

Doctrine of God Part 25...the Sovereignty of God and Prayer

Excerpts from “R C Sproul...If God is Sovereign, Why Pray?”

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.
<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/if-god-sovereign-why-pray/>

Excerpts from A W Pink on “God’s Sovereignty and Prayer”

"If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us"
1 John 5:14

Why has God appointed that we should pray? The vast majority of people would reply, In order that we may obtain from God the things which we need. While this is one of the purposes of prayer, it is by no means the chief one. Moreover, it considers prayer only from the *human* side, and prayer sadly needs to be viewed from the *Divine* side. Let us look, then, at some of the reasons why *God* has bidden us to pray.

First and foremost, prayer has been appointed that the Lord God Himself should be *honored*. God requires we should recognize that He is, indeed, "the *high* and *lofty* One that inhabiteth eternity" (Isa. 57:17).

God requires that we shall own His *universal dominion*. In petitioning God for rain, Elijah did but confess His control over the elements; in praying to God to deliver a poor sinner from the wrath to come, we acknowledge that "salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9) ; in supplicating His blessing on the Gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth, we declare His rulership over the whole world.

Again; God requires that we shall *worship* Him, and prayer, real prayer, is an act of worship. Prayer is an act of worship inasmuch as it is the prostrating of the soul before Him; inasmuch as it is a calling upon His great and holy name; inasmuch as it is the owning of His goodness, His power, His immutability, His grace, and inasmuch as it is the recognition of His sovereignty, owned by a submission to His will.

It is highly significant to notice in this connection that the Temple was not termed by Christ the House of Sacrifice, but instead, the House of Prayer.

Again; prayer redounds to God's glory, for in prayer we do but acknowledge our dependency upon Him. When we humbly supplicate the Divine Being we cast ourselves upon His power and mercy. In seeking blessings from God we own that He is the Author and Fountain of every good and perfect gift. That prayer brings glory to God is further seen from the fact that prayer calls faith into exercise, and nothing from us is so honoring and pleasing to Him as the confidence of our hearts.

In the second place, prayer is appointed by God for our spiritual blessing, as a means for our growth in grace. When seeking to learn the *design* of prayer, this should ever occupy us *before* we regard prayer as a means for obtaining the supply of our need. **Prayer is designed by God for our humbling.** Prayer, real prayer, is a coming into the Presence of God, and a sense of His awful majesty produces a realization of our nothingness and unworthiness. **Again; prayer is designed by God for the exercise of our faith.** Faith is begotten in the Word (Rom. 10:17), but it is exercised in prayer; hence, we read of "the prayer of faith". **Again; prayer calls love into action.** Concerning the hypocrite the question is asked, "Will he delight himself in the Almighty? Will he always call upon God?" (Job 27:10). But they that love the Lord cannot be long away from Him, for they *delight* in unburdening themselves to Him. Not only does prayer call love into action, but through the direct answers vouchsafed to our prayers, our love to God is increased—"I love the Lord, *because* He hath heard my voice and my supplications" (Ps. 116:1). **Again; prayer is designed by God to teach us the value of the blessings we have sought from Him, and it causes us to rejoice the more when He has bestowed upon us that for which we supplicate Him.**

Third, prayer is appointed by God for our seeking from Him the things which we are in need of. If God has foreordained, before the foundation of the world, everything which happens in time, what is the use of prayer? If it is true that "of Him and through Him and to Him are *all things*"(Rom. 11:36), then why pray? Ere replying directly to these queries it should be pointed out how that there is just as much reason to ask, What is the use of me coming to God and telling Him what He already knows? wherein is the use of me spreading before Him my need, seeing He is already acquainted with it? as there is to object, What is the use of praying for anything when everything has been ordained beforehand by God? Prayer is not for the purpose of informing God, as if He were ignorant, (the Saviour expressly declared "for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him"—Matt. 6:8), but it is to acknowledge He *does* know what we are in need of. **Prayer is not appointed for the furnishing of God with the knowledge of what we need, but it is designed as a confession to Him of our sense of the need. In this, as in everything, God's thoughts are not as ours. God requires that His gifts should be sought for. He designs to be honored by our asking, just as He is to be thanked by us after He has bestowed His blessing.**

However, the question still returns on us, **If God be the Predestinator of everything that comes to pass, and the Regulator of all events, then is not prayer a profitless exercise? A sufficient answer to these questions is, that God bids us to pray—"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).** And again, "men ought always to pray" (Luke 18:1). And further: Scripture declares that, "the prayer of faith shall save the sick", and, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:15, 16); while the Lord Jesus Christ—our perfect Example in all things—was pre-eminently a Man of Prayer. Thus, it is evident, that prayer is neither meaningless nor valueless. But still this does not *remove* the difficulty nor *answer* the question with which we started out.

