

The Sovereignty of God and Prayer

This question “Why pray if God is deterministically sovereign?” can be multiplied several times as Why evangelize or Why do any religious obligation? Of course an immediate answer is because God has commanded it. For example, we are to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). However, these kinds of questions and the specific one about prayer is more intimate and complex than merely obedience. Such an investigation raises the apologetic question, “Is prayer significant?” However when we are in need, we go even further as we join with Job in asking the practical question, “What profit should we have if we pray unto the Almighty?” (Job 21:15). A look at the question more closely helps to unpack aspects of our spiritual life under the sovereign God in practical ways: what is prayer, why is it done, and how is it to be done best? This look also helps us to see glimpses of the intricacy of the sovereign God as He folds and envelopes our free choices into His sovereign plan.

What is prayer? From contemporary English speakers, prayer may be defined as an expression of thought and feeling toward a deity. Though almost every prayer in the Bible prays to the true God (e.g. 2 Chron. 6:14; Eph. 3:14), occasionally idolaters pray also but to their false gods (Isa. 45:20). Such an expression is so common that William James considered that virtually everyone cries out to a god who could help when they find themselves caught in desperate

circumstances.¹ However, the O.T. concept of prayer is broader than these desperate petitions so as to include the wide range of emotions. That is, the Psalms (with its laments, hymns, and liturgy) fills out the broad pattern of expressing thought and feeling to the Deity. However, on emphasis of the psalm material one would say that petition still is the emphasis. Sometimes reformation influenced writers primarily view prayer as worship.² Whereas, in the N.T. it is helpful to recognize that the words translated prayer (*deesis*, *enteuxis*, *eychomai*, *parakaleo*, *proseychomai*) actually are words of petition, asking God for something. Often these words draw this action of petition together with an acknowledgment of sovereignty. For example, *aiteō* is always an inferior asking a superior for something. The use of these words in the N.T. points to petition as the meaning of prayer. In light of these concerns the command "Pray without ceasing" is actually a command for the corporate assembly (as evidenced by the plurals) to be characterized by repeated petitioning God for their concerns (1 Thess. 5:17).

With both the broader and more petition focused definitions of prayer, one reason to pray is that of building a relationship with God. Initially, humans were created in a context in which they conversed with God and walked in each other's presence (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:8-13). Though marred by sin humans began to recover a prayer relationship in Seth's day (Gen. 4:26). Enoch and Noah in relationship "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24; 6:9). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "walked before God" in a believing relationship (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 48:15). In this Abraham was called the friend of God, focusing on his open communication and responsiveness to God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). Moses spoke in dialogue with God (e.g. Ex. 3). David, the man after God's heart, maintained an active communication with God in hymn and lament, praising and petitioning God. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of the possible interpenetrating relationship

¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1977), pp. 203-4

with God in prayer (e.g. Jn. 17). All these examples demonstrate that a relationship filled with vibrant communication with God is essential and desirable for the one who loves God. Such a love relationship with God is preeminent in our obligations in this life (Mt. 22:37). One of the most prominent imageries of God in relationship is that of a loving Father. As we address Him as Father in prayer we raise the issues of His sovereignty (“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”) and petition, since the imperatives throughout the Lord’s prayer indicate it is a series of requests (Mt. 6:9-13; Lk.11:2-4). The essence of the prayer is that the Sovereign’s kingdom may come in all its many ramifications: God’s name be recognized as holy, God’s kingdom rule on earth, daily physical provision, spiritual cleansing, and guidance with protection. God’s sovereignty and prayer are intertwined. This same compassionate Father responds by answering prayer generously and swiftly (Lk.11:5-13). The Holy Spirit shows His leading in the believer’s life by prompting us to intimately cry out “Daddy, Father!” to God in prayer (Rom. 8:15-16).

Prayer changes the one who prays. For example, anyone who is anxious or concerned about anything is commanded by Paul to pray (Phil. 4:6-7). God supplies a promise that His peace, which surpasses our comprehension, will guard your minds and hearts in Christ Jesus. Presumably the anxiety that spurred the prayer in the first place will be removed as the prayer involves the person with the God of peace. There may be many other changes as well as we humbly admit our dependency upon God and increase our faith as our prayers are answered in the affirmative. Certainly the wonderful religious affections and fruit of the Spirit which are developed in the midst of an intimate relationship cultivated with God involve prayer in the process. However, the change of the praying person’s emotions is not the primary reason to be praying. The petitions identify specific requests sometimes beyond the person who prays. So it is partly why Paul shows us the specific prayers for his disciples character in Christ as he begins most of his

² E.g. John Hannah, “Prayer and the Sovereignty of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979)

letters. Paul lets his readers know what he prays for in their character and thanks God when he sees these character traits develop.

