

If God Is Sovereign, Why Pray?

Preached at DCC

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I want to admit to you upfront that prayer is one of the hardest disciplines that I have ever engaged in. And it's puzzling, when you think about it. Prayer should be like breathing for the Christian. It should be the most natural response of our hearts to God. God has given me so many miraculous answers to prayer that you would think I would be highly motivated to pray. Yet even the most faithful prayer warriors of old have said from time to time that they have struggled with it. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer." That's a remarkable statement for a man who was known for his spirituality. He said, "*Everything* we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer." The famous theologian, Alexander Whyte, said, "There is nothing that we are so bad at all our days as prayer." And one of the reasons this is true is that Satan fears prayer more than anything else, and he will do everything that he can to keep us from praying. Now that all by itself ought to clue us in to the importance of prayer. But when you couple Satan's temptations together with the excuses of the flesh, you have a powerful obstacle to prayer. Next week we are going to look at some of the reasons why prayer is so tough and how to overcome those obstacles.

But today I want to address a nagging feeling that some people have that prayer is really not that important. We know that James says, "You have not because you ask not," but deep down we still feel like prayer is not going to make a big difference.

I. Setting the Context

A. Objections to a Calvinist Praying

Have you ever heard the objection, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" It's probably one of the most frequent objections to Calvinism that I have heard. And on the surface, it does seem to be a legitimate objection. Think about it. If God has predestined everything that comes to pass, how can my prayers make any difference? I can't change God's mind. It has been set from before the foundation of the world. And if His providence is working out every detail of His plan, then there doesn't seem to be a place for prayer. If I am asking God to do something that He has *not* planned to do, I am asking Him to change His predestination. Impossible. And if I am asking God to do something He *has* already planned to do, what is the point? He's

planned to do it anyway. So why not relax? This objection claims that there is no place for prayer if our God is a sovereign God. We will be seeing that it is a gross misunderstanding of God's sovereignty.

B. Objections to an Arminian Praying

But it is helpful to realize that every view of God has just as puzzling, if not more puzzling paradoxes with regard to prayer. Take the Arminian position. They deny that God determines the future. Instead, they say that God simply foreknows the future. Because God has given man a free will, God cannot force people to change. And we might ask, "Why pray then? Is our prayer going to cause God to force people to change?" No. Then why bother? Wouldn't God be just as motivated to save people with or without our prayers?

One writer objected to Arminianism, saying, "No Arminian can consistently say that God foreknew all things yet teach that prayer is of any use. We would ask the Arminian: should we pray for the salvation of those whom God foreknew would be damned? [If God foreknew they would be damned, then they will indeed be damned irrespective of our prayers.] We would then also ask: should we pray for those whom God foreknew would be saved? If so, why? Would they not be saved anyway, seeing that God foreknew they would be? Why pray at all, then?"

You see, even if God is not the one who determines the future, the fact that all things are foreknown means that nothing in the future can be changed. Otherwise it wouldn't be foreknown. This is true whether God is sovereign or not. And yet they want to believe that prayer changes things. If God has given men a free will and if God will not change man's will, why pray for a man's salvation? What can God do that He hasn't already done? But even if the Arminian believed that God could somehow change a person and move that person to salvation, why would He wait for our prayers to do such changes? It doesn't seem very kind to send a person to hell simply because we failed to pray for his or her salvation. So many people have felt that the significance of prayer is even more destroyed by a non-sovereign God who foreknows all things.

C. Objections to an Open Theist Praying

This line of reasoning has been so disturbing to many modern Arminians, that they have left Arminianism and have adopted Open Theism. Open Theism says that God cannot foreknow the future, does not control men's wills, and thus God can make mistakes and be frustrated in His will. The future is open. It can be changed. They insist that for God to be a loving

God, He can't plan our entire future. Instead, He waits for us to make choices and do things so that He will *know* what is going to happen and then to respond to us. Since they claim that the world is not controlled, they believe that our actions can be significant and our prayers can change things.

