

58 - Love and Freedom

John 10:17-18

It's confusing to hear people talk about God controlling everything because everywhere you look He has given so much freedom. He gave humans freedom; He gave angels freedom, and now we hear the Son of God telling us that He too had been given the freedom to choose whether or not to die on the cross. He says the Father gave Him authority over His own life, so that He could choose whether or not to die for our sins and even to choose when He would rise from the dead.

God doesn't give people freedom because He doesn't care what we do. He gives freedom so that people can choose to obey. He is inviting us to partner with Him in His great work of redemption, to be the instruments through which He performs His good works and as a result to share in the rewards that follow. If He took that freedom away it would change everything. He could force us to do the right thing, but that would reduce us to slaves. Of course He wants us to obey and seek His guidance in all our decisions, but that is very different from forcing us to do His will. Though He would have every right to do so as our Creator, God refuses to dominate or manipulate. He reveals His will and then invites people to follow. He does, rightly and sternly, warn us about what will happen if we disobey. Yet He refuses to make the decisions for us. Why? Because He wants children who choose to love and obey Him, not slaves who mechanically serve Him. He's given us the gift of freedom, so we can give Him the gift of obedience. His love for us has set us free, so our love for Him can fully surrender to Him.

After repeatedly telling a group of Pharisees (Jn 9:40) that He, the Good Shepherd, was going to lay down His life for His sheep (Jn 10:11, 15), Jesus wanted them to know three things: First, His death was voluntary; it was something He had chosen to do. God was not making Him do this, and humans had no power to take His life. Second, His death was a step of faith. He was confident in God's promise that He would not stay in the grave, but He would rise again from the dead. And third, He wanted them to know that His death was His gift of love to the Father. Because the Father loved Him, He had given Him the freedom to choose whether or not to die, and because He loved the Father, He would gladly obey. At that moment He was explaining the relationship between Himself and the Father, but as He did so He revealed our relationship with Him as well.

Explaining His death (Jn 10:17-18)

This entire passage about the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-18) centers around the fact that Jesus will lay down His life to save us (vs 11, 15). His death is what sets Him apart from all others who claim to be the savior of God's people (Jn 10:1-2). And it is His death that qualifies Him to be the "door" through which every human must pass in order to enter God's sheepfold (Jn 10:7). In the course of this discussion He also said that those who believe in Him will come from all over the world. God's "flock" will be a diverse flock made up of people from many different languages and cultures. But before He finished this teaching about the Good Shepherd He wanted everyone to understand that His death would be something He freely chose to do, and He wanted them to understand why.

What Jesus said (Jn 10:17-18)

I believe this is what the Pharisees heard Jesus say:

"This is the way the Father has shown His love for Me: He has given Me complete authority over My life. He will not force Me to die, nor does any human have the power to kill Me. I am choosing to lay it down, confident that I will take hold of it again. So what I am about to do is a gift of love. I'm doing this because I love the Father, and I long to rescue My "sheep." And I will remain in the grave only as long as I choose to. Not even death has the power to hold Me. As I have said before, I will rise from the grave on the third day (Jn 2:19-22).

"In His love the Father has asked Me, not forced Me, to become the sacrifice that will pay for the sins of the world. And in my love for Him and you, I gladly choose to do so. But at no point am I a victim. My death is voluntary, and I am in full control throughout the entire act of redemption" (paraphrase).

Again as we mentioned earlier, this statement by Jesus contains three important truths about His death. Let's try to understand each one.

His death was voluntary

One of the best ways we can understand what happened to Jesus is by comparing it to an example of what did not happen to Him. God did not treat His Son the way Abraham treated his on Mt. Moriah. Listen:

"Then they came to the place of which God had told him, and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood" (Ge 22:9).

Abraham apparently trapped Isaac and then bound him with rope in order to lay him on that stone altar. Isaac was a victim not a willing sacrifice. He had no choice in the matter. He was nearly murdered.



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Now compare that with what Jesus is telling us about His own death. He said the Father was not going to trap Him, bind Him and place Him on an altar (cross). He would willingly lay Himself down on that “altar” (wait in the Garden of Gethsemane for the soldiers to come to arrest Him). In other words, what happened to Isaac was not going to happen to Him. He would lay down His life voluntarily.

As we read through the Bible we discover that Jesus made a conscious choice to die on at least several occasions that we know about. The first must have occurred in heaven before He came to earth. Paul says He chose to become a man, so He could die for us. Listen: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus (selfless love), who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Php 2:5-7).

That means Jesus fully knew what would happen to Him before He left heaven and came to earth.

A second very powerful choice was made at His water baptism at the Jordan River (Mt 3:13-17). He had no sins to wash away when He presented Himself to John the Baptist, yet He insisted that John immerse Him. To Him that water must have become a symbolic grave. He would lay Himself down in it as a way of saying to the Father, “I know what will happen to Me if I step into the ministry to which You have called Me. It will lead Me to the cross, and I accept Your will.” In response to this, the Father opened the heavens, sent the Holy Spirit and said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

A third very significant moment took place on the Mount of Transfiguration (Lk 9:28-36). Jesus went up on a mountain to pray and began to glow like the sun. He was, apparently, in the process of being lifted directly back into heaven. He was so pure, death had no power over Him. At that critical moment Moses and Elijah came to counsel Him about the death He must die at Jerusalem, and then He returned to His normal human condition. And afterward, He was “determined to go to Jerusalem to die” (Lk 9:51).

His death was a step of faith

Having become a man, Jesus had to walk in faith just as we do. That means He chose to die trusting God's promises which said He would rise again from the dead. We hear Him say, “I lay down My life so that I may take hold of it again” (Jn 10:17) (literal). There are many promises in Scripture that speak of the Messiah dying and rising, but let's look at one Jesus surely held on to as He faced death. In Isaiah's great prophecy of the Suffering Servant he first describes the Servant's violent death, but as soon as he has done that he describes His resurrection and reward. Listen: Isaiah 53:10-12.

When Jesus spoke about His death, He usually spoke about His resurrection as well. In His mind the two were deeply connected. They were both part of one event. His assignment was not simply to die but to rise again on the third day. Death was not the end; it was the ugly step that had to be taken to break the power of death. When He asked Him to lay down His life as the Good Shepherd, the Father also gave Him the authority to take it back again. As surely as He chose death, He also chose life.

His death was a gift of love

It wasn't the nails that held Jesus on the cross. He told those who came to arrest Him that any moment He chose He could have called out to His Father, and He would have “at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels” (Mt 26:53). And it wasn't a spear through His side that ended His life; He was already gone. And before He left He had announced, “It is finished!” and then He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit” (Jn 19:30).

In the Garden of Gethsemane we are allowed to watch Jesus struggle with the horror of what lay ahead of Him (Mt 26:36-46). But then we hear Him say this, “My Father, if this [cup] cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” We hear the Son talking to the Father, and we hear Him make a full surrender. The Son was choosing to die because He loved the Father and us, and the Father gave Him the freedom to make that choice because He loved the Son.

Love and Freedom

Jesus' death was voluntary. It was a step of faith, and it was a gift of love. And that's how God wants us to walk with Him as well. Because He loves us, He has given us the freedom to choose whether or not to obey Him. He is inviting us to join Him in His great work of redemption, to be the instruments through which He performs His good works. In other words, He is treating us the same way He treated His own Son. The question each of us must answer is will we respond the same way His Son did.

Questions

- 1) Think of a time when you were faced with a choice of whether or not to obey God. What choice did you make? Why did you choose that way?
- 2) Think of a time when you chose to do something very difficult to help someone else. Tell us what you did. How did that person respond?