

Reformation
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Sooner or later, every believer in the sovereignty of God's grace comes face-to-face with a two-edged theological problem that has great practical implications. One edge is this: "If God is really sovereign, then why pray?" In other words, why should we pray if God has already predestined whatever will come to pass? Will He not do whatever He pleases anyway without consulting us? The second edge is this: "If we are commanded to pray, how can it be said that God is sovereign and has foreordained everything that will happen?" How do we reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility in this thorny dilemma? And how do we pray with real feeling and passion with a clear view of God's sovereignty?

These are not merely questions for ivory-tower theologians. Anyone who has not wrestled with this question has not waded far into the ocean of divine sovereignty or the mysteries of prayer. It behooves us to take another look at an old but ever-present problem.

Prayer is talking to God in the right way. Demons and unbelievers talk to God, but not in the right way. Blasphemy can hardly be called prayer. It takes a believer to pray to the true God. Probably the best concise definition of prayer is the answer to Question 98 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies."

Prayer is both a duty and a privilege. God commands us to pray. "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17; Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:1; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 4:16). Prayer is part of the revealed will of God. Consequently, not praying is a sin (1 Sam. 12:23). In addition to the many commands to pray, we are exhorted to imitate the many examples of those who pray (e.g., James 5:16-18).

Prayer is also a privilege. God's children have been

granted access into the throne room of their Father (Heb. 4:16). This privilege has not been extended to all men; it belongs only to those who belong to Christ by faith. It is one of the highest privileges a Christian has. God, of course, did not have to grant this privilege. He could have deigned to conduct the business of running the universe all by Himself without the slightest thought of consulting us. After all, He did just that in formulating the eternal decrees (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:34). But in His providence, He grants the privilege of prayer to His children. "This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them" (Ezek. 36:37). God lets us pray. This must be firmly understood as we examine the matter of prayer and the sovereignty of God.

In Reformed tradition, it has been customary to divide prayer into four categories. Each has its own peculiar problems regarding the sovereignty of God. First, there is confession. We are commanded to confess our sins (1 John 1:9). The truly penitent believer will acknowledge that he has sinned against God and will turn from his sin. Psalm 51 is the model prayer of confession. David acknowledged that he had sinned, and he did not shift the blame on to Bathsheba. Nor did he blame Adam. Calvinists need to be careful lest they subtly shift the blame on to the total depravity that is still resident in their mortal bodies. More important, we must never pray in any way that suggests that God is to blame for our sin. Such is abhorrent to the holy God and to the sanctified conscience. How would one ever do such a thing? By hinting that his sin had been foreordained by God. It is, of course, true that God has foreordained all things and in a mysterious way ordained that sin would come into being (Isa. 45:7). He foreordained the crucifixion of Christ, which was the most evil sin in history (Acts 2:23; 4:28). But those who carried out that deed could not have pleaded innocence because it had been foreordained. Confessional prayer, then, submits to divine sovereignty

but does not use it to excuse one's responsibility.

Second, there is the prayer of supplication, or requesting what we need from God. This is related to the third, namely, intercession, in which we request things for other people. Most of the rest of this study will concern the particular problems involved in these aspects of prayer. The fourth category is praise and adoration. It is the "Thank-you" that follows the "Please" of the first three aspects. It, too, is part of the revealed will of God. We are frequently commanded to praise the Lord. But the problem arises: "If God is already perfect in glory, how then can we contribute to His glory by praise and worship?" The answer belongs to the realm of the secret things of Deuteronomy 29:29, but we do know that such praise glorifies God (Ps. 50:23). Let no believer in divine sovereignty refuse to worship the Lord with the feeble excuse that God is already perfect in glory. Such an attitude is not humility, but presumption. The same applies to the refusal to glorify God, because God has predestined that He will receive glory from all things in the end anyway (Rom. 11:36). The Lord commands us to render to Him praise in return for His sovereign bestowal of grace (Eph. 1:6). Nothing should more characterize a believer in sovereign grace than exuberant worship of our heavenly God.

Now let us address some of the problems relating to supplicatory and intercessory prayer. One of the problems is whether God has given us a blank check with the command to pray. Does the privilege of prayer mean that God promises to answer all our prayers? If so, then being sovereign, He is certainly able to answer and effect such prayers.