But this is even worse. If God cannot change men's wills, why pray to Him for their salvation? If God is not in charge, let's pray to the one who is. If God cannot change men's wills, let's focus our attention on trying to convince men to change themselves. This is even more destructive to prayer.

D. Many objections presuppose a magical view of prayer

But let's go one step further. If we say that our prayers influence and change God, then we have gone even beyond Open Theism into the realm of magic. Magic believes that there is a power in words or activity that can manipulate or change the gods. If we say things a certain way or perform a certain ritual, then it will give us power and perhaps give the gods power to perform something. And I use the term gods deliberately because a magical conception of prayer produces a view of God that does not even remotely resemble the God of the Bible. Yet how many times do Christians pray as if prayer is magic. If I pray it loud enough, or with enough tears, or with a certain tone of voice, or with enough people, then prayer will work. It's almost viewed as magic.

E. If God is not sovereign, why pray?

But we don't make prayer "work." God works. God is sovereign. And prayer is a submission of our wills to His will. Prayer is an acknowledgment that He is in charge, and He is the first one that we should go to. And I hope to show in today's sermon that if God is not sovereign, there would be no basis for prayer. But if God is indeed sovereign, our hearts will have every reason to be stirred up to prayer.

II. The Sovereignty of God & Human Responsibility

First, let's see that Scripture does indeed link Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility. Turn to Daniel 9. This chapter gives the passionate and heartfelt prayer of Daniel on behalf of His people. It is a model prayer that teaches us how to pray with faith and passion, how to pray according to God's revealed will, and how to fill our mouths with God-centered arguments. It's a marvelous prayer.

But if you look at verses 1-2, you might question why Daniel bothered to pray at all. What he was praying for had been promised to happen in exactly that year. Daniel 9:1-2 says, **In the first year of Darius the son of**

Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans – in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. This was a prophecy made in Jeremiah 25:11 and reiterated in 29:10. Jeremiah had said, **And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.** The other passages say that Israel would return to Palestine at the end of seventy years.

Well, now it was the end of 70 years, so he started praying in real earnest. That may be a puzzler for you. If God has promised it, why does he need to pray? God is a God who cannot lie. Their return was predestined. But Daniel realizes that God predestines the means as well as the ends. And Leviticus 26 mandated a confessional prayer before any exiles are returned. Without confessional prayer, no return to Israel will happen. Jeremiah 18 also guarantees that without repentance there can be fulfillment of prophecy. Daniel is just as convinced of *that* fact as he is of the *promise* of the 70 years. So he prays. One of the problems with some Calvinists who are passive is that they are only *half* Calvinists. They are convinced that God has ordained the end – the goal, but they are not convinced that the means are necessary. But God has decreed the means to be essential to the obtaining of the end and you simply will not have the goal without the means. James says, **You have not because you do not ask.**

Over and over again Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility are mysteriously put together in the same verse, and worded in such a way that it makes clear that it is God's sovereignty alone that enables us to be responsible.

Philippians 2:12 ¶ Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Philippians 2:13 for [here comes the reason why we can work our sanctification out – “for”] it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.

The reason we can work anything out is because God makes us willing and gives us strength to do it. He even uses the pleadings of Paul as part of His ordained means to get these Philippians active.

Here's another Scripture: Leviticus 20:7-8.

Leviticus 20:7 Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I *am* the LORD your God.

Leviticus 20:8 And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I *am* the LORD who sanctifies you.

If God is the one who sanctifies us and makes us holy, why does He command us to work at it? Because divine sovereignty and enabling never contradict our responsibility. Both are true.

Thus in 1 Kings 8, when Solomon prays at the dedication of the temple, he not only prays that God would forgive His backsliding people, but that He would turn their hearts to follow Him so that they would be forgiven. No one can pray apart from God pouring out a spirit of prayer and supplication upon us, but unless we pray, there will be no answer.