With an eternal sovereign God who determines everything, the human prayer and the answer are both expressions of His deterministic choice. C. S. Lewis elaborates this.

If our prayers are granted at all they are granted from the foundation of the world. God and His acts are not in time. Intercourse between God and man occurs at particular moments for the man, but not for God. If there is—as the very concept of prayer presupposes—an adaptation between the free actions of men in prayer and the course of events, this adaptation is from the beginning inherent in the great single act.³

Wayne Spear defends that God ordains *means* as well as *ends* and thereby gives prayer its meaning.

Paul finds no contradiction between prayer and God's eternal decree. In his most extended discussion of predestination, where he shows that the salvation or rejection of Israel rests upon God's purpose of election (Rom. 9-11), he can say, 'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved' (Rom. 10:1). He is confident that God will complete the work of salvation which he has begun in the Philippians (Phil. 1:6; cf. Rom. 8:29-30); and what he is sure God will do, he prays for (Phil. 1:9-11).⁴

With God's determinative sovereignty including our praying and the answer to these prayers we should willingly pray as participation within the plan of God.

The implementation of this decree is providence. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines this succinctly as "God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all

345.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 48.

⁴ Wayne Spear, *The Theology of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 69.

their actions.”⁵ God’s providence is comprehensive and unconditional. As Paul says, “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. . . . So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (Rom. 9:16, 18). God says, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa. 46:9b-10). This providential control covers all areas (e.g. Eph. 1:11) even down to giving specific answers to prayer (eg. 1 Sam. 1:19; 2 Chron. 33:13; Ps. 65:2; Isa. 20:5-6; Mt.7:7; Lk. 18:7-8). The proper response to this sovereign God is worship, “Now to the King everlasting, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen...He who is blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and everlasting dominion! Amen.” (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16).

At times God is shown authoring prayer. For example, when Abraham journeyed into the Negev he and Sarah deceived King Abimelech into thinking that Sarah was not Abraham’s wife. As a result Abimelech took her to be his wife. God put him under a curse of death with only one way out: restore Sarah to Abraham and have Abraham pray for him. “Then God said to him in a dream... he will pray for you, and you will liv” (Gen. 20:6-7). It was God’s idea for Abraham to intercede before God, not Abraham’s idea. This is not an isolated instance of God authoring the prayers of those who are His. Along these same lines, God restored Job’s fortunes when he prayed for his friends, but the prayer of Job originated with God (Job 42:8, 10). Some of the council’s of the church have even made pronouncements on the fact that God initiates at least some prayers, especially the prayer of initial faith by which believers begin their initial salvation. For example, the Council of Orange, A.D. 529, settled this issue in the third canon saying, “Whoever says that the grace of God can be bestowed in reply

⁵ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 11

to human petition, but not that the grace brings it about so that it is asked for by us, contradicts Isaiah the prophet and the Apostle (Isa. 65:1; Rom. 10:20)."⁶ However, the prayers which God initiates are not only those of rescue and salvation. For the Christian there is a developing spirituality dependent upon the Holy Spirit transforming them. Paul develops this in the leading of the Spirit, in which the Spirit prompts the believer to cry out in intimate prayer "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:14-15). In commenting on the poem, *Dream*, C. S. Lewis says, "If the Holy Spirit speaks in man, then in prayer God speaks to God... 'God did (or said) it' and 'I did (or said) it' can both be true."⁷

Some authors claim that prayer powerfully changes things.⁸ For example, Luther writes in language characteristic of those who are sure God has made specific response to their petitions.

No one believes how strong and mighty prayer is and how much it can do except he whom experience has taught, and who has tried it. It has raised up in our time three persons who lay in danger of death, myself, my wife Katha, and Phillip Melanchthon in 1540 at Weimar.⁹

In such a view prayer, Kierkegaard writes, "The archimedian point outside the world is the little chamber where a true supplicant prays in all sincerity—where he lifts the world off its hinges."¹⁰ Such a posture often expresses itself as though prayer was the cause for accomplishing the request. Jesus often enough told parables that fit this kind of model. For example, there was a friend who was without bread when another friend returned from a long journey (Lk. 11:5-13). The host wishing to be hospitable to the traveler went to another friend late at

⁶ *The Council of Orange*, third canon, as expressed in Joseph Cullen Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 473.

