

DOES GOD REALLY RULE?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Genesis 15:12-16; Revelation 11:15-18

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Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

Memorial Day weekend marks a time when America remembers those who died defending our country. Many of us use the day to also remember special loved ones. No matter how we celebrate this weekend, the name Memorial reminds us that the shroud of death and suffering darkens our lives. More than 3,000 Americans unexpectedly observe this holiday because of the events of September 11th. Their experience confirms once again the truth that death does not respect wealth, age, health or innocence.

In this city, we see the malevolence of death attacking people of all ages. We see children plagued by terrible diseases. We observe the worried looks of those in their prime who travel from the ends of the earth in hope that somehow medical knowledge here will grant them a reprieve. We watch in sadness the broken bodies and mourning families from carnage on the

highways. Although gangs and wars do not ravage our region, we know that death often preys especially upon the innocent and heroic. Listen to the writer of Hebrews.

[Believers] were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated -- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.
(Hebrews 11:35-38)

That last sentence that describes people wandering in deserts, mountains, caves and holes recalls an attack on Israel when the people were observing the Sabbath. Because the Israelites refused to fight on the Sabbath, they were slaughtered. They fled to the deserts, mountains, caves and any hole they could find.

When good people suffer, or when people suffer precisely because they believe, the question arises, "Where is God in suffering?" Sometimes life is contrary to the goodness of God. The events raise doubts about the existence, the goodness or the relevance of God because life plays out differently than the way we expect it would with a good God.

It did for Bill Ellsworth. Bill, who was a retired pastor, worked in a butcher shop when I met him. Kind and gentle, he took personal interest in me and other youth from the community. I don't think we did much without his help. I was so drawn to Bill that as a junior high student I remember spending an evening at his house just watching TV with him and his wife. Most young teens may do that with a peer. They may do it with a grandparent. But not many teens consider an unrelated person 60 years older than them one of their closest friends. My last teenage memory of Bill was difficult. Shortly before he died, I saw him in a hospital bed, emaciated by cancer. His quiet smile flashed from a face with sunken eyes and cheeks.

When a person witnesses these things despite prayers to the contrary, questions and doubts invariably arise. We wonder, "What good is my prayer?" We question, "Does God really care?" We ponder, "Is God really there? Is He in charge?"

Some people believe that God is a dictator. They think everything happens because of God's will. If someone dies, God wills it. If someone suffers, God wills it. If someone is ill, God wills it. They read Scripture from the Old Testament that tells us God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and they think that Pharaoh had no choice. They read that an evil spirit from the Lord was sent to torment King Saul, and they reason that God caused the suffering of Saul and made him more evil. They believe that God decreed some people to be saved and others to be damned, and that in the end people have no choice. "God rules!" they reason.

If God rules in this absolute way, why then did he give us dominion over the fish of the sea and all the creatures of the earth? How can we believe that God dictates what we meet in life, if he tells us to govern? Did God set us over this earth as mere figureheads, or do our actions actually govern our world? Are we puppets or are we princes and princesses, made in his image?

If God's will dominates all things, then why do people perish when the Bible teaches that God wills that none perish? If the will of a good God dominates all things in our life, then why is so much of life ravaged by evil rather than dominated by goodness?

When people quote the Hebrew Scriptures to suggest that God dominates all things and that we are but pawns, they misunderstand its message. The Old Testament stresses that there is only one sovereign ruler that humanity must fear. The gods of Egypt do not rule over Egypt. They are pretenders. Only one God is in charge of all lands and peoples. The Israelites are not to fear the opponents of their God. They are to fear only one God. If Pharaoh is stubborn, his stubbornness comes not from the strength of Pharaoh's gods; instead, it results from the judgment

upon that man and his nation by the one true God. In the end, God's desires for those who trust him will prevail, despite the dominion of evil people.

In Genesis 15 Abraham falls into a fitful sleep, and God reveals the future in a dream.

The Lord said:

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. (Genesis 15:13-16)

This text reveals several things. *First, God knows the future.* God tells the future to Abraham. *Second, God permits evildoers to do evil.* Your descendants will be strangers, enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. *Third, God holds evildoers accountable.* I will punish the nation they serve. *Fourth, God plans to bless his people.* Abraham's descendants will come out with great possessions. *Fifth, there is a time when God watches.* God has given us dominion, thus there is a time of stewardship. There is a time when people rule. God does not manipulate or cause their decisions. Instead, God responds to those decisions in a way to bless those who trust him. *Finally, God acts with impartiality and justice.* The Israelites would return to the Promised Land only when the sins of its residents reached full measure. God would not displace and destroy the Amorites until their sins fully warranted such judgment.

Another Abraham, Abraham Lincoln pondered this. In his second inaugural speech he spoke of the evil of slavery that polluted this nation for two centuries and God's judgment in the tragedy of the Civil War. Many wondered about this as well when Nazi armies scourged materialistic and proud Europe and then later were utterly destroyed for their own crimes.

I myself ponder this text, consider our history and then think about God's response to our deceit with the Indians (who are still bitter, you know), our cruelty to the unborn, our romance with greed in gambling, our rebellion against God's plan for our sexuality, and the vulgarity and irreverence that punctuate our speech. How long before our sins like those of the Amorites reach their full measure? How long before the cup of sin reaches the brim?

Does God reign? Some believe that God rules in the broad sweeps of history; they believe he rules in the life of nations but not in the detail of every day life or in an individual's life. However, the central message of Jesus suggests the opposite. Jesus announced God's kingdom and rule. With his arrival came a powerful and personal rule that brought healing to bodies, hope to hearts, and help to individuals. The goodness of God was tasted as individuals brought their questions, their needs and their trust to Jesus. They experienced the kingdom, the reign of God, in the intimate details of their life.

This reign of God was so intimate and so personal that Jesus said:

The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, "Here it is," or "There it is," because the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:20-21)

Jesus taught that God's reign begins inside us as we repent and turn to him in faith. As we humbly trust in him, God's loving will begins to dominate our thoughts, our feelings, our behavior. From there the kingdom advances into the realm of our world because we have dominion. Literally, we cause clashes between the kingdoms of light and darkness. Through faith in Christ, we become agents by which God spreads his dominion of goodness. We bring the possibility of mercy and healing, so that judgment may be escaped. So much of that mercy and healing depends upon our activity, our prayers, our obedience, and our humility.

So does God reign? Yes, he does. God rules the sweep of history. God rules the destinies of nations. God rules the hearts, minds and actions of those who humble themselves, shed their self-deception and trust in Christ. God rules as believers invite God's dominion through prayer. God will rule when one day the period of patience and permission ends, and the era of the new heaven and earth begin. A day is coming when the seventh angel will blow his trumpet and loud voices will cry:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 11:15, NIV)