Charles Spurgeon once said,

It is our full belief that God has foreknown and predestinated everything that happeneth in heaven above or in the earth beneath, and that the foreknown station of a reed by the river is as fixed as the station of a king, and "the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses." Predestination embraceth the great and the little, and reacheth unto all things; the question is, wherefore pray? Might it not as logically be asked wherefore breathe, eat, move, or do anything? We have an answer which satisfies us, namely, that our prayers are in the predestination, and that God has as much ordained His people's prayers as anything else, and when we pray we are producing links in the chain of ordained facts. Destiny decrees that I should pray -- I pray; destiny decrees that I shall be answered, and the answer comes to me

In fact, once this connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is understood, it gives us every reason to pray. In Acts 4:23-31 we see that the apostles were fueled in their prayer life by the knowledge that everything that happened to them was predestined by God. And it helped their prayer life take on a God-centered, rather than a man-centered approach. Let me just read their prayer. It is an awesome prayer fueled by the knowledge of God's sovereignty.

Acts 4:23 ¶ And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

Acts 4:24 So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them,

Acts 4:25 who by the mouth of Your servant David have said:

"Why did the nations rage,

And the people plot vain things?

Acts 4:26 *The kings of the earth took their stand,*

*And the rulers were gathered together
Against the LORD and against His Christ.'*

Acts 4:27 ¶ “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together

Acts 4:28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.

Acts 4:29 Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word,

Acts 4:30 by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

Acts 4:31 ¶ And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

Here is a people who know that God is in charge, and it gives them a boldness to speak and boldness to serve. They know that if God is for us, who can be against us? God's kingdom purposes are invincibly moving forward, and they want to be on the cusp of the wave as it advances. What a privilege! And they know that they can only share in this glorious victory as they are caught up into His will through prayer.

III. Why Pray?

A. Negatively

1. Prayer does not inform God of anything (Ps. 139:1-4)

So why pray if God is sovereign? Well, it is certainly not to inform Him of anything. Matthew 6:8 tells us not to pray like the pagans do. And His reason is this: ***For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.*** The purpose of prayer is not to inform. Psalm 139 says that God knows the end from the beginning, and long before a word comes onto our lips, He knew what we were going to say. Though David prays Psalm 139, he does not do it to give God knowledge. He is blown away with wonder and amazement that God knows everything. And yet His prayer is still a passionate prayer. Why? Because prayer has drawn Him to the heart of God.

2. Prayer does not change God's plan (Psalm 139:1-24)

Nor does David pray that prayer to change God's plan. He tells God, ***Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book***

they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there was none of them. Every day was mapped out long before David was born.

B. We pray because God has given us life and we are abiding in Christ (John 15:4-8)

So why pray? In John 15 Jesus indicates that it is an evidence of life. It is evidence that we are united to Christ, the vine. Nowhere in the speech on the True Vine are we commanded to bear fruit. We are commanded to abide in Christ just as a branch abides in the vine. You don't see vine branches striving to bear fruit. Can you imagine a branch working hard to get grapes? Unnnghh! Unnnghh! No, it doesn't do that. Grapes automatically grow on branches when they abide in the vine. The sap of that vine gives life. And the same is true of us. Our pride makes us think that we can produce all kinds of things without prayer. But in verse 5 Jesus said, **I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.** Our strivings produce nothing. Only His grace produces fruit. And how do we get this grace? By abiding in the vine; by a life of prayer and dependency. And verses 7-8 indicate that when we abide in Him, we can ask anything, and it will be done. When we abide we bear much fruit. So prayer is a sign of life – a sign that we are a genuine branch abiding in the vine.

C. Secondly, because prayerlessness is an evidence of pride, not a humility before the sovereign (2 Chron. 7:14)

Second, prayer is evidence that we believe God is sovereign. Where prayerlessness is an evidence of self-sufficiency and pride and that we really don't need the Lord, prayer is an acknowledging of God's greatness and of our own humility. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, **if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray...** It takes humility to pray. The reason we are so prone to prayerlessness is because our hearts are so filled with pride that they cannot see the greatness of our sovereign God. We really think we can do it on our own. Can you see how the sovereignty of God is quite consistent with prayer? On the other hand, prayerlessness is evidence that we think we are sovereign or independent.