⁷ Lewis, p. 68. For further development see the chapter in this book on "Sovereignty and Free Will."

⁸ Examples include E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) and Charles Blanchard, *Getting Things from God* (Wheaton: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1915).

⁹ Quoted by George Buttrick, *Prayer* (N.Y.: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1942), p. 82.

night and woke him to obtain bread. Though his friend might not give the bread for friendship's sake to get back to sleep he might still give the bread. Summarized as "Ask and it shall be given; seek and you will find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds and to him who knocks, it shall be opened." (Lk. 11 9-10). Other parables present the same point, like the persistent widow (Lk. 18:1-8). However, these texts do not leave us with such a resistant uncaring individual to whom we pray. God is better than a loving father who would only give good things. "If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give gifts like the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Mt. 7:7-11; Lk. 11:11-13). Relationship with such a loving Father tends to soften the need to see the prayer as the cause; a prayer becomes taken into account by the loving Father, Who has fostered our inclination to pray in the first place. C. S. Lewis develops this idea of "taken into account."

I agree that my deliberately vague expression about our prayers being 'taken into account' is a retreat from Pascal's magnificent dictum ('God has instituted prayer so as to confer upon His creature the dignity of being causes'). But Pascal really does suggest a far too explicit agent-and-patient relation, with God as the patient. And I have another ground for preferring my own more modest formula. To think of our prayers as just 'causes' would suggest that the whole importance of petitionary prayer lay in the achievement of the thing asked for. But really, for our spiritual life as a whole, the 'being taken into account,' or 'considered' matters more than the being granted. Religious people don't talk about the 'results' of prayer; they talk of its being 'answered' or 'heard.' Someone said, 'A suitor wants his suit to be heard as well as granted.' In suits to God, if they are really religious acts at all and not merely attempts at magic, this is even more so. We can bear to be refused but not be ignored.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, pp. 52-3.

In petition we speak to God as a loving Father Who is already aware of these issues, “for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him” (Mt. 6:8).

Some human petitions are definitely spoken against in the sovereignty of God. Moses petitioned God to allow him to enter the Promised Land but Yahweh cut off his prayer saying, “Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter” (Deut. 3:26). Perhaps the most dramatic was that of Jeremiah who petitioned God in trying to hold off the captivity. In answer to his prayers, God said forcefully, “As for you, do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me; for I do not hear you” (Jer. 7:16; 11:11-12, 14; 14:11-12; 15:1). Even if God’s actions are determined, petition against them is natural but not effective. For example, God told Jeremiah to stop petitioning Him on behalf of Israel, since their sinning rendered divine judgment inevitable (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Nevertheless, Jeremiah continued to intercede on behalf of the nation (Jer. 14:7-9, 13-22).

Though God’s acts are sovereignly fixed, prayer may have an effect as to when these events will occur. At times God has revealed what He will do but did not reveal when He would do them (Ex. 5:22-23; cf. 1 Pet. 1:9-21). In such situations human prayers effect God’s providential timing. Intercession slowed the coming of divine judgment (Ex. 32:34; Num. 14:27; Deut. 9:18-20, 25-29) and hastened the arrival of His promises (Isa. 62:6-7; Ex. 36:37).

Some of God’s acts are providentially conditioned on petition for their execution. Petitioning God is required if one is to receive certain blessings from God (Luke 11:5-13; James 4:2). Petition is a means established by God for the accomplishment of His foreordained purposes (Mt. 9:38; 24:20; 2 Cor. 1:11). Some divine events occur as a direct result of human petitions (Josh. 10:12-14; 2 Sam. 15:31).

A few events even seem to be changed by prayer from what God has revealed. A good example of this is when Hezekiah was mortally ill, God sent Isaiah to him with the message, “set your house in order, for you shall die and not