What then is the *relationship* between God's sovereignty and Christian prayer?

First of all, we would say with emphasis, that prayer is *not intended to change* God's purpose, nor is it to move Him to form fresh purposes. God has decreed that certain events *shall* come to pass, but He has also decreed that these events shall come to pass through the means He has appointed for their accomplishment. God has elected certain ones to be saved, but He has also decreed that these ones shall be saved *through* the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel, then, is one of the appointed means for the working out of the eternal counsel of the Lord; and prayer is another. **God has decreed the means as well as the end, and among the means is prayer.** Even the prayers of His people are included in His eternal decrees. Therefore, instead of prayers being in vain, they are among the means through which God exercises His decrees....

That prayers for the execution of the very things *decreed* by God are *not* meaningless, is clearly taught in the Scriptures. Daniel "understood" by the writings of the prophets that the captivity was to last but seventy years, yet when these seventy years were almost ended, we are told that he "set his face unto the Lord God, *to seek* by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:2, 3). God told the prophet Jeremiah "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end"; but instead of adding, there is, therefore, no need for you to supplicate Me for these things, He said, "*Then* shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you" (Jer. 29:12).

Once more; in Ezekiel 36 we read of the explicit, positive, and unconditional promises which God has made concerning the future restoration of Israel, yet in verse 37 of this same chapter we are told, "Thus saith the Lord God; *I will yet for this be enquired of* by the house of Israel, to do it for then;". **Here then is *the design of prayer: not that God's will may be altered, but that it may be accomplished in His own good time and way.*** It is because God *has* promised certain things, that we can ask for them with the full assurance of faith. It is God's purpose that His will shall be brought about by His own appointed means, and that He may do His people good upon *His own* terms, and that is, by the 'means' and 'terms' of entreaty and supplication.

Did not the Son of God *know* for certain that after His death and resurrection He *would* be exalted by the Father? Assuredly He did. Yet we find Him *asking for* this very thing: "O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine Own Self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:5)! Did not He know that none of His people could perish? yet He besought the Father to "keep" them (John 17:11)!

Finally; it should be said that God's will is immutable, and cannot be altered by our crying.

Our views respecting prayer need to be revised and brought into harmony with the teaching of Scripture on the subject. The prevailing idea seems to be, that I come to God and *ask* Him for something that I want, and that I *expect* Him to give me that which I have asked. But this is a most dishonoring and degrading conception. **The popular belief reduces God to a servant, *our* servant: doing our bidding, performing our pleasure, granting our desires. No; prayer is a coming to God, telling Him my *need*, committing my way unto the Lord, and leaving Him to deal with it as seemeth *Him* best. *This* makes my will subject to His, instead of, as in the former case, seeking to bring His will into subjection to mine. No prayer is pleasing to God unless the spirit actuating it is, "*not* my will, but thine be done".**

The distinction just noted above is of great practical importance for our peace of heart. Perhaps the one thing that exercises Christians as much as anything else is that of unanswered prayers. They have asked God for something: so far as they are able to judge, they have asked in faith believing they would receive that for which they had supplicated the Lord: and they have asked earnestly and repeatedly, *but* the answer has not come. The result is that, in many cases, faith in the efficacy of prayer becomes weakened, until hope gives way to despair and the closet is altogether neglected. Is it not so?

Now will it surprise our readers when we say that *every* real prayer of faith that has ever been offered to God *has been* answered? Yet we unhesitatingly affirm it. But in saying this we must refer back to our definition of prayer. Let us repeat it. Prayer is a coming to God, telling Him my *need* (or the need of others), committing my way unto the Lord, and then leaving Him to deal with the case as seemeth Him best.