D. We pray because He commands us to (1 Thes. 5:17; etc)

Thirdly, we pray because God, the Sovereign, commands us to. 1 Thessalonians commands us, **pray without ceasing.** Christ said, **"Watch therefore and pray.** Over and over again our Sovereign Lord commands us to pray. Now, what kind of sovereignty do we think God has if we can

excuse disobedience to His commands simply because He is sovereign? That's a strange sort of sovereignty. Such an objection to sovereignty is illogical. It is illogical. A sovereign commands and expects to be obeyed. Far from being inconsistent with sovereignty, prayer is an acknowledgment of sovereignty.

E. We pray because He loves us (John 16:26-27; Rom. 15:30)

Fourth, we pray because He loves us. John 16 says, **In that day you shall ask in My name... for the Father Himself loves you...** Does a couple that is in love need a reason to talk together? No. They look for reasons to talk because there is a love relationship between them. And let me point out something about prayer that is many times missed. Prayer is not asking. Asking for requests is only the smallest portion of what prayer is all about. Prayer is communing with the God who loves us; communing with Him in adoration, awe, reverence and wonder. We learn of His will as we pray the Scriptures. We hope in Him as we pray His promises. We submit ourselves to Him as we pray His commandments. We pray because it is the expression of our hearts to God's heart of love. The sovereignty of God does not annul, but magnifies and makes such love even more amazing.

F. We pray because we hunger for God, and desire is power, glory, loving-kindness, refreshment and presence (Psalm 63:1)

In Psalm 63 David expresses half a dozen further reasons that drove Him to pray to God. The chief one was that he hungered to know the reality of God's presence with Him. Once you taste of God's goodness, you hunger for more. Once you have known His power, you make Paul's life goal your own life goal, **that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings.**

David said,

Psalms 63:1 ¶ O God, You *are* my God;

Early will I seek You;

My soul thirsts for You;

My flesh longs for You

In a dry and thirsty land

Where there is no water.

Psalms 63:2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary,

To see Your power and Your glory.

Psalms 63:3 Because Your loving-kindness *is* better than life,

My lips shall praise You.

Psalms 63:4 Thus I will bless You while I live;

I will lift up my hands in Your name.

**Psalms 63:5 My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.**

**Psalms 63:6 When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the *night* watches.**

**Psalms 63:7 Because You have been my help,
Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.**

**Psalms 63:8 My soul follows close behind You;
Your right hand upholds me.**

I think we can understand why a hunger for God is consistent with praying to a sovereign God. We want more and more of the One whom our soul desires.

G. We pray because we desire His will to be accomplished (the Psalms)

Are you beginning to see a pattern? Biblical prayer is God centered. It is a means of seeking God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. As W. Bingham Hunter says, "Paul's experience highlights the simple but profound truth that prayer is not the means by which we get what we want, rather it is a means that God uses to give us what he wants." And the more we pray the Scriptures, the more our heart yearns for His will to be accomplished.

H. We pray because God finds delight in our prayers (Prov. 15:8) and because fellowship with God brings us joy (Job 33:26)

Another reason we pray is that it brings delight to God. To me this is encouraging. Proverbs 15:8 says, "**The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight.**" The prayer of the upright is His delight. Do you want to delight the Lord? Pray. But while we are speaking of delight, we might as well point out that as hard as it is to enter into prayer, prayer not only brings delight to God, it also brings delight to us. Those who have sought God's heart for hours at a time have found that their own hearts find delight in God. Job 33:26 says not only that God delights in our prayers, but it says that coming before God's face gives us joy. The kind of sovereignty we are dealing with is a gracious, loving and generous sovereignty. It is a sovereignty that looks out for our good and takes joy in our fellowship.

