

Coach House Church

BEACONS

LEANING

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One of my jobs in the past was to look after Southern Europe for the company I worked for. This involved the arduous task of taking flights to Europe most weeks, usually to Italy or Turkey. One of the places in Italy had a peculiar land mark that acted as its main tourist attraction. Many of you will have heard of the city of Pisa, but probably and only because of its famous tower: - Torre Pendente di Pisa. The Leaning tower of Pisa. The freestanding bell tower of the cathedral in Pisa.

The crazy thing about the tower, is that when construction on it began, way back in the 12th century, it was never meant to lean. It was meant to be like any other bell tower, straight and true. The tower consists of 7 floors and then the bell housing perched on top. It took nearly 200 years to complete – Noah could have built two arks in this time!) – but there was a break of 100 years as the Republic of Pisa became embroiled in civil war with its neighbours. Problems began to show themselves when the building got to the second floor of its construction – however they should have been apparent from the very beginning. Envisaging a 7-storey tower with bells on top, should have been prepared for with more than the 3ft of foundation it was given! This and the soft ground on which it was constructed became a recipe for disaster, and became evident when the 2nd floor was added and its now famous lean began to show itself.

Wait a minute – it started to lean at the construction of the 2nd floor and they still built another 5 floors on top of that?? What were they thinking!

In fact, when the lean was detected at this stage, subsequent layers were added with counter weighting included. This meant building sides a little higher on one side to compensate for the lean and strengthening the foundations. The tower was therefore built with a curve to its structure to counter the lean. Famously, it has had counterweights added to the bottom to increase its stability and although it had been continually leaning more and more each year (which would have led to

its falling down) – in recent history the lean has been stabilised and it is believed that current measures will mean that the tower will not lean any more for at least 200 years to come.

This is all fascinating, but why not do something to straighten it? Well, the authorities have realised that the tourist potential of the tower is far greater because of its lean than it would be straight. After all, the straight bell tower of Pisa doesn't quite have the same ring to it! (no pun intended)

Perversely, we humans consider folly and deformity a thing of interest and are strangely drawn to such things. Not that long ago it was a source of entertainment to view abnormality and deformity in the human form, as attested to in the popularity of freak shows and circuses. I think of John Merrick, who we more commonly refer to as the 'elephant man' because of the film and the resemblance to an elephant that his deformities produced. Crowds would flock to see such a spectacle – but the truth is, it was probably because we like to see ourselves as better than we ought and these exaggerations help us to feel ok about ourselves. Even as Christians, we can catch ourselves thinking – 'at least I'm not as bad as them', as a way of justifying our position against another. But all this does, like continuing to build on a dodgy foundation, is make us feel falsely good about ourselves and allows us to keep building on flawed assumptions.

Scripture tells us to build our lives on solid dependable foundations – the truth of who God is and His great mercy towards His creation. The fact -that Jesus is the son of God and gave His life in order to make things right for us with God, because we in our fallen humanity could not do it ourselves. The fact - that we have eternity in heaven promised to those who accept Jesus' sacrifice for our wrongdoing – which we commonly know as sin – should encourage us to continually try and do better and correct the source of our 'leaning'.

I never really knew that the tower of Pisa was leaning as it was being built. I wrongly assumed, like many, that it began to lean once it was finished. To continue to build knowing this, sounds like madness to me (as well as dangerous to those building it!) But this is probably an accurate understanding of who we are. Let me put this into spiritual terms for a moment.

The bible clearly tells us that our foundational position as human being, is that we are born in sin – we don't choose this – it just is. We are building on a faulty foundation.

Romans 3:23

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (NIV)

However, this wasn't always true. Adam and Eve for example did not fall (and were therefore sinners) until they disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, it could be argued that foundationally, mankind was created without sin, but since the fall, our position is one of sin and we have started to inch away from the beauty of our intended position. We have started to lean! Like the tower of Pisa, we gradually move further and further away from what was intended. The current situation of the tower of Pisa is that it is some 15ft out of plumb. That means that at the apex of the tower, it is 15ft skewed from its centre line – that is some lean – and it is only the remedial work carried out that has caught it – suspended it where it is – before it crashes to the ground.

Our problem is that there is nothing we can do to restore ourselves back to plumb. We are way off the intended plumb line and it is impossible for us to claw ourselves back in line – we are heading for disaster (which the Bible defines as hell). That is why we rightfully worship and give thanks to God, who recognises that we are unable to straighten ourselves out, and so, sends Jesus to live as a man on earth, so that His sacrifice is deemed to correct all of our failure, shame and separation. If you like, when we accept Jesus, our lean is suspended – our impending inherent structural default is stopped from heading for destruction and we are now preserved by God's great mercy towards us.

More than that, the righteousness of Jesus covers our shame and guilt, making us something to be admired and held up before others as trophies of God's grace for the world to see.

Remember that the tower of Pisa is now a recognised tourist attraction, attracting thousands of visitors each year to admire it.

As Christians, we are transformed into something which brings Glory to God:

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (ESV)

It is hard for us to come to terms with the fact that God views us in such positive light, but this is purely because God acts in Grace towards us. He does not treat us as we deserve. God is LOVE and He acts in accordance with love.

God does not want anyone to perish without knowing Him. In His grace He waits patiently and continues to hold us from falling.

I'm like the leaning tower of Pisa with Gods hand being the restraining force which holds me and keeps me from falling.

In the words of the famous hymn, penned by John Newton

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see

It is only when we realise that God sustains us that we can truly bring glory and honour rightfully to Him. He has saved me from impending doom. I am upheld by God's grace.



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