

The Lord Reigns

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It has become unfashionable in many circles to speak of the sovereignty of God, or to speak of God as a king or a lord. We might regard it as the triumph of a distinctively American form of sociology over theology. It is an extension of the idea that all hierarchy is inherently evil. These are cultural ideas transmuted into theological ones.

I've actually served as a pastor in a country that still has a monarchy. I've stood in the middle of the chancel of the church I served and at the close of the worship service on a Remembrance Sunday said the words, "God save the Queen," at which the whole congregation stood and sang, "God save our noble Queen." I've known Eastern Orthodox theologians who assume as an essential part of their theology that God the Unoriginate and Father is the ultimate Hierarch and Monarch.

But, today in our country, in some places it's impossible to strike up the choir and sing "Crown Him with Many Crowns" or "Praise ye the Lord the Almighty." I tried it in a service at Louisville Seminary and that idea was roundly rejected.

So, some Reformed theologians and Presbyterian preachers struggle to make sense of God and the world and everything else without resorting to what the Old Testament scholar, the late James Mays, described as the unifying concept of the whole Bible: "*The Lord Reigns.*"

A couple of centuries ago when Debbie and I joined the Presbyterian Church it was still the practice to examine new members before the session. I told you this was a long time ago, and the practice has receded into antiquity. Those days are a little hard to remember now, but Debbie and I had studied for that examination. There were things we had to know.

We both had learned, for instance, that the distinctive, basic belief of the Reformed tradition is the Sovereignty of God, the idea that God is ultimately in charge of all things and that God doesn't pass the buck.

A woman named Mrs. Grillo was the terror of the session when it came to the keeping of the door of Reformed orthodoxy. When it came time for her to ask her question, she said, "Explain to me, please, the Reformed concept of the Sovereignty of God, how it differs from fatalism, and how it relates to the problem of evil and suffering in the world?"

I smiled and said, "Oh, that's an easy one. Why don't you take it, Sweetheart?"

It is said that no one can look upon the face of God and live, and I would add that few men have looked into the faces of their wives and seen such a withering gaze as my beloved gave me in that moment, and survived.

Debbie, of course, answered the question with theological perception and good humor and Mrs. Grillo shrank back into her lair satisfied.

But her question remains. In some ways it is unanswerable, at least in the form in which she raised it. If we approach the reign of God as a philosophical problem that must be solved with mathematical precision, "How does the power of God differ from fate? Or: How can an all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?" we risk missing the central affirmation that the Bible is getting at.

The central affirmation of the Bible is personal. When we say, "the Lord reigns" we are not setting forth an abstract principle but a pledge of loyalty. Not just "God is in control" but "I will follow this Lord come what may."

The Sovereignty of God is a concept most personal.

We can consider questions of fate and evil and suffering in the world, and they are important questions to wrestle with. But when Jesus came preaching the reign of the Lord and the good news of God, he wasn't descending from the hill of the philosophers in Athens, he was treading the roads of Galilee, and he was inviting people just like us to live in a *particular* way in a *particular* direction as followers of a *particular* Lord, to fulfill God's purposes for them as human beings.

Even to say, I trust the Lord's reign, isn't the same as surrendering to the fates. Mrs. Grillo knew that for sure, although she enjoyed teasing candidates for church membership with the question. She knew, as we know, that trust is personal, a matter of letting go.

Recently I heard a story told by the writer Wajahat Ali, whose little daughter was diagnosed with cancer at the age of two. The cancer was already advanced when discovered, and the situation dire. He tells the story, a story of the roller coaster ride of hope and sadness, terror and possibility, of dread and success. Eventually, his little daughter's life is saved, because of the generosity of an anonymous liver donor and through the brilliance of fine doctors. As he told the story, an old Arabic saying provided the unifying theme: "*Trust God, but tie your camel first.*"

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To trust in the Lord who reigns does not mean a blind resignation to the fates. We are called to follow, to act, to do what we believe we are called upon to do. And when we have done all we can, we leave the outcome in God's hands, because we believe God is faithful and just, that God is trustworthy. We believe that God does not hide himself or his will or his eternal counsel behind an impenetrable screen, but that God has bared his heart in Jesus of Nazareth.

My old friend Will Storrar, whom you met a year ago on Scottish Heritage Sunday, is a British subject, as you know, a chaplain to the Queen of England, and a convinced supporter of republican government back home in the U.K. But one night, sitting in a pub in Windsor, imbibing of a favorite malt, he said to me, "You know, I love our Queen. I would die for her."

That's a personal pledge of loyalty right there, not an abstract affirmation.

And as Jesus walked the roads of ancient Palestine, as he preached the reign of the Lord and the good news of God, his call was no less personal. "Come with me" he said to one person after another along the way, "and live walking in this manner."

The Lord Reigns isn't an abstract notion, it is the beginning of a sentence which, complete, reads: "The Lord Reigns over me."

Amen.