

By Jeff Hopper

OUR ACTIVITY,
GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

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a balanced
consideration of
God's role in our
everyday lives

When we begin to take a thorough look at God's sovereignty, we are presented with this essential question: *How involved is God in the details of our lives?*

PERHAPS YOUR THEOLOGY DOESN'T RUN TOO deep. Few people live on a level where they awaken each morning and ponder the things of God. But most of us do ask this question, "What am I going to do today?"

Your own question may not sound exactly like that, because with your calendar a fingertip away, you can quickly scan the events of the day. You are reminded of when your meetings will take place and what their purpose is. You are set—and it is possible you have been set for this particular day for many weeks, especially if you're headed out on vacation!

But if you are someone who cares and is careful about your relationship with God, you may still sit up in bed and consider where God might take you today apart from what it says on your calendar. *Who will he have you meet? Where will conversations go outside the expected parameters? What divine appointment may be waiting for you in terms of compassion or evangelism or encouragement?* These are questions that juxtapose our activity with God's sovereignty, which is the consideration of this brief article.

When we begin to take a thorough look at God's sovereignty, we are presented with this essential question: *How involved is God in the details of our lives?*

A SPECTRUM OF SOVEREIGNTY

A range of responses have met this question through the centuries of theology. On what we might call the "no God" end of that spectrum, there are those who have posited that God set the universe in motion and has ever since stood back. He is not involved in any details of our lives and our destinies are determined by a "you reap what you sow" economy. While Paul

did affirm this principle in terms of ethical consequences, the apostle's ultimate teaching—that the grace of God dispensed by the blood of Christ covers the sins for which we deserve eternal judgment—is in keeping with the core understanding of God's nature throughout the Old Testament, which is that he is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love" (Exodus 34:6, Nehemiah 9:31, and Psalm 103:8, among other passages). This God is recognized as engaged and active by his own hand, by his own voice, by angelic commission, by the incarnation of Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit. Those on the "less God" end of the spectrum must build their arguments (and their view of God) without paying attention to all this biblical content to the contrary.

At the other end of the spectrum, we would find the "all God" camp. Building their understanding on the all-knowing, all-powerful nature of God, those who make this argument state that not one small detail is outside God's control. He is the King in every corner of his kingdom, ordaining and ordering the events that occur in all places. Proverbs 16:33, where we read that "the die is cast in the lap but its every decision is from the Lord," certainly points to this kind of microsovereignty. We will see as we go forward that God's active participation in even minute details is apparent when we review the days and events of our lives. But there is also what we might call a practical understanding that makes it difficult to think that our minds and wills do not act on their own when we make decisions about, say, where we will eat dinner or what book we will next read. If God ordains even these decisions, then we are truly automatons with nothing to offer to our own daily activities. And then we are led to the truly entangled theological arguments about the free will of

A SPECTRUM OF HOW THEOLOGIAN'S VIEW GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY



man to choose God or the absolute election by God of those who will follow him (a matter we will not endeavor to take up in this article).

Must we say then that there is no middle ground, no compromising way out of these difficult questions? We might suggest that there is a “more God” stop along the spectrum, or even a “mostly God” landing spot. Here we would say that God is that same King, but like an earthly king he does not attempt to race from place to place in his kingdom, dropping local edicts and incessantly dinging those who are missing the mark. The omnipresent God, of course, is capable of being in infinite places at the same time, so he would not be zooming around if this is how he wanted to manage his kingdom. Is it possible, however, that he limits his influence and allows for people to choose righteousness, act so, and receive the natural rewards of that righteousness. Conversely, he may let others fall into the traps they have set for themselves, indeed reaping what they have sown. In coming as Jesus, deity in human form, God set precedent for limiting himself. Maybe he still does the same, and so while God may certainly intervene at whatever time and to whatever degree he wishes—think miracles, for instance—he does not always do so. He leaves us to make plans and decisions and find out where they lead.

FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, LAST THING AT NIGHT

Which takes us all the way back to those first few minutes after the alarm goes off in the morning—but also to those last few minutes before we lay our heads on the pillow at night. You may, as it turns out, be thinking more theologically than you know, if indeed you are considering what God would have you do today. Or what he has done.

And this is where the balance rests. You can find the balance in the spectrum if you wake up in the morning and look at what it is you are to do. When Paul commended the Thesalonians for the faith they showed in their work, the Greek word he chose for work was one that suggested business. That is, he was praising them for the way they went about their daily tasks, each according to the work God had given them, be that mercantile, agricultural, or domestic. He later went on to encourage them to “mind your own business and work with your hands” (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Paul was no esoteric theologian. He knew how his audience lived. And he knew that each day they would get up, go to the work God had given them, make decisions, take action—and in the midst of all that, be the light and fragrance of Christ to those around

them. What he did not expect was that their recognition of God’s sovereignty would produce in them a sort of paralysis until handwriting on the wall told them whether to brush their teeth or take their shower first.

But this was also true of Paul: he saw God to be the unbreakable thread connecting every event and element of our lives. So when he stopped to reflect on what God had done (which often resulted in the writing of a letter that we now call scripture), he was likely reminded of the words the Holy Spirit had given him when he addressed the Greek philosophers at the Aeropagus: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (Acts 17:26). This would lead him to offer reminders like this to the Ephesians, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...” (Ephesians 1:11). Again, without getting caught up here in the discussion of election and predestination, note as we have italicized that Paul was giving credit for all outworkings in life to the sovereign plan of God in accordance with his will. This is a God whose hand is in everything. To complete the balance of understanding in our own lives, this is what we should reflect on when we lie down each night. We should look back on our day and see how God has connected the dots in remarkable fashion. Do this with the course of your whole life and you cannot help but stand amazed at the work God has done to bring you to where you are now.