I. We pray because God has promised numerous times to answer our prayers (Matt 7:7-11; etc)

J. We pray because we love our Sovereign's kingdom and He wants us to plead for the kingdom (Is. 62)

Another reason we pray is because we love our Sovereign's kingdom and God has invited us to join the intercessions of Son and Spirit on behalf of that kingdom. Isaiah 59:16 gives one of the most amazing anthropomorphisms in the Bible. An anthropomorphism is a figure of speech in which the Bible describes something that is indescribable in God by likening God to a human characteristic. God doesn't have arms to embrace us to His chest, but that figure gives us a warm understanding of something that would otherwise be incomprehensible. Well, this passage speaks of God the Father (who knows all things) being astonished or surprised that there is no one praying. It says, **And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede; Then His own arm brought salvation to Him; And His righteousness upheld Him (NASB).** God is amazed that humans would not pray. In answer to this lack of intercessors, God the Father sends the Son and Spirit to be intercessors. In verses 17-18 He sends the Son, and in verse 19 He sends the Spirit to lift up a standard. Son and Spirit will intercede on behalf of the church. But Isaiah goes on to call upon the whole church to join Son and Spirit in their intercessions in another surprising invitation in Isaiah 62 where we are all called to pray. **For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns...** And in the next verses he outlines the goal of the prayer that all nations submit to King Jesus. But in verses 6-7 he invites the church to never give God rest until that is accomplished. I would never have dared to use such bold language if God Himself did not use it. He says, **I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the LORD, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.** So God the Father encourages our hearts by telling us to never stop praying; to never give Him rest; to pray without ceasing. Christ died and lives to intercede in heaven to make our prayers acceptable. And the Spirit intercedes from within us to make our prayers acceptable. What a motivation this is to prayer. As Spurgeon worded it, "God the Holy Ghost writes our prayers, God the Son presents our prayers, and God the Father accepts our prayers.

And with the whole Trinity to help us in it, what cannot prayer perform?" Is that not encouraging?! I love this sovereign God.

K. Without prayer, God will not advance His cause upon the earth (2 Chron. 7:14; James 4:2). He has made us co-laborers.

But the last reason I want to give for why we must pray is that without prayer, God will not advance the cause of His kingdom upon the earth. Again, we had better submit to the Sovereign's plan in doing it this way. I as a mere creature would not dare to make such a statement had God not said the same. James insists, **You have not because you ask not.** Scripture over and over puts conditions upon the growth of the church. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, **If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.** That "if" is a divine "if." Without prayer, expect nothing. The very sovereign who ordains all things, has ordained that nothing will be accomplished of any significance in the advancement of Christ's kingdom without prayer. I can guarantee that you will not see victory without prayer because God the Sovereign has said so. The Sovereign guarantees that you will have not if you ask not. God has willed for us to be co-laborers. So when Christ was burdened over the sheep without a shepherd, He called His disciples and told them, **The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.** Literally thousands of times in Scripture God places our human responsibility squarely in the context of God's sovereignty.

Here's how the Calvinist, John Piper puts it,

"The success of the gospel in church planting depends not only on God's sovereignty BUT ALSO on the faithful preaching of the gospel AND the faithful prayers of God's people. Prayer is the mysterious means that God has chosen through which he releases the transforming power of the gospel in your life and ministry. Not only has God made the accomplishment of his purposes hang on the preaching of the word; he has also made the success of that preaching hang on prayer. God's goal to be glorified will not succeed without the powerful proclamation of the gospel. And that gospel will not be proclaimed in power to all the nations without the prevailing, earnest faith-filled prayers of God's people. This is the awesome place of prayer in the purpose of God for the world. That purpose won't happen without prayer." (John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, p. 66).

Scripture does not ask the question, “If God is sovereign, why pray. Instead, He asks the question, “Since your Sovereign has called you to pray, why are you not praying?” Next week we will look at the obstacles to prayer and why we find such an amazing privilege so difficult. But today, let’s tell our sovereign that we will submit before Him, and bow our knees to Him. Let’s rejoice that such an awesome God would ordain to make our actions be significant. And let’s make our prayers significant. Amen.