing a story all over this fallen, groaning, aching creation.¹

One of the classic verses in the Bible declaring the sovereignty of God is Romans 8:28-29. Notice a few things: (1) The Goodness of God – God’s heart is totally good towards you in Christ Jesus. See also Romans 8:31. (2) The Goal of God – God has one goal for our lives: to make us like Jesus, to shape us and form us so that you and I display the character of Jesus Christ in our lives. We will display Christ in our unique way – through our personality, our life situation, our gender, our temperament – but God wants to forge the image of his Son Jesus into us. (3) The breadth of God - Notice that this truth includes “all things,” not just some things. And if you read further, you some of the events that the Bible includes under “all things”: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness and danger (see Romans 8:36).

The “all things” really does include all things. For instance, on August 1st at 6:00 PM a major bridge over 35W in south Minneapolis collapsed and plummeted into the river. My brother Steve, who has recently turned his life over to Jesus, and his wife and his two sons crossed that bridge two hours before it collapsed. Was that pure chance? Was he delivered by God’s gracious hand? We like those stories about the sovereignty of God. But what if Steve had a flat tire, got delayed two hours, and hit the bridge at 6:00 PM and disappeared into the river? Would that mean that God was not sovereign or less sovereign in my brother’s life? No, the claim from the Bible is that God “causes *all things* to work together for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” – even when bridges collapse.

Or take another example: two married couples – both followers of Jesus – open restaurants on opposite ends of town. Both couples have dreamt about this venture for years. So after they pray and seek wise council and wait on the Lord they gather their savings and throw everything into their dream. One restaurant takes off; the other restaurant flops. As a result, one couple has extra time to volunteer at church, send their children to private schools and take exotic vacations. The other couple is strapped by debt and anxiety; they both work full-time at undesirable jobs, their children can’t even afford new shoes and they have no time left over for church activities. Was God sovereign with the first couple and less sovereign with the second couple? No, “God causes *all things* to work together for good ...”

Those Christ-followers in the Book of Acts believed in God’s sovereignty and it became the bedrock of their confidence. For them the sovereignty of God meant this: God is bigger than the circumstances, accidents, diseases, hurts, disappointments, and heartaches that we meet along life’s journey. God is bigger than the people in our lives – whether

¹ A theological treatise written over 400 years ago (the Belgic Confession of 1561) stated it this way: “(The sovereignty of God) affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father who watches over us with paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not a hair of our head ... nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground, without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust.”

they bless us or curse us, pursue us or abandon us. God is bigger and God has purposes for us that are good and redemptive.

As Peter preached this sermon he wove in the sovereignty of God. See verses 23-24. Notice the bad things that happened to Jesus: he was handed over to mean people, wicked men who put him to death by nailing him on a cross. Notice that the sovereignty of God does not mean that we are responsible for our actions. It was all so unfair and unjust and awful. How could God allow it? Was God big enough for this job? Did God make a mistake? No, God was sovereign when Jesus was miraculously healing people, calming storms, turning water into wine and feeding the masses; and God was just as sovereign when Jesus went to the cross. Notice this verse again: “this was by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge.” And notice also that God brought good purposes even from the cross: see verse 24. Ah, even in the crucifixion God was weaving a good story because there is the unbelievable promise of resurrection. Suffering, cruelty, mean people and even death – none of these get the last word. God does – and his word always leads to hope, love, purpose and resurrection.

We’ll return to these verses in a minute, but notice another example of their belief in the sovereignty of God. See chapter 4:24-30. Their lives are being threatened by powerful, mean people. They should be afraid. They should be filled with hate and resentment. But they pray with such confidence and boldness. Why? They know and believe and base their lives on the bedrock of God’s sovereign goodness. In other words, they trust that God is bigger than all the negative, nasty circumstances of their lives.

The clearest biblical story about the sovereignty of God in the Old Testament is story of Joseph. Turn with me to page 40 or Genesis 50:19-20. Joseph is talking to his brothers and he tells them, “Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” In order to grasp the beauty of these verses we have to back up many years and 13 chapters in the book of Genesis. Joseph’s life started to unravel with his sin. He was arrogant, pompous, self-centered and driven towards success and fame. The Bible tells us very clearly that none of us are pure victims of life; all of us are also rebels and fugitives and sinners before a holy God. As a result of his sin, his brothers wanted to get rid of him, so they faked his death, threw him into a pit and sold him as a slave. Joseph slowly rose from nothingness to become the trusted attendant of a very influential man named Potiphar. The Genesis story says, “The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered” (Genesis 39:2). But then Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape – on his boss’ wife – and he was tossed into prison. Once again, the story tells us, “But while Joseph was in prison, the Lord was with him” (39:20). In other words, God was sovereign and good when Joseph ascended to fame and success; and God was sovereign and good when Joseph started his journey of descent into prison and poverty and pain.