This leaves God to answer the prayer in whatever way He sees fit, and often, His answer may be the very opposite of what would be most acceptable to the flesh; yet, if we have *really LEFT* our need in His hands, it will be His *answer*, nevertheless. Let us look at an example...

Turn to 2Corinthians 12. The apostle Paul had been accorded an unheard-of privilege. He had been transported into Paradise. His ears have listened to and his eyes have gazed upon that which no other mortal had heard or seen this side of death. The wondrous revelation was more than the apostle could endure. He was in danger of becoming "puffed up" by his extraordinary experience.

Therefore, a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, was sent to buffet him lest he be exalted above measure. And the apostle spreads his need before the Lord; he thrice beseeches Him that this thorn in the flesh should be *removed*. Was his prayer answered? Assuredly, though not in the manner he had desired. The "thorn" was not removed, but grace was given to bear it. The burden was not lifted, but strength was vouchsafed to carry it.

Does someone object that it is our privilege to do more than spread our need before God? Are we reminded that God has, as it were, given us a blank check and invited us to fill it in? Is it said that the promises of God are all-inclusive, and that we may *ask God for what we will*? If so, we must call attention to the fact that it is necessary to compare scripture with scripture if we are to learn the full mind of God on any subject, and that as this is done we discover God has *qualified* the promises given to praying souls by saying, "If we ask anything *according to His will* He heareth us" (1 John 5:14). **Real prayer is communion with God, so that there will be common thoughts between His mind and ours. What is needed is for Him to fill our hearts with His thoughts, and then His desires will become our desires flowing back to Him.** Here then is the meeting-place between God's sovereignty and Christian prayer: If we ask anything according to *His will* He heareth us, and if we do *not* so ask, He *does not* hear us; as saith the apostle James, "Ye ask, and receive not, *because ye ask amiss*, that ye might consume it upon *your lusts*" or desires (4:3)

But did not the Lord Jesus tell His disciples, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, *Whatsoever* ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you" (John 16:23)? He did; but this promise does not give praying souls *carte blanche*. These words of our Lord are in perfect accord with those of the apostle John—"If we ask anything according to His will He heareth us." What is it to ask "in the name of Christ"? Surely it is very much more than a prayer formula, the mere concluding of our supplications with the *words* "in the name of Christ." To apply to God for anything in the name of Christ, it must needs be in keeping with what Christ is! To ask God in the name of Christ is as though Christ Himself were the suppliant. *We can only ask God for what Christ would ask.* To ask in the name of Christ, is therefore, to *set aside* our own wills, accepting God's!

Let us now amplify our definition of prayer. What is prayer? Prayer is not so much an act as it is an *attitude*— an attitude of *dependency*, dependency upon God. Prayer is a confession of creature weakness, yea, of helplessness. Prayer is the acknowledgment of our need and the spreading of it before God. We do not say that this is *all* there is in prayer, it is not: but it is the essential, the primary element in prayer. Prayer is both an attitude *and* an act, a *human* act, and yet there is the *Divine* element in it too, and it is this which makes an exhaustive analysis impossible as well as impious to attempt. But admitting this, we do insist again, that prayer is fundamentally an attitude of dependency upon God. Therefore, prayer is the very opposite of *dictating* to God. Because prayer is an attitude of dependency, the one who really prays is *submissive*, submissive to the Divine will;

and submission to the Divine will means, that we are content for the Lord to supply our need according to the dictates of His own sovereign pleasure. And hence it is that we say, *every prayer* that is offered to God in *this* spirit is sure of meeting with an answer or response from Him.

Here then is the reply to our opening question, and the scriptural solution to the seeming difficulty. **Prayer is not the requesting of God to alter His purpose or for Him to form a new one. Prayer is the taking of an attitude of dependency upon. God, the spreading of our need before Him, the asking for those things which are in accordance with His will, and therefore there is nothing whatever *inconsistent* between Divine sovereignty and Christian prayer.**

How slow we all are to learn the lesson that the haughty creature needs to be brought down to his knees and humbled into the dust. *And this is where the very act of prayer is intended to put us.* But man (in his usual perversity) turns the footstool into a throne, from whence he would fain direct the Almighty as to what He *ought* to do!

