

Hebrews

Hebrews 2:9 - Our will versus God's will

This is an insert into the series on Hebrews, to go back to **Hebrews 2:9** and the bit about Jesus being crowned with glory and honour **because he suffered and tasted death**. I breezed over that when going through verse 9 in part 5, without stopping to think how that is possible. How can suffering and tasting death, which are only short-lived, temporary experiences for humans, even remotely entitle a person to an eternity of glory and honour?

But we read here in Hebrews that this is exactly what happened to Jesus. He lived a short human lifetime, suffered and tasted death as God willed, and for doing that God gave him supreme and eternal rulership of his Kingdom. It was tough short-term pain, yes, but it translated into eternal gain. So there had to be something about suffering and tasting death as a physical human being that God so deeply valued in Jesus it was all he needed to say to his Son, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever" (Hebrews 1:8).

So what was it about Jesus' suffering and tasting death that made it so acceptable to God? And that's just the first question. There's a second question too, because how is it possible for a God of holiness and justice to then make the same staggering exchange possible for the rest of us humans too? And that's a question I've had for years, as to how God can take me from who I am, with all my obvious weaknesses and stupid things I still think, say and do, and make me a highly valued member of his royal family forever? Why would he do that, and especially when he knows I'll still be me, probably without much improvement on what I am now, until the very last second of my life?

What happens in my life, therefore, or what must I do before I die, that makes it acceptable enough to God to transform this frail, vulnerable, incomplete mess that I am into a king worthy of glory and honour forever? Or is it that God sort of bends the rules a bit to squeeze me into his Kingdom? But we know from the story of Israel that he doesn't let anyone into his presence who isn't holy. God does not compromise his standards or his rules of behaviour to accommodate our weakness. He loves us, yes, and he's gracious and merciful, but no way can he risk resurrecting anyone to eternal life he isn't sure about, right? So what convinces him we'll be OK as members of his royal family forever, despite all our obvious imperfections now?

But that raised a third question in my mind, because why is God even bothering giving us the chance to become members of his royal family forever when he'd **already** given us that chance in Genesis and we rejected it? Adam and Eve threw God's offer into the garbage in favour of one bite of a fruit that would hand the control of their lives over to themselves rather than God. And Adam even knew what he was doing too, but he couldn't resist it. The offer of being in the driver's seat, having all the controls at his fingertips giving him the power and wisdom to do as he wished and what he thought best, was so powerful his mind could think of nothing else.

It was the first stirring of the human will, brought to vivid life by a temptation to oppose God's will, and what a shock to see how powerful and stupid our human will is. Faced with an alternative to God's will and up popped the human will immediately to grab onto it. Faced with a choice it was amazing how quickly and easily the human will took over. But obviously God wanted this to be known, because he deliberately made a creature that under Satan's influence would head straight for the human will to stir it into action and show us all just how powerful it really is.

And if we missed seeing how powerful it was in Genesis, we've had thousands of years of seeing how powerful the human will is since, because we still love being in control and having all power within ourselves. For centuries, for instance, we've viewed nature as something to be tamed and conquered, rather than cared for as God willed in Genesis. But that's the rule of the human will. We'd much rather exploit the environment for our own ends, believing it won't matter anyway because we have the power within ourselves to solve all problems. Or we don't care about the planet at all, because why should gods like us care when the world only exists to serve our needs?

And every chance we get we pat ourselves on the back for how clever and brilliant we are. We hand out awards, and gush about the brilliance of movie directors, fashion designers, artists and composers. We even turn funerals into celebrations of life, and gush on about how great the person was, but no mention of the great God who gave the deceased his abilities, or what God made humans for in the first place. All that is dismissed as boring nonsense compared to the great sense of humour the person had, or the crazy things he got up to when he was young, or his love for his family, or his bravery in face of terminal illness. God doesn't get much of a look-in, or if he does it's usually droning through the Lord's Prayer or singing hymns most of the audience has never sung and doesn't want to. And it's all over in half an hour, and nobody is any the wiser as to what God willed a human life for. It really does make you wonder why God bothers with us at all.