Some Christians think that God has given such an unconditional promise in His revealed will. They appeal to verses such as Matthew 7:7-12; 18:19; John 14:13; 15:7; 16:23; and 17. Their prayers are remarkably like the one in Mark 10:35, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask

of You.” This approach is common in the so-called “Name it, Claim it” movement, which one wag has renamed the “Blab it, Grab it” movement.

But this approach is all wrong. It does not truly recognize divine sovereignty. It fails to balance the above texts with texts which lay down other principles and conditions. James 1:6, for example, says that our prayers must have faith. Verses 7 and 8 explicitly say that we will not be heard without faith. Then James 4:3 warns us against praying with greedy motives. Such motives are more common in our prayers that we realize or will admit. They are like the words of an old song from the 1960s, “O Lord, Won’t You Buy Me a Mercedes Benz.” One wonders how prevalent it is in the “Name it, Claim it” movement. Still other texts tell us that our prayers must be coupled with obedience to God’s will (John 9:31; 1 John 3:22). This does not mean that we earn things in prayer by obeying God’s will. Nothing could be further from the truth. It does mean that we cannot expect anything from God if we are not willing to obey Him.

True prayer submits to God’s authority. Right prayers are “requests” (Phil. 4:6), not demands. Demanding things from God treats Him as our servant, not our sovereign. It whistles to Him as our bellhop, rather than submitting humbly to Him as our King. Christians should be careful even in the use of imperative verbs when we pray. It might be better if we used the word “please” in our prayers. Manoah gave us a good example in Judges 13:8,15. One wonders whether Jean Calvin, the Frenchman, employed the phrase, “S’il vous plait” (If You please) in his prayers.

The awkward disciples employed the blank check approach in Mark 10:35. Notice how the Lord gently rebuffed them in verse 40: “But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” God had already foreordained who will sit where, and so their prayers did not submit to the predestination of

divine sovereignty.

Still another principle that offsets this misuse of prayer is found in the several instances in which God explicitly told one of His people not to pray for such-and-such (Deut. 3:26; Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; Ex. 32:10; Jer. 11:11-12; 15:1; Hos. 5:6; 1 John 5:16). It is God’s prerogative as our sovereign to lay down conditions on the privilege of prayer which He gives.

On the other hand, Scripture indicates that there are some things which God has promised to supply if we present our requests in the right manner. The key verses are 1 John 5:14-15. These refer to the will of God. But this is not the secret will of predestination, but the revealed will of precept. The gist is this: If we pray in faith in the name of Christ with an obedient and selfless heart for things which God has commanded us to have, then we can be assured that He will grant them. It is like Augustine’s prayer, “Give what Thou commandest and command what Thou will.”

Take the matter of wisdom. We are commanded to have wisdom. “Be wise as serpents” (Matt. 10:16). But we are born fools without wisdom. Is God commanding us to make bricks without straw? No, He offers to give us the straw. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” This is praying aright with a view to the sovereignty of God in His revealed will. He commands us to have what only He can give; therefore He promises to give it to those who request it properly.

The problem is that we do not know how to pray rightly (Rom. 8:26; Luke 11:1). Jesus said to the disciples, “You do not know what you are asking” (Mark 10:38). We confuse our needs with our greeds (James 4:3). God rarely gives us our greeds, except to punish us (Num. 11:4, 20). It takes wisdom to know the difference, so we should ask for wisdom to know how to pray aright for what we need. It is presumption to demand or claim what God has not promised. Humility is

not the refusal to ask in faith for what God has commanded and promised in His revealed will. It would be presumption to think that God commands us to ask for what He can give, but then is unwilling to bestow it.

There are other misconceptions about prayer that are based upon a fundamental misunderstanding about the sovereignty of God. First, "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." This is patently false. The truth is, God does almost everything irrespective of prayer. He governs the universe in all its details with no regard to prayer. How many of us pray that God keep the moons orbiting around the planet Saturn? We do not know enough about the universe to pray that the Lord keep it going. The same is true in His providence with man. Take creation. Did God answer anyone's prayer when He created the world? Moreover, the Lord does many, many things in our lives regardless of prayer. He does them by sheer grace. This is seen, for instance, in common grace for unbelievers who never pray and in special grace for the elect before they pray.