Joseph languished in prison for thirteen years. Was God un-sovereign? No, Joseph had a vision of God’s care that was bigger than circumstances. At one point Joseph said, “It was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:8). Nothing was wasted in the story of Joseph’s life – not even his pain. Somehow God took it all – all the tragedy and

loss, the abuse of his brothers, the success in Potiphar's life, the failure in Potiphar's house, a slow-working justice system, the neglect of others who should have helped him, a famine in a far away land, the "coincidental" visit from his brothers, even Joseph's sin that started his journey of descent into Egypt – God took it all and wove it into a story that God intended for good.

Like Joseph, our life story will always contain a mixture of pain and pleasure, good times and bad times, soaring delight and crushing heartbreak, people who cherish us and people who disappoint us – and often times the same people will cherish and disappoint. Christians do not get an exemption from any of these things. Of course we like the soaring delight and the people who cherish us. But all of these good gifts are merely that – a gift. Jesus referred to the delightful, grace-filled moments this way: "(God the Father) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). In other words, every day is filled with pleasure and delight that I don't deserve. God scatters his grace everywhere – wildly, abundantly, indiscriminately – and I don't deserve any of it. It's pure gift.

But our life's story is also filled with pain, isn't it? Like Joseph, we sometimes rise with success and then we crash with failure. Sometimes it's our own fault; sometimes others mistreat us. But pain is pain, isn't it and it always hurts. Author Ravi Zacharias writes, "Talk about pain, and you will never lack for listeners ... Over the years I have discovered that pain ... comes not in one package or one expression but in various measures. While pain is the universal leveler, it works differently in everyone's life. It shapes us uniquely, sparing no one in the process."

Now I said that pain hurts. Accepting the sovereignty of God does not shut down our emotions of hurt, grief and even anger. We live in a fallen and broken world and it will hurt, and we will hurt each other – often accidentally but sometimes even intentionally. The natural response to hurt is grief and sometimes anger. When Jesus came to the grave of his friend Lazarus, he did not say, "Weep not for this is the sovereign will of the Lord so accept it." No, he stood there and wept. Jesus knew that God is bigger than our circumstances, but he also knew that God created a good and beautiful and whole world that was now broken and in ruins. Death never should have entered the world. Death came when we rebelled against God. And so he wept. He wept and felt what we all feel at death and destruction and tragedy: it's wrong, it hurts, it shatters and it should be set right again. Jesus will set things right – everything! – but at times he just stands beside us and shares our tears.

But a follower of Jesus faces his or her life story – with all its mingling of pleasure and pain, soaring delight and crushing heartache – with an under-girding called the sovereignty of God. Somehow, someway, sometime, God will take all the pieces of my life – the shattered, broken pieces and the lovely, shiny pieces and craft them back into a beautiful story of redemption and wholeness. That is the promise of Romans 8:28-29 – and the all things really does mean all things.²

² Pastor John Piper claims that Romans 8:28 is the only bedrock to build your life upon: *If you live inside this massive promise, your life is more solid and stable than Mount Everest. Nothing can blow you over when you are inside the*

How does God weave all things together for our good and for His glory? Ah, that's not always easy. We always look for human connection. We want clear explanations. So we say, "I missed the train so it delayed me so I would miss that twenty car accident on the L.I.E." Or "I failed biochemistry so God could put me into English Literature." Sometimes these human connections make sense; sometimes we see them clearly, but most of the time they remain a mystery. We don't know when or how God will cause all things to work together for good.

For instance, let's return to the two couples that opened the restaurants. Perhaps the successful couple is in much more danger. Perhaps the couple who failed has learned through suffering and failure to renew their faith in Christ. Perhaps they just lived a boring, conventional, cultural Christian faith but now, through the failure, they have been driven to depend on God in ways they never imagined.

We don't know and that's not the way the New Testament tries to deal with the mystery of God's sovereignty. They never tried to unravel the mystery and tie up all the loose ends. Instead, they pointed back to Jesus. Look at the cross, they said. Look at the injustice and horror of it all. God in the flesh, Jesus, was murdered. But he was also bearing our sins ... And then look at the resurrection.

- Have you claimed Romans 8:28-29 as promises for you? Have you come to faith in the Lord Jesus?
- Are you living in fear? What is your fear?
- Are you living in regret? Let it go at the foot of the cross?
- Are you living in bitterness? God is bigger than the people who have hurt you.
- Are you living in too much safety? Step out in bold and adventurous faith in the Living God who is Sovereign and good and who is for you in Christ Jesus?
- Where does your confidence come from? Is it based in the sovereignty of a good God who has good plans for your life? Or does it rise and fall depending on success or failure, or how others treat you?

walls of Romans 8:28. Outside Romans 8:28 all is confusion and anxiety and fear and uncertainty ... There are slat roofs of fragile investment strategies and fleeting insurance coverage and trivial retirement plans ... (But) once you walk through the door of love into the massive, unshakable structure of Romans 8:28 everything changes ... You simply can't be blown over any more. The confidence that a sovereign God governs for your good all the pain and all the pleasure that you will ever experience is an incomparable refuge and security and hope and power in your life. When God's people really live by the future grace of Romans 8:28 – free measles to mortuary – they are the freest and strongest and most generous people in the world.