IN THE RIGHT ORDER

How important is it to approach our days in this order? Well, if we get it backward, we face a problem. Those who wake up with a tunnel vision view toward God’s sovereignty can miss a call to action—and the Bible is definitely full of these. We can get up and pray, even for the famous three hours of Martin Luther, but we must also rise from our feet and make the proverbial hay while the sun shines, an idea which also may be encouraged by Luther’s suggestion that we “sin boldly”—that is, we must get to work, even though as fallen people we risk erring before God and needing to seek his forgiveness.

Likewise, if we turn our end-of-the-day eyes toward our accomplishments rather than God’s, we face the embarrassing possibility that we will fall in love with all we’ve done and swell with pride, when instead our lips should be voicing thanksgiving for God’s role in ordering our day, even bringing

those previously recognized divine appointments.

The psalmist had no reflective doubts about the active role of God in our lives. He wrote: “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways” (Psalm 139:2-3). But this psalmist was David, one of the most active men we read about in Scripture. David struck the balance we need, inquiring of God, acting in faith, and recognizing the awareness and participation of God in all that we do.

God’s sovereignty is never an excuse for our inactivity. Neither is our proneness to sin or our lack of clarity about precise details of God’s plan for our day. Through his Word, God has outlined far too many ways for us to obey him for us to back off and say, “I really don’t know what God wants me to do.” What he wants is for you to go about your daily work in a way that honors him and displays his glory. Then when you have come to the end of that day, he wants you to quietly reflect on the wonder of his plan, the work of his hand, and the way he loves you through it all.

A STORY OF THE BALANCE

In late 2015, a scan showed a large tumor extending from my upper chest up into my neck, where it was intricately threaded among the principal structures there. After several weeks of further scans and tests at Stanford Medical Center, which is three hours from where I live, it was determined that this mass was showing early signs of cancer. It would to come out, and before that to be treated with five weeks of radiation and chemotherapy. Such daily treatments come with an extra degree of difficulty when you are so far from home.

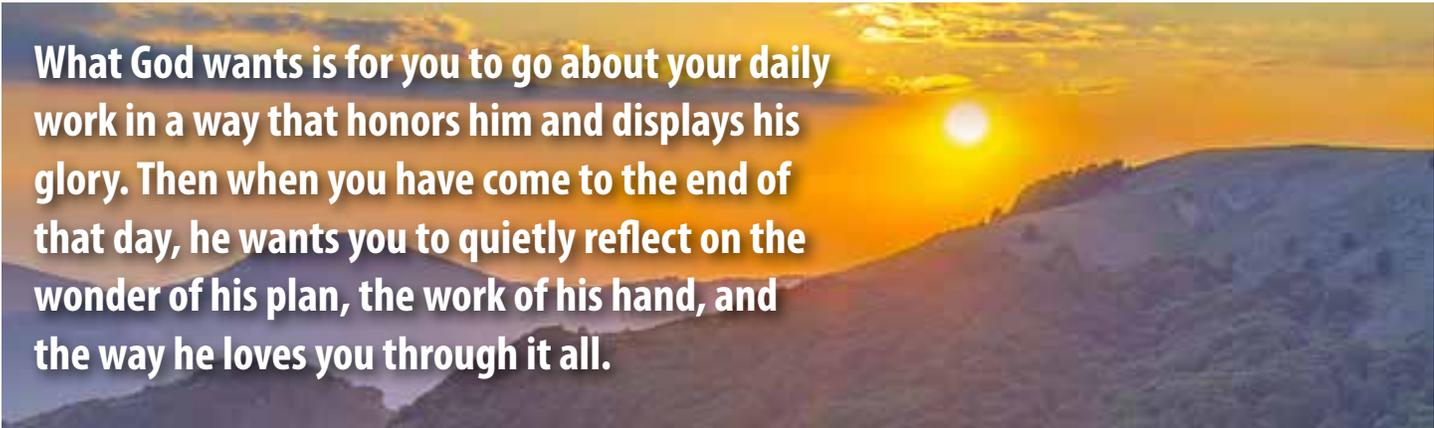
As word of my condition and proposed treatments spread to some of our Links Fellowships, people became both concerned and prayerful. But one woman, who with her husband

has a house in Palo Alto, just blocks from the Stanford campus, called me days before I was supposed to go into the hospital for the first round of chemo. She wanted to offer a room in their home. It was an act of pure generosity from someone I had never met personally.

The morning after that first week in the hospital, I was sitting with this woman at her breakfast table. By then it had become quite clear to me that this arrangement had long been orchestrated by God in his sovereignty. God had given me a father who brought me up in golf, I had gone to college to play, and after I decided to stop playing had taken up a major that made a writer of me. After 15 years of teaching high school, I was invited to take over media operations for Links Players, rejoining my college experiences, and not long after that, I met my now longtime partner in ministry, Jeffrey Cranford. Ticking ahead another ten years, it was Jeffrey’s teaching in Indian Wells, California, that opened the door for contact with my Palo Alto benefactors.

Together, this new friend and I reflected on how God had ordained all these connections and more to bring us to this time in the spring of 2016, when his help came to me through this kind couple. And yet, I had one more thing to tell her. It was this: “Still, you got up that morning and said to yourself, ‘I’m going to call Jeff today.’ And then you dialed the phone.” You see, God didn’t make that phone call; she did. Our activity in the midst of God’s sovereignty—this is how he does his wonderful work in accomplishing his will on earth, just as it is accomplished in heaven. 🙏

A special thanks to my longtime ministry partner Jeffrey Cranford. Together we have had many discussions through the years regarding the concept of looking forward with action and backwards with appreciation. -JH



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