Second, "Pray that God saves a person, but does not intrude upon his free will." But no man has free will. Man's will is enslaved to sin (John 8:34). He will never be saved unless God intervenes into his will. The Lord does just that, and not only in salvation (Prov. 21:1). The sovereign God intervenes, interrupts, and intercepts our fallen wills. That is an inside secret, as it were, to the glory of praying with a view to the sovereignty of God. Even an Arminian should recognize the futility of his feeble formula. Christians rarely pray, "Lord, save my loved one, but do not interfere with his free will." No, we all pray, "Lord, save him! Do whatever has to be done!" Praying under the sovereignty of God means praying that God do what only God can do.

A third misconception is, "We should believe like Calvinists but pray like Arminians." This is as incorrect as the notion that we should evangelize like Arminians and

believe like Calvinists. Why not evangelize and pray like Calvinists?

A fourth misconception is this: "I am praying for God's will." It is right that we pray for God's help in discerning His will, but this statement is usually an excuse to avoid doing what the revealed will explicitly states. Such a person usually is not studying his Bible to learn the will of God. He should stop praying and start studying, or, better yet, pray while he reads the Bible. This misunderstanding underlies many of the popular theories about divine guidance. Too many think that God guides us by feelings and impressions, rather than by Scripture.

Fifth, "God answers everyone's prayers." Scripture says otherwise. God does not answer those who pray without faith, repentance, in the name of Christ, and so on. Specifically, God does not answer the prayers of the unregenerate. Since the reprobate are permanently unregenerate, God never answers the prayers of the reprobate. Their prayers are insults to God. They do not pray with any regard to divine sovereignty.

A more general misunderstanding surrounds the popular phrase, "Prayer changes things." Of course, it does not change God's secret will (Num. 23:19), nor does it change His essence (Mal. 3:6). It will not do, then, to use this ditty or even the more sanctimonious one, "Prayer changes God and God changes things." It would be more appropriate to say with Robert Lewis Dabney, "Prayer is not intended to produce a change in God, but in us." Calvin commented, "It was not so much for His sake as for ours." When we pray, we change our wills to conform with God's revealed will. Behind that process, we should observe that God is changing us.

But what about the examples of Abraham and Jonah? Did not Abraham haggle with God and force Him to change His mind about Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:22-33? Look again. God still destroyed those cities as He had intended

and announced to Abraham (James 2:23). God did not choose to give repentance to the Sodomites, and without that they were fuel for the fire.

What about Jonah and Nineveh? The argument suggests that God threatened Nineveh with destruction, the Ninevites talked God out of it by prayer, and so God did not carry out His threat. This misunderstands what really happened. For one thing, had the Lord unconditionally promised to destroy Nineveh, it would certainly have been destroyed. God always keeps His unconditional promises. The fact that God did not carry out the promise tells us that it was a conditional promise. Scripture gives us several such examples. It was as if God had said through Jonah, "I will destroy you unless you repent" (Luke 13:3). As the book unfolds, we see that the Ninevites did in fact repent, so they were spared. It was certainly not because Jonah prayed for them. Had they not repented, God would certainly have destroyed them like Sodom and Gomorrah. Notice that they prayed with a view to the sovereignty of God in 3:9. They threw themselves on God's mercy, which is the appropriate attitude of prayer. Thus, they showed that they submitted to His authority, His sovereignty, His revealed will. Look deeply and you will see that God gave them that repentance and faith in the first place. That was because He had ordained to do so. It was not in answer to Jonah's prayer, because Jonah did not want them to be spared.

Most of our discussion so far has concerned prayer and the sovereignty of God with regard to His revealed will. Now we must look at prayer and the secret will, both in predestination and providence. The first principle we need to recognize is that God did not predestine anything because He foresaw that we would pray for it. He did not consult with anyone in the formulation of the decrees. He only consulted Himself (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:34).