But he does, because the question is asked point blank in both Psalms and Hebrews, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” and the answer comes right back that God hasn’t given up one iota on his original plan for humans. He still wants to crown us with glory and honour as members of his royal family, just as he originally intended in Genesis. But it’s HOW he’s bringing us humans to that point now that takes us right back to why there has to be suffering and tasting death - first of all for Jesus, and then for us as we follow in his footsteps.

And it has everything to do with the human will, and the battle we must face with it as the key to God accepting us into his family.

I have two examples to illustrate this, one from the life of Jesus, and one from the life of a person who really thought he had everything nicely sewn up in his life, until he met Jesus.

The obvious example from Jesus’ life was the time he said to God, “Not as I will but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). In that one sentence he summarized the greatest battle raging in the heads of every human on this planet and every human who’s ever lived long enough to make choices and decisions. It is the human will versus God’s will.

And Jesus made it very clear where he stood on that point, because he stated outright in **John 4:34**, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work,” and in **John 5:30**, “I do not seek my own will, but the will of him who sent me,” and again in **John 6:38**, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”

And doing God’s will had tight boundaries too, as in **John 5:19** when Jesus said, “the Son can do nothing of himself (or by his own will), but only does what he sees the Father do,” and in **verse 30**, “Of my own self I can do nothing,” and in **John 12:49** and **50**, “For I do not speak of my own accord, but what the Father who sent me commanded me to say and how to say it....So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say,” and in **John 14:31**, “I only do exactly as the Father has instructed me to do.”

Jesus had a tight rein on him, which I imagine to people heavily into our culture today must sound horrible. How can you ever be free if you can’t have freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of choice in what you say, think and do? But that’s the driving force of the HUMAN will, just as it was in the Garden of Eden, to be free to be oneself, and free from anyone, God included, telling you what to think, say or do.

Which serves to illustrate again where the battle for us humans lies. The battle lines are clearly drawn in Scripture, from the moment the human will was stirred in the Garden of Eden to Jesus praying, “Not my will, but your will be done,” to us now following in Jesus’ footsteps. It’s a battle between God’s will and our human will. And there are no half measures. It’s either one or the other, as Jesus made clear in his own life and in what he said to others.

In **Luke 14**, for instance, Jesus put his cards on the table to a large crowd gathered in **verse 25**, when he said in **verse 27** , “anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Well, that picture must have sent a shudder through the crowd, because in their day if someone was seen carrying a cross it meant he was going to die. It was a one way walk to certain death. So Jesus is already introducing the concept of suffering and tasting death being necessary for his disciples. He doesn’t say in **what form** yet that suffering and death will take, but for a disciple it is required, and nothing less than suffering and death is acceptable.

Jesus had spoken in similar terms six chapters earlier too, in **Luke 9:23-25**, when he said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” In other words, to be a true follower or disciple of Jesus you had to die. You really were carrying a cross to your death.

That doesn’t sound like good news, though, or the kind of subject you’d start with for someone thinking about Christianity, but it would be doing them a great favour in preventing a nasty surprise later on, because back in **Luke 14:28** Jesus talks about “counting the cost.” So there is a cost for being a Christian. It also happens to be the biggest cost a human can make too, because it involves, as Jesus said in **verse 33**, “giving up everything,” or as another translation phrases it, “renouncing all that he has.”

Some have interpreted that as giving up all worldly possessions and becoming a monk or a nun. Or giving all their money to the poor. Or leaving one’s home and children and becoming a missionary in some far off land. Or giving up things we enjoy like good food, travel, hobbies, playing and watching sports, or buying a decent car. But is that really what Jesus meant by renouncing or giving up everything? It might, because Jesus did tell a rich young man in **Matthew 19:21**, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor.” And in Hebrews 2:10 it’s “perfection” that God is after, which can only come through suffering, so is this the suffering he meant?