Our main purpose has been to emphasize the need for submitting, in prayer, *our wills to God's*. But it must also be added, that prayer is much more than a pious exercise, and far otherwise than a mechanical performance. Prayer is, indeed, a Divinely appointed means whereby we may obtain from God the things we ask, *providing* we ask for those things which are in accord with *His will*.

Excerpts from John Piper on “Prayer and the Sovereignty of God”

I am often asked, “If you believe God works *all things* according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11), and that his knowledge of all things past, present, and future is infallible, then what is the point of praying that anything happen?” Usually this question is asked in relation to human decisions: “If God has predestined some to be his sons and chosen them before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4–5), then what’s the point in praying for anyone’s conversion?”

God Decides Who Will Be Saved

“Why pray for anyone’s conversion if God has chosen before the foundation of the world who will be his sons?”

A person in need of conversion is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1); he is “a slave to sin” (John 8:34; Romans 6:17); the god of this world has blinded his mind that he might not see “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians. 4:4); his heart is hardened against God (Ephesians 4:18) so that he is hostile to God and in rebellion against God’s will (Romans 8:7).

Will you pray that God enlighten his mind so that he truly see the beauty of Christ and believe? If you pray this, you are in effect asking God no longer to leave the determination of the man’s will in his own power.

You are asking God to do something within the man's mind (or heart) so that he will surely see and believe. That is, you are conceding that the *ultimate* determination of the man's decision to trust Christ is God's.

God's Sovereignty Enables Prayer

Prayer is a request that *God* do something. But the only thing God can do to save a lost sinner is to overcome his resistance to God. For "no one can come to [Christ] unless it is *granted* him by the Father" (John 6:65, 44).

My prayer for unbelievers is that *God* will do for them what he did for Lydia: He opened her heart so that she gave heed to what Paul said (Acts 16:14). I will pray that *God*, who once said, "Let there be light!" will by that same creative power shine in their hearts to give "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). I will pray that *he* will "take out their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). I will pray that they be born not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of *God* (John 1:13). And with all my praying I will try to "be kind to everyone, able to teach, correcting [my] opponents with gentleness," for "*God* may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24–25).

The Relationship Between Prayer and Evangelism

If someone now says, "Okay, granted that a person's conversion is ultimately determined by God, I still don't see the point of your prayer. If God chose before the foundation of the world who would be converted, what function does your prayer have?" My answer is that it has a function like that of preaching: How shall the lost believe in whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall they preach unless they are sent (Romans 10:14–15)? Belief in Christ is a gift of God (John 6:65; 2 Timothy 2:25; Ephesians 2:8), but God has ordained that the means by which men believe on Jesus is through the preaching of men.

It is simply naive to say that *if* no one spread the gospel, all those predestined to be sons of God would be converted anyway. The reason this is naive is because it overlooks the fact that the *preaching* of the gospel is just as predestined as is the *believing* of the gospel: Paul was set apart for his preaching ministry before he was born (Galatians 1:15), as was Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5). Therefore, to ask, "If we don't evangelize, will the elect be saved?" is like asking, "If there is no predestination, will the predestined be saved?"

God knows those who are his, and he will raise up messengers to win them. If someone refuses to be a part of that plan because he dislikes the idea of being tampered with before he was born, then he will be the loser, not God and not the elect.

God Uses Means

Prayer is like preaching in that it is a human act also. It is a human act that God has ordained and which he delights in because it reflects the dependence of his creatures upon him. He has promised to respond to prayer, and his response is just as contingent upon our prayer as our prayer is in accordance with his will.

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything *according to his will* he hears us” (1 John 5:14). When we don’t know how to pray according to God’s will but desire it earnestly, “the Spirit intercedes for the saints *according to the will of God*” (Romans 8:27).

Prayer is a human act that God has ordained and which he delights in because it reflects the dependence of his creatures upon him.”In other words, just as God will see to it that his word is proclaimed as a means to saving the elect, so he will see to it that all those prayers are prayed which he has promised to respond to. I think Paul’s words in Romans 15:18 would apply equally well to his preaching and his praying ministry: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience.” Even our prayers are a gift from the one who “[works] in us that which is pleasing in his sight” (Hebrews 13:21). Oh, how grateful we should be that he has chosen us to be employed in this high service! How eager we should be to spend much time in prayer!

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-sovereignty-of-god-and-prayer>