One should never pray in a way that seeks to persuade

God to change His decrees. Of course, the Lord would not change them anyway. It is impertinence to ask that He alter the unalterable. A decree is an oath; would one dare ask God to break His oath? Moreover, the Almighty issued the decrees out of His infinite, perfect wisdom. To pray against the decrees is to impugn the wisdom of the sovereign. A person who prays this will receive a rebuke, not an answer to his request.

Naturally, few persons would ever explicitly dare to pray such insubordinate prayers, except in gross ignorance or blatant arrogance. Unfortunately, gross theological ignorance is rampant in our churches, and so we hear occasional examples of prayers which are not in keeping with the secret will of God. A few examples should suffice. One is the prayer that God save the whole world. But even the Lord Jesus did not pray for the entire world (John 17:9), and He always prayed perfectly (John 11:42). Yet, we should pray for the conversion of the lost. We can pray for anybody, but not for everybody. Why? Because we know that God has not chosen all men to be saved, but He has chosen some and has not told us who they are. To pray that God save literally everybody is as contrary to the sovereignty of God as to pray for the salvation of the Devil (and some Christians have even done that, presumably in grossest ignorance).

Similarly, we ought not to pray that the Lord reverse the decree of reprobation. For example, do not pray that God release someone from hell. Those in hell are there because they are reprobate; to pray for a release is to pray that God reverse the decree of reprobation.

Then there is the business of "claiming" a person for Christ. We have no license to do this, either in our prayers or in our evangelism. This even applies to our own children. Even paedo-baptist believers in covenant theology discuss this point. But 1 Corinthians 7:16 says, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?" One simply

cannot know whether any person in particular will ever be saved, for the simple reason that God has not decided to tell us who the unconverted elect are. We should not grumble about this; there is wisdom in His decision, and we need to submit to it. One can know that another is elect, but only after that person has given proof of regeneration (Eph. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:13). On the other hand, we cannot know who any of the reprobate are until they confirm it by final impenitance unto death.

Likewise, we cannot pray that God change the date of Christ's return, for that has already been decreed (Acts 1:7). Revelation 22:20 is not a prayer that Christ return earlier than decreed, but the earnest desire that is in every true saint that Christ return in his lifetime. God has already set the date and has not deigned to reveal it to us (Matt. 24:36). We can deduce that God has not yet called His elect to Himself, for Christ will not return until all the elect are called in, even as God did not send the rains until He had led all the animals into the ark (Gen. 7; 2 Peter 3:9). It would be more appropriate to increase our evangelism to hasten that day than to pray idly for it to advance because we are sick of this world (2 Peter 3:12). This was the tenor of Christ's words in Acts 1:7-8.

Actually, there are several parallels between prayer and evangelism with regard to divine sovereignty. In his excellent little book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer shows that the two are biblical and therefore compatible. Among his many useful observations are two that can apply to prayer. First, we evangelize because God commands us to. We pray because God commands us to. Second, we evangelize because God uses our evangelism to call in His elect. We pray because God uses our prayers to call in His elect.

God is the First Cause of all things (Rom. 11:36), but like a master billiards player, He uses second causes. One of

them is evangelism and another is prayer. Human responsibility in general is a second cause (Phil. 2:13-14). We are responsible to pray, and prayer is a means of providence. God uses our prayers, when prayed aright, to carry out His sovereign purposes. Of course He is not bound by prayer, but neither does His sovereignty require that He act without prayer. Scripture and experience testify to this point.

When we begin to look at it like this, a new vista opens up. Calvinism does not kill prayer, as some of our Arminian friends charge. The exact opposite is true. The fact that we pray assumes that we believe in the sovereignty of God, even implicitly. Alva McLain, hardly a Calvinist by most definitions, saw this and observed, "The doctrine of divine sovereignty should be an incentive to pray, for the only kind of a God who can answer prayer is a sovereign God."

For an example of this principle, one may compare 1 Timothy 2:1-2 with Proverbs 21:1. Paul exhorts us to pray for our rulers; Solomon tells us that God holds the hearts of the rulers in His hand. This is not limited to civil rulers, by the way. God directs the wills and minds of all men. This is one of the beauties of Reformed theology, for it opens a hitherto ignored window on prayer.

A "free will" Arminian is inconsistent. A. M. Toplady used to say that a praying Arminian is a self-contradiction. Conversely, a non-praying Calvinist is also inconsistent. If he believes in the sovereignty of God, his lack of prayer can only be attributed to lack of concern.