I had to think about that one for a bit, but then it dawned on me that it ties in with the main point I'm getting at here, as to how and why God is totally willing - and justified - in making us fully fledged members of his royal family and crowning us with glory and honour, despite our many weaknesses and obvious imperfections. We know so far that it has everything to do with this battle between our will versus God's will, and the need for suffering to perfect us, but we still don't know yet WHAT it is that we must suffer and what death we must taste for God to accept them as sufficient for making us rulers in his Kingdom forever.

So that's what stirred this second example in my mind, about the rich young man who really thought he had everything nicely sewn up in his life. It's with great confidence, then, that he strides up to Jesus and asks him in **Matthew 19:16**, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" And Jesus answers in **verse 17**, "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments," and he makes reference to five of the original ten commandments in Exodus 20, and one from Leviticus 19:18 about "loving your neighbour as yourself."

The rich young man is jolly pleased to hear that, because he's been keeping all those commandments to a tee, but just to be sure that he's totally on the right track to eternal life by his obedience he asks Jesus in **verse 20** if there was anything else he might be lacking, or something he might have missed. So the man **wants** to be perfect, which sounds good, because isn't it perfection that God wants in granting eternal life to us, and nothing less will do?

And Jesus confirms that too, when he starts off in **verse 21** with "If you want to be perfect..." So, yes, perfection IS good, just as it is in Hebrews where it talks about Jesus "being made perfect" too. It's the cost we must include in being a Christian, because God is not diluting his demands one bit. Only perfection will do.

But now we get to hear WHAT that perfection entails, because Jesus says to the man, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me."

So now we've got a direct command from Jesus on how to be perfect, which is great to know, because all the man has to do now to be utterly perfect in God's sight - and therefore deserving of eternal life - is sell what he owns, which shouldn't be too difficult, and then throw in his lot with Jesus and become one of his personal disciples, guaranteeing his future forever. It's a great trade-off and clearly to his advantage. All he has to do is get rid of a few physical things and in return he gets eternal life.

It's just like us being given rulership in God's royal family forever for some temporary suffering and tasting death in this life now. So we've got a great example here of the position we're in too, in the amazing trade-off God has made possible for merely a bit of physical suffering in the here and now.

But instead of the man leaping at the offer and saying, "Wow, is that all I've got to do to be in God's kingdom forever? You mean, I just get rid of a few things and in return I get the staggering wealth of all God's blessings, way beyond what I have now, forever? Wow, that's amazing, I'll take it." But instead he frowns, his heart sinks like a rock in water, and a terribly sad look fills his face, "because," **verse 22**, "he had great wealth."

The man didn't want to give up his money, and the good life that went with it, the nice restaurants, the servants, the waiters fawning all over him, the nice robes from Egypt, the admiration and respect he got for being a successful businessman, and the fine reputation he had in the community. He'd worked hard for all that and done the dream, and here he was financially secure for life, free to do as he pleased, travel to all the best spots with the best spas, attend the best concerts, and fill his home with expensive art and sculpture. No, he wasn't going to give all that up. Why should he, when it was his initiative and his cleverness and his hard work that had made it all happen?

And there we have it illustrated for us, in brilliant colour and detail, **the extraordinary power of the human will**. It was so powerful in this man that keeping the wealth he'd created actually justified in his mind throwing Jesus' amazing deal in the garbage. It was nothing new, of course, because that's exactly what Adam and Eve did. Given the choice between a Tree that would give **them** eternal life too, versus doing what they wanted in the here and now, they easily went for the here and now. They threw their birthright in the garbage for an obvious lie, and God's will for them held no appeal at all.

And suddenly we see where the real battle lies. It's not in trying to keep the commandments to the best of our ability to get eternal life, because Jesus clearly shows here that you can keep all the commandments perfectly but still be lacking. It's in the battle between God's will and human will, and how human will, even when offered the most amazing deal from God the Creator and Sustainer of everything, will reject it in favour of some short-term, short-lived, ever so temporary gain in this life now.

No wonder Jesus was so blunt in **Luke 9:25** when he asked, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" And that's the question every human is faced with and needs to answer.