live” (2 Ki. 20:1). His response was one of true repentance in which He cried out sincerely to God in prayer. God responded with giving him fifteen more years to live (2 Ki. 20:1-6; 2 Chron. 32:24; Isa. 38:1-5). In essence this is just the slowing of the approach of death as a result of a man’s petition. It is complicated, however, by the forceful language used which does not appear to leave room for a condition. One is left with one of two choices. Either God deceived Hezekiah knowing full well that he would receive fifteen more years but desired him to repent and pray, or else prophetic statements revealed by God directly to the person in question may be conditional in spite of forceful, seemingly unconditional language. God cannot deceive, for He is the source of truth so much that He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). From the context of the story it is probably true that God desired Hezekiah to change his attitude and exhibit the change through petitioning Him. It could not be that He practiced deception, an act which He condemns as sin. One is left with only the possibility that some prophetic statements revealed by God are conditional though they do not have a condition attached. Jonah’s proclamation to Nineveh is another prophecy without a revealed condition, which prophetic judgment was not realized due to the Ninevites repentance and petitions. This Jonah prophecy is significant because a time limit was even attached. So, some prophecies are conditional and thus can actually be changed from occurring. However, believers do not know which statements are conditional and which are not conditional. Probably conditional prophecies are addressed to the individuals to whom they concern so that they can make the desired response and thus avert judgment or receive blessing. One need not wait until history fulfills prophecy to determine the conditional nature of some prophecies. Petitioning God works because God actively and willingly works in our world.

Summarizing part of this answer, some things cannot be changed from what God has revealed. Some things, while they cannot be changed, can be seemingly hastened or slowed in their arrival times. The act of petitioning God

for answers is included within the decree as one of His means. Within this range of options, some things can even be changed from what God reveals them to be as He decides.

As humans we do not know what God knows. Believers are required to live within the perspective of the truth that is revealed. When we pray in line with the revealed will of God we can have confidence that He hears us and that we will have the answers which we have asked from Him (1 Jn. 5:14-15). So in this context, petitioning for everlasting life and the assurance of this salvation are requests, which we will confidently receive. Praying in line with God's will is well illustrated by Daniel who records that while he was reading the book of Jeremiah, he noticed that the captivity was to last seventy years. He made some quick calculations and rightly concluded that the time was almost over, so he petitioned God concerning the matter. When explicit commands and consequences are delineated in the Bible praying in line with these is guaranteed. For example, Elijah is righteous in praying for draught in line with God's covenant curse when Israel was disobedient to the Mosaic covenant, and praying for rain in line with God's covenant blessing when Israel became obedient to the Mosaic covenant in killing the prophets of Baal (Deut. 11:13-17; 1 Ki. 17:1; 18:1-46; James 5:16-18). Petitioning God in line with His revealed will should be done by all believers. This would tend to encourage us to: give God our anxieties, pray for Christian virtues, and petition that Christ and kingdom would come.

The Biblical text also provides a range of prayers that can serve as patterns for our prayers. In these we have no guarantee of getting our requests answered affirmatively but the example does provide guidance in how to pray. One such prayer might be if one prayed for the salvation of some Jewish friends based on Paul's example (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1). Answers to this type of prayer are not guaranteed but it is likely that the answer might be favorable, and either way a person is in good company patterning their prayers off the prayers recorded in the Bible. It is of this type of prayer that David says, "Delight yourself in the Lord

and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). As a believer draws closer to God, he will become more like Him in character. As a person develops this relationship with God over a period of time, his desires are changed into God's desires. From this desire for God's will and ways, he petitions God closer and closer to His will progressively into maturity. Thus, these answers may often be favorable. Anyway around it, it is always appropriate to go to the Sovereign and pray.

PROVIDENCE VIEWS¹

	Process	Openness	Redemptive Intervention	Molinist	Thomist	Relational Calvinist	Calvinist	Fatalist
Description	God persuades to good possibilities while occasions make the choices.	God is open to the future of His creatures libertarian free will.	God knows all so as to plan responses to His creatures libertarian free will.		Nonexclusive redundancy of God's first cause and man's efficient free-will.	God is comprehensively deterministic with humans having free will, and God relates to creation in time.	God is comprehensively deterministic with human having free will.	God determines all.
God's experience of time	Temporal	Temporal	Could be either	Could be either	Timeless	Could be timeless, but He is temporally related to creation	Timeless	Timeless
God knows the actual future totally	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
God knows counterfactuals	No	No	No	Yes	No	Could be either	No	There are none
God takes a risk in creation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
God specifically permits all evils	No	No	No, only generally	Yes, in choosing this world	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, but actively brings them about
Human freedom is:	Libertarian	Libertarian	Libertarian	Libertarian	Compatibilistic Libertarianism	Volitional	Volitional	Illusory
Human effort and prayer affects the outcome	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
			Influenced the plan but does not change it now			No	No	No
						Terrance Tiessen, Doug Kennard	John Calvin, Paul Helm, J.I. Packer	Islaamic Kadari sect

¹ This chart is a modification of the one in Terrance Tiessen. *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) pp. 363-4.