

God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility
Some Personal Reflections
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The Proverbs tell us that “a man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” When I read a statement like that the question that pops into my mind is this: how does he do that?

Being filled with the Spirit raises the same question. Many – including myself, see a relationship between the appeal of Ephesians 5:18 to be “filled with the Spirit” and the appeal of Colossians 3:16 to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The relationship is seen primarily between the similarities of the results that flow from both appeals. Paul, by using different words, is addressing the same concept. Namely, the Holy Spirit uses the indwelling word of Christ to influence and control the believer. But just how does he do that?

When one reads the narratives of Scripture it is hard not to see the clear, dynamic relationship between the events of life and the sovereign will of God. I see and accept the reality of that relationship, but still I wonder how it actually works.

Recently I was reading in First Chronicles and noticed something that I had not seen before. It relates to the death of Saul and his sons. The army of Saul had been defeated by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. They “struck down Jonathan, Abinatab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul” (10:2). Saul was wounded by the archers, and faced with the humiliation of being killed by the Philistines, he commanded his own armor bearer to kill him. But the armor bearer refused and the text states that “Saul took his sword and fell on it. . . . Thus Saul died with his three sons, and all those of his house died together” (10:5-6).

But at the end of the chapter, the author concludes by stating “So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the Lord, because of the word of the Lord which he did not keep; and also because he asked for counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it, and did not inquire of the Lord. Therefore He killed him and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse” (10:13-14).

On the one hand the text says that Saul killed himself, and yet on the other hand the text says that God killed him. Both are correct! And this is a very clear example of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. In God's eternal plan he chose to include the actions of Saul to accomplish his purposes. It would seem, then, that no matter what life looks like from man's perspective, the purposes of God will always be accomplished.

Several years ago, while riding on a train from London to Edinburgh, Scotland, I decided to spend some time looking for this dynamic in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. I didn't have to read very far – in fact the first verse of Ezra states, “The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom . . .” Again in verse five it states, “Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. In both cases the God “stirred up” the

spirits of individuals whose response was to carry out and fulfill his purposes! But how did he “stir up” their spirits? Were they consciously aware that God had done this? Did they see their decisions and actions as being independent of God or as carrying out his purposes?

Later, those who returned from exile ate the Passover and “observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread with joy, for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (6:22). How did he cause them to rejoice? And how did he turn the heart of the king? And what was their sense of it?

During the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, it was often necessary for Ezra to make request from him on behalf of God’s people. We are told that “the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord was upon him” (7:6). Ezra had come to Jerusalem “because the good hand of his God was upon him” (7:9).

In my quest to better understand the dynamic relationship between the events of life and God purposes, certain things began to develop. For example, right after the statement that the hand of God was upon Ezra appears the statement “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (7:10). Apparently, Ezra’s passionate relationship with God through his word brought about sensitivity to the relationship between the issues of life and the application of God’s word. This is the same dynamic that the writer of Hebrews expressed when he wrote “But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (5:14). Call it a “subjective sense”; call it “insight”; call it “wisdom”; it all boils down to a relationship with God through his word.

King Artaxerxes made a decree on behalf of Ezra. In it he set forth that the gold and silver which had been collected in Babylon should be used to buy “bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings, and drink offerings and offer them on the alter of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God” (7:17-18). The decree also stipulated that Ezra was to appoint “magistrates and judges” to judge the people. The basis of the judgment would be God’s laws, which were to be taught to “anyone who is ignorant of them” (7:25). The sentences for violators would range from death (capitol punishment), to banishment from the community, to confiscation of goods, to imprisonment (7:26).

Ezra’s response reveals his perspective of the decree: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart” (7:27a). Ezra understood that the king’s decree was really the decree of God. That is, God had so moved on the king’s thinking that the decree issued was the decree God wanted issued. Further, this work of God through the king had impact on Ezra personally so that “Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the Lord my God upon me” (7:27b).

King David once wrote “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it all” (Psalm 139:4). Another aspect of this dynamic

relationship between the events of life and God's purposes is our prayers. God is omniscient. It is impossible for God to learn. He knows all things – actual and potential. When he formulated his eternal decree (his sovereign plan for the ages), he knew every thought I would ever entertain, every word I would ever speak, and every action I would ever perform in relation to any potentiality that he might include in his plan that would touch my life. By including me in the plan, my thinking and choices – and their consequences would be used to carry out his purposes. Even my sinful thinking and choices! The result is God's sovereignty over all and my personal responsibility for all of my thoughts, words and actions.

What we see in life's experiences is the outworking of God's eternal plan that includes God's interaction and responses to our thoughts, words and actions – which all took place in eternity past, when God put his plan together. Sometimes, God expresses his interactions and responses in terms that may appear as if he is *right now* changing his mind about something he has said or done. It is expressed that way to help us learn more about the heart of God. The prophet Samuel said of God, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (1 Samuel 15:29). Perhaps we can understand it best if we see such statements through the eyes of the historical present tense: something done in the past described in the present tense so as to bring about a greater vividness in the mind of the reader.

This applies to prayer as well. We pray *right now*. God's listening and responding to our prayers is most often expressed in present tense terms. But the reality is that he "heard" and "responded" to them via his omniscience in eternity. And the entire plan (including our prayers and his responses) is unfolding before us *right now*. As my theology teacher was fond of saying, "God has not only ordained the end of things, but also the means to the end." And one of those means is our prayers. In that regard the Scriptures affirm, "This is the confidence we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15).

It is essential that we understand the sovereignty of God. It brings to us comfort and confidence as we move through life *right now*. Nothing happens that is not directly caused by God or permitted by God. God is absolutely in control of all things. God permits the natural laws of nature to unfold. Because the world is under a curse because of man's sin (see Romans 8:19ff), there is much that unfolds in the natural realm that often results in death and destruction. But even in that God's purposes are being accomplished. We know so because his word tells us that it is so!