Put bluntly Jesus is asking, “You mean you’re willing to give up the chance for your ‘self’ to live forever just so you can live as you think best for the few short years you’ve got left before you die?”

“Well, yes,” it seems most people today would answer, because that’s what will be said at their funeral. People will get up and talk about how great and full the deceased’s life was because of all the good and fun things he got up, and how much he did for people, and how much his children and grandchildren loved him, and how much he loved life, or how brave he was in his battle against cancer. It’s all about the glorification of the person and how he lived this life now, as if it’s the be all and end all. But when is it ever mentioned, even at a Christian funeral, that the one thing the dead person lived for above all else was the fulfillment of God’s will, no matter how much suffering he experienced, or how short his life was, or if cancer cut him down in his prime?

Meaning that no one at the funeral gets to hear WHY the fulfillment of God’s will is so important to us humans, or why it’s the greatest battle we humans face, and why it needs to be fought and won. No one, therefore, gets to hear how and why God in his great and unbending holiness is willing to accept us weak and very stupid, stubborn humans into his royal family ruling his creation forever. They don’t get to hear, then, how suffering and tasting death come into the picture as the necessary death throes of our human will. Or that because of the death of our human will that God in his amazing grace and mercy accepts that as sufficient for crowning us with glory and honour forever. Which probably means they won’t hear much about Jesus either, which is a great pity, because his life is the only evidence we’ve got that God really **does** give eternal life to those who focus their lives on his will, not their own.

What we’ve got instead at a typical funeral is trying to cope with this great person we loved simply being snuffed out. And it all seems such a waste, and so does any suffering the person might have gone through too, because what was the point of any of it - good, bad and ugly - when it all ends in death?

But what is there in the **Christian** message at funerals that answers that? We talk of the resurrection, yes, but not how and why God deems a person worthy of it. We just assume that a resurrection awaits good people, but Jesus told the rich young man in Matthew 19 that it didn’t matter how good the man had been, or how well he’d kept the commandments, or how much he’d loved his neighbour. it was all a totally pointless exercise if his human will was still the driving force in his life, which in that man’s case it was. And if that sounds terribly shocking and a real downer, then we’re not the first people to feel that way, because in **Matthew 19** the disciples reacted with horror too.

Jesus had just used the analogy of trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle to explain how impossible it is for us humans to enter God's Kingdom if our human will is still the driving force in our lives.

Well, **Matthew 19:25**, "When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?'" You bet, good question. I mean, what's the point of trying to do anything good or loving in this life if all we get at the end of what we think is a jolly well lived life is an interview with God and he says, "Well, old chum, that was quite a performance you put on down there, but you totally missed the point"?

So what was the point instead? If we can't ever put on a good enough performance, or ever be fun enough, or loving and good enough, for God to applaud and welcome us into his Kingdom with a slap on the back and a hearty laugh, then what is he asking of us instead?

The answer from Hebrews is, "But we see Jesus," and what we see of Jesus is God saying to him in **Hebrews 1:8**, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever." So that part is done and dusted. Jesus is fully God, and he's on the throne of God's Kingdom as Supreme Commander of Planet Earth being totally trusted by God to rule this Earth the way it was meant to be.

But what was the condition in Jesus' life that satisfied God his son was ready for the job? It's in **verse 9**, where God says to his Son, "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness," or put another way, "You loved what I wanted, not what the world wanted," and that's what it took for God to accept Jesus' human life as being sufficient and ready to rule.

That's easy to say, but for Jesus to reach that point, according to **Hebrews 2:9-10**, it would take suffering and tasting death. But suffering and death in what form? Well, we know from the most agonizing time of his life, in the Garden of Gethsemane, that the greatest battle in Jesus' head, the one that made him sweat blood, was saying to God, "Not my will, but yours." And that's what made him suffer most of all. It was the overwhelming power of his own will, plus the billions of other human wills all being dumped into his brain as well, all screaming for their wishes to be met, not God's. The noise in his head must have been excruciating.