There is another useful principle in all this. Jonathan Edwards put it like this: "When the people of God are stirred up to prayer, it is the effect of His intention to show mercy."

When one prays rightly, he should deduce that the Lord has poured out upon him the "spirit of supplication" (Zech. 12:10). A.W. Pink wrote, "The God who has determined to grant a blessing also gives a spirit of supplication which first

seeks the blessing." If God stirs us to pray, it indicates that He is about to work in connection with those prayers. Of course, one should not simply wait for that stirring. As in evangelism, our duty is to pray at all times, in season and out.

Then there is importunate prayer and the sovereignty of God (Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8). Our persistent praying does not force God's hand. God is still sovereign, but He has commanded us to pray and keep on praying. What is more, He has ordained that He will bestow some blessings only in reply to persistent prayer. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say that God sits in a hayloft and lowers down a rope. The blessing is tied to the rope at the top, and He calls down and says, "Start pulling." One or two tugs will not pull it down. But when we keep praying aright and God is so pleased, He kicks over the blessing and we pull it down.

The Calvinist should never resemble the Hyper-Calvinist who shows his laziness and presumption by saying, "God will call in His elect whether I offer the gospel to them or not." We ought never think that we are blameless if we believe that God will do things whether we pray or not. Such an attitude is fatalism, not faith. Charles Hodge commented, "A fatalist cannot consistently pray." Prayer takes faith, not Stoic resignation to the inevitable. True, God shall carry out His purposes. But be forewarned that if you think that God foreordained your lack of prayer, remember that He also foreordained chastening for those who do not pray when they should.

A few words should be said in this context about the phrase "Thy will be done" as it pertains to prayer. Some believers resort to it in the wrong way to cover up a poor prayer. But it is a biblical phrase and is found twice in Scripture—both times on the lips of the Savior Himself. The first instance is in Matthew 6:10 in the Lord's Prayer. Now to which "will" of God does this refer? Obviously the

revealed will, as recognized by most Reformed commentators on the passage (e.g., Hendriksen, Pink, Watson, and Kelly). Hendriksen comments: "It is the ardent desire of the person who sincerely breathes the Lord's Prayer that the Father's will shall be obeyed as completely, heartily and immediately on earth as this is constantly being done by all the inhabitants of heaven."

Thus, it is a submission to the revealed will with the prayer that others submit also. It cannot refer to the secret will, for that is accomplished by all in heaven, earth and hell. There is no warrant to pray, "Thy secret will be done." The accent to that prayer is strange. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it like this: "We pray that God, by His grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to His will in all things, as the angels do in Heaven" (Question 103). This is much the same as the submission of faith (James 1:6) and obedience (1 John 3:22) that is requisite for true prayer. Therefore, the phrase indicates submission, not apathy, to the sovereignty of God.

The Savior used the phrase also in His prayer in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39. Again, it indicates submission to the revealed will, not apathy in light of the secret will. Christ had received a command from His Father to lay down His life (John 10:18). He kept the Father's commands *in toto* (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 17:4). Christ realized that the elect would perish if He did not keep this command. Moreover, He Himself would have perished had He not kept the command, for disobedience would have meant sin and sin brings judgment. The Lord Jesus submitted, and so should we.

One more point deserves mention regarding prayer and the sovereignty of God. The sovereign God already knows what He will do. He knows what is best. He even knows what we will pray, for He has foreordained everything (Matt. 6:8). Then why pray? Augustine gives us the answer: "God does

not ask us to tell Him our needs that He may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what He is preparing to give." This was echoed even in the words of Thomas Aquinas: "Neither do we pray in order that we may alter the divine plan, but rather that we may obtain what was divinely planned to be given in answer to prayer." For a Catholic scholastic, that is good Calvinism!

So, then, prayer is a duty and a privilege. It includes much mystery and requires much faith. It is not theologically incompatible with the sovereignty of God in either the secret or revealed will. Thomas Manton wrote, "It must be conformable to His revealed will and with submission to His secret will; not contrary to His Word, nor against His decrees." Amen.

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Recommended Reading

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