

## THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

Nothing escapes God's notice; nothing oversteps the boundaries of His power. God is authoritative in all things. If I thought even for one moment that a single molecule were running loose in the universe outside the control and domain of almighty God, I wouldn't sleep tonight. My confidence in the future rests in my confidence in the God who controls history. But how does God exercise that control and manifest that authority? How does God bring to pass the things He sovereignly decrees?

Augustine said that nothing happens in this universe apart from the will of God and that, in a certain sense, God ordains everything that happens. Augustine was not attempting to absolve men of responsibility for their actions, but his teaching raises a question: If God is sovereign over the actions and intents of men, why pray at all? A secondary concern revolves around the question, "Does prayer really change anything?"

Let me answer the first question by stating that the sovereign God commands by His holy Word that we pray. Prayer is not optional for the Christian; it is required.

We might ask, "What if it doesn't do anything?" That is not the issue. Regardless of whether prayer does any good, if God commands us to pray, we must pray. It is reason enough that the Lord God of the universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, commands it. Yet He not only commands us to pray, but also invites us to make our requests known. James says that we have not because we ask not (James 4:2). He also tells us that the prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much (James 5:16). Time and again the Bible says that prayer is an effective tool. It is useful; it works.

John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, makes some profound observations regarding prayer:

But, someone will say, does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem in a sense superfluous that he should be stirred up by our prayers—as if he were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until he is aroused by our voice? But they who thus reason do not observe to what end the Lord instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his own sake as for ours. Now he wills—as is right—that his due be rendered to him, in the recognition that everything men desire and account conducive to their own profit comes from him, and in the attestation of this by prayers. But the profit of this sacrifice also, by which he is worshiped, returns to us. Accordingly, the holy fathers, the more confidently they extolled God's benefits among themselves and others, were the more keenly aroused to pray ...

Still it is very important for us to call upon him: First, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor. Secondly, that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand. (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960], Book 3, chapter 20, section 3.)

Prayer, like everything else in the Christian life, is for God's glory and for our benefit, in that order. Everything that God does, everything that God allows and ordains, is in the supreme sense for His glory. It is also true that while God seeks His own glory supremely, man benefits when God is glorified. We pray to glorify God, but we also pray in order to receive the benefits of prayer from His hand. Prayer is for our benefit, even in light of the fact that God knows the end from the beginning. It is our privilege to bring the whole of our finite existence into the glory of His infinite presence.

### **A Discourse with God**

One of the great themes of the Reformation was the idea that all of life is to be lived under the authority of God, to the glory of God, in the presence of God. Prayer is not simply a soliloquy, a mere exercise in therapeutic self-analysis, or a religious recitation. Prayer is discourse with the personal God Himself. There, in the act and dynamic of praying, I bring my whole life under His gaze. Yes, He knows what is in my mind, but I still have the privilege of articulating to Him what is there. He says: "Come. Speak to me. Make your requests known to me." So we come in order to know Him and to be known by Him.

There is something erroneous in the question, "If God knows everything, why pray?" The question assumes that prayer is one-dimensional and is defined simply as supplication or intercession. On the contrary, prayer is multidimensional. God's sovereignty casts no shadow over the prayer of adoration. God's foreknowledge or determinate counsel does not negate the prayer of praise. The only thing it should do is give us greater reason for expressing our adoration for who God is. If God knows what I'm going to say before I say it, His knowledge, rather than limiting my prayer, enhances the beauty of my praise.

My wife and I are as close as two people can be. Often I know what she's going to say almost before she says it. The reverse is also true. But I still like to hear her say what is on her mind. If that is true of man, how much more true is it of God? We have the matchless privilege of sharing our innermost thoughts with God. Of course, we could simply enter our prayer closets, let God read our minds, and call that prayer. But that's not communion and it's certainly not communication.

We are creatures who communicate primarily through speech. Spoken prayer is obviously a form of speech, a way for us to commune and communicate with God. There is a certain sense in which God's sovereignty should influence our attitude toward prayer, at least with respect to adoration. If anything, our understanding of God's sovereignty should provoke us to an intense prayer life of thanksgiving. Because of such knowledge, we should see that every benefit, every good and perfect gift, is an expression of the abundance of His grace. The more we understand God's sovereignty, the more our prayers will be filled with thanksgiving.

In what way could God's sovereignty *negatively* affect the prayer of contrition, of confession? Perhaps we could draw the conclusion that our sin is ultimately God's responsibility and that our confession is an accusation of guilt against God Himself. Every true Christian knows that he cannot blame God for his sin. I may not understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but I do realize that what stems from the wickedness of my own heart may not be assigned to the will of God. So we must pray because we are guilty, pleading the pardon of the Holy One whom we have offended.

### **Does Prayer Change Anything?**

But what about intercession and supplication? It's nice to talk about the religious, spiritual, and psychological benefits (and whatever else might derive from prayer), but what about the real question—Does prayer make any difference? Does it really change anything? Someone once asked me that question, only in a slightly different manner: "Does prayer change God's mind?" My answer brought storms of protest. I said simply, "No." Now, if the person had asked me, "Does prayer change *things*?" I would have answered, "Of course!"