But what Jesus had fought all his adult life was the screaming of his will. Never could he allow his will to overrule or override God's will. He could only say what God had planned for him to say, and only do what God had planned for him to do.

The death he tasted every second of every waking hour, then, was the putting down of his will in favour of God's will. And since that also made him the pioneer of our salvation, that's clearly what he's now enabling us to do too. That's why he told the rich young man in Matthew 19, "Come, follow me," because Jesus knew the battle the young man was in for, so Jesus would always be there to help him.

And we now have the Holy Spirit always with us to help us, because Jesus knew what we would be in for too. Every day we face the same battle he faced, and it is brutal. For me, it begins the moment I enter traffic. If anybody gets in my way my will is screaming at me to get upset at all these dumb idiots driving like zombies, and it justifies me being angry and driving like a mad man. Well, how can God ever accept me into his ruling family if that's how I'm going to deal with people? Clearly, it has to stop. But my mind won't let me. It hates having to hand over the controls to the Holy Spirit. It rages in my head, justifying my lousy behaviour, which now puts me in exactly the same position as the rich young man in Matthew 19.

Like that young man, I'm faced with a clear picture of what God's will is for me. It is the putting down of my will, wherever and whenever it so obviously opposes his will, and I usually know when that is. And if I don't know I get a gentle nudge from the Holy Spirit, or if I'm being stupid and stubborn an elbow in the ribs, to wake me up to the obvious.

It leaves me, then, with the same question that young man was faced with: "Is what God is offering me for eternity worth what he's put before me as the one thing he needs from me to convince him I'll be OK and I won't treat people in his Kingdom like I want to treat them now?" That's all he needs to know to lift this scrap of human imperfection into his ruling family forever, because our human will has always been the problem. If he sees me, therefore, willing to go through the suffering and tasting death that comes with the putting down of my human will, and I willingly confess fault when I fail to use the power of the Holy Spirit to put my will down, the holy God who never compromises his holiness is utterly justified in giving me eternal life. Like Jesus it's obvious that I too love righteousness and hate wickedness, and it's only weakness that causes me to crack, and then, thanks to the Holy Spirit's help, it's only temporary.

Now that's what I would like to have said if and when someone gets up to talk about me at my funeral, that in reality I was a terribly ordinary chap with nothing worth a hoot in God's sight to justify him giving me eternal life in his family. Except one thing: I loved what God wanted, not what I wanted.

And I hope then that an explanation is given as to how suffering and tasting death fitted in with that, that it's the cost I was willing to pay to have my human will stopped in its tracks when it opposed God's will. And yes, it was tough for me not being able to say and do what my human will wanted, and crushingly tough at times when I was tired and cranky and exhausted by ill health and the insanity of this world.

But as a Christian I was given a note to read any time I was near to breaking point, which goes like this: "My dear friend, Jonathan, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange is happening to you. Instead be glad of it, because suffering makes you a partner with Jesus, so imagine the joy you have coming when his glory is revealed."

I thank Peter for writing that in **1 Peter 4:12-13**, and his advice in **verse 19** too, that "if you are suffering, Jonathan, in a manner that pleases God (which battling our human will is), keep on doing what is right (according to God's obvious will), and trust your life (when the power of your human will threatens to turf out God's will) to the faithful One who created you, for he will never fail you."

That's an amazing promise and also good, practical advice, because when it comes to silencing the scream of our human will, Jesus made it clear in **Matthew 19:26** - at the end of the incident with the rich young man sadly walking away - that "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Jesus knows how impossible it is for us to subdue the power of our human will, because that was his biggest battle too, so he's ready and willing to help us. He also knows from his own life's battle with his human will, that being willing to suffer and taste the death that comes with battling the human will is all that God needs to convince him that we are worthy of eternal life, despite our weaknesses and imperfections.

And wouldn't you love all those at your funeral to hear that too, that the Christian hope is real because the person who died fought that battle and that's what guarantees a life forever in God's Kingdom ruling this planet the way it was meant to be?