The Bible says there are certain things God has decreed from all eternity. Those things will inevitably come to pass. If you were to pray individually or if you and I were to join forces in prayer or if all the Christians of the world were to pray collectively, it would not change what God, in His hidden counsel, has determined to do. If we decided to pray for Jesus not to return, He still would return. You might ask, though, "Doesn't the Bible say that if two or three agree on anything, they'll get it?" Yes, it does, but that passage is talking about church discipline, not prayer requests. So we must take all the biblical teaching on prayer into account and not isolate one passage from the rest. We must approach the matter in light of the whole of Scripture, resisting an atomistic reading.

Again, you might ask, "Doesn't the Bible say from time to time that God repents?" Yes, the Old Testament certainly says so. The book of Jonah tells us that God "repented of" the judgment He had planned for the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10, KJV). In using the concept of repentance here, the Bible is describing God, who is Spirit, in what theologians call "anthropomorphic" language. Obviously the Bible does not mean that God repented in the way we would repent; otherwise, we could rightly assume that God had sinned and therefore would need a savior Himself. What it

clearly means is that God removed the threat of judgment from the people. The Hebrew word *nacham*, translated “repent” in the King James Version, means “comforted” or “eased” in this case. God was comforted and felt at ease that the people had turned from their sin, and therefore He revoked the sentence of judgment He had imposed.

When God hangs His sword of judgment over people’s heads, and they repent and He then withholds His judgment, has He really changed His mind?

The mind of God does not change for God does not change. *Things* change, and they change according to His sovereign will, which He exercises through secondary means and secondary activities. The prayer of His people is one of the means He uses to bring things to pass in this world. So if you ask me whether prayer changes things, I answer with an unhesitating “Yes!”

It is impossible to know how much of human history reflects God’s immediate intervention and how much reveals God working through human agents. Calvin’s favorite example of this was the book of Job. The Sabeans and the Chaldeans had taken Job’s donkeys and camels. Why? Because Satan had stirred their hearts to do so. But why? Because Satan had received permission from God to test Job’s faithfulness in any way he so desired, short of taking Job’s life. Why had God agreed to such a thing? For three reasons: (1) to silence the slander of Satan; (2) to vindicate Himself; and (3) to vindicate Job from the slander of Satan. All of these reasons are perfectly righteous justifications for God’s actions.

By contrast, Satan’s purpose in stirring up these two groups was to cause Job to blaspheme God—an altogether wicked motive. But we notice that Satan did not do something supernatural to accomplish his ends. He chose human agents—the Sabeans and Chaldeans, who were evil by nature—to steal Job’s animals. The Sabeans and Chaldeans were known for their thievery and murderous way of life. Their will was involved, but there was no coercion; God’s purpose was accomplished through their wicked actions.

The Sabeans and Chaldeans were free to choose, but for them, as for us, freedom always means freedom within limits. We must not, however, confuse human freedom and human autonomy. There will always be a conflict between divine sovereignty and human autonomy. There is never a conflict between divine sovereignty and human freedom. The Bible says that man is free, but he is not an autonomous law unto himself.

Suppose the Sabeans and Chaldeans had prayed, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” I’m absolutely certain that Job’s animals still would have been stolen, but not necessarily by the Sabeans and Chaldeans. God might have chosen to answer their prayer, but He would have used some other agent to steal Job’s animals. There is freedom within limits, and within those limits, our prayers can change things. The Scriptures tell us that Elijah, through prayer, kept the rain from falling. He was not dissuaded from praying by his understanding of

divine sovereignty.

### **The Prayers of the Son of God**

No human being has ever had a more profound understanding of divine sovereignty than Jesus. No man ever prayed more fiercely or more effectively. Even in Gethsemane, He requested an option, a different way. When the request was denied, He bowed to the Father's will. The very reason we pray is because of God's sovereignty, because we believe that God has it within His power to order things according to His purpose. That is what sovereignty is all about—ordering things according to God's purpose. So then, does prayer change God's mind? No. Does prayer change things? Yes, of course.

The promise of the Scriptures is that “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16). The problem is that we are not all that righteous. What prayer most often changes is the wickedness and the hardness of our own hearts. That alone would be reason enough to pray, even if none of the other reasons were valid or true.

In a sermon titled “The Most High, a Prayer-Hearing God,” Jonathan Edwards gave two reasons why God requires prayer:

With respect *to God*, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgement of our dependence on him to his glory. As he hath made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures; and it is fit that he should require this of those who would be subjects of his mercy ... [it] is a suitable acknowledgement of our dependence on the power and mercy of God for that which we need, and but a suitable honor paid to the great Author and Fountain of all good.

With respect *to ourselves*, God requires prayer of us ... Fervent prayer many ways tends to prepare the heart. Hereby is excited a sense of our need ... whereby the mind is more prepared to prize [his mercy] ... Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of faith in God's sufficiency, so that we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received. (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974], 2:116)

All that God does is for His glory first and for our benefit second. We pray because God commands us to pray, because it glorifies Him, and because it benefits us.

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