

The Sovereignty Of God (Part Nine)

Prayer (cont.)

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Today I am going to continue the series of sermons that I have been giving on God's sovereignty, and I am going to give you Part Two of a little mini series within it on prayer. In the previous sermon on sovereignty and prayer we saw that the purpose of prayer was *not* to change God's mind, nor to introduce anything new to Him. To think to change His mind is to deny His foresight, His oversight, His wisdom, as well as His goodness.

You might recall that I built a great deal of that sermon on the following quote from *The Christian Worker*. So listen to this quote:

The prayers of God's saints are the capital stock in heaven by which Christ carries on His great work on earth. The great throes and mighty convulsions on earth are the result of these prayers. Earth is changed, revolutionized; angels move on more powerful, more rapid wing, and God's policy is shaped as the prayers are more numerous, more efficient.

Let us just consider one thing there—God's policy *shaped* by human beings? Who is running things? I think that you will begin to see that this leaves one with the impression that either God has no plan, or He is caught napping, or He has been distracted while other things are going on. Perhaps we might even consider that He is a bit befuddled by the confusion of events, or that somehow or other He needs the exhortations of His children in order to be encouraged to go on. It kind of sounds like modern childrearing practices. At any rate it certainly elevates man's prominence and importance in regard to prayer and the destiny of our lives.

As we begin I want you to turn to Psalm 121. We are going to read the whole Psalm. This is the psalm from which the song in the old purple hymnal, "To The Hills I Lift Mine Eyes" was taken.

Psalm 121:1-8 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence comes my help. My help comes from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved: he that keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he that keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper: the LORD is your shade upon your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD shall preserve you from all evil: he shall preserve your soul. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

The 2nd phrase (Verse 1) where it says "unto the hills, from whence comes my help,"—if you care to look at the songbook (page 95)—you will find that in it Dwight Armstrong had changed that into a question. When I questioned that and began to look in some commentaries—indeed they confirmed it should be a question. Now the "hills" those of us who are prophecy buffs might have the tendency to think of that in terms of its symbolic meaning, that it is representative of a small nation. If mountains are large nations, and a hill is a small nation, then hills are smaller nations. No, that is not what it is referring to here.

It means exactly what it says. It means "hills." The psalm is picturing a pilgrim on his way to the place where his life is taking him. For us, that means we are pilgrims on the way to the Kingdom of God. The hill represents a place that holds uncertainties—terrors to someone who might be on his way to somewhere where he has never been before—a place where robbers, bandits, and so forth can hide, leap out and take all that you have. Maybe even take your life.

So here is the pilgrim, coming to a difficult stress that he is going to have to pass by before he can get to where he is headed, and he looked at the hill and said, "Who's going to protect me?" Now from that point on, the psalm ought to be very clear and also very reassuring.

The psalm certainly does not give me the impression that God is somehow caught with His mind wondering, without knowing what is going on in our lives. We are the "apple" of God's eye, and He is not a parent distracted by other concerns so that He neglects His children. *He knows exactly what is going on* all the time, every day, every minute, every second. He is on the

job. He does not sleep, as this psalm says. His eyes are always open. He is serious about His responsibility.

I also mentioned in that sermon that God does not let us get away with anything pertaining to His purpose. But sometimes brethren, we are deceived by human nature into thinking that we have gotten away with something because God is patient in giving us ample time to repent and get back on the track. Now in Ecclesiastes 8 is a series of verses that pertain to this, and we want to look at it again as we lay the groundwork for this sermon.

Ecclesiastes 8:10 And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity.

Before I go on, we are going to look at that word forgotten just a bit, because it does not really say that in the Hebrew. Most of the manuscripts available say praise. In other words, "The wicked were buried, and they were praised [in eulogies and so forth] at their funeral—praised by the community. Now that seems weird that the wicked would be praised, but brethren, that is a reality. That is the way it is in this life. The good die, and nobody knows it. Nobody cares. That is what Isaiah says in chapter 56. Here comes a bit of an explanation:

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

They think that they are getting away with it.

Ecclesiastes 8:12-14 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him. But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow: because he fears not before God. There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happens according to the work of the wicked.

In other words, the just people get what you think the wicked deserve. And again, there are wicked men who get what you think the righteous deserve. Now, you would think that the righteous would be praised, and they would be honored; but that is not the way it is in the world. The world loves its own, and so everything is reversed. The problem for us is, brethren, that we get caught up in this thinking.

We get to thinking like the world does, and therefore we act like the world, and so we sin and nothing seems to happen. Lightning does not come down from God. Thunder does not roar in. God does not speak. There seems to be no penalty, and we think that we have gotten away with it. Not true though. This is because God is on the job, and the living of life is different for us than it is for the world after our calling.

We receive *much* more careful scrutiny from God because of what is at stake. It may look like we have gotten away with something, or even that God approved, or He doesn't care. But brethren, if we have sinned, and we do not repent, our sin *will* find us out *in this life*.

For those in the world, they can get away with it. Sociologists will tell you what you can see in your newspapers now, that crime pays. I mean, it is so obvious, so blatant—crime pays, because the wrath of God is not coming down on them. But I guarantee you, brethren, if you do the same thing as they do, the wrath of God is going to come down on your head, because God cares, because He loves us—and their time is not yet. Look back here again, in verse 12.

Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow: because he fears not before God.

God is dealing with us in terms of eternal life, in terms of eternity; and "to prolong his days" means, "eternal life." So those people go to the grave, and that is it. Possibly that is it for all time. They have had their chance. God may resurrect them in the second resurrection; then again He may not. That is in God's hand.

We always have to recognize that God is dealing with us in terms of eternity, and therefore we are being scrutinized very carefully. He will not let us get away. He may be patient and He may withhold the penalty for quite a period of time, but it will come, unless we repent.

Even if we repent, like David did in his sin with Bathsheba, there was still a penalty. David had a disastrous family life for the rest of his life. That was the penalty of his sin. So what we are talking about here is an *absolute*, because God is always on the job.

Now we have got to get this thought out of our head that God is simply a greater man. He is God. He is not man. The capacity of God's mind so far exceeds ours, that there is *no* adequate comparison, except the one that He Himself has given, and even that is hard for us to grasp. He said His thoughts are higher than ours, than heaven is above the earth. They are "out of sight!"

There is a proverb that says, "Without vision, the people perish." Now it was God who inspired that. He caused it to be written, to be a guiding principle for our lives, because it is a principle by which He also lives. He knows where He is headed. In fact, He knows so well, He knows the end from the beginning, and He has the powers and the wisdom to bring His vision to pass *exactly* as He foresaw it.

I want you to feed this into your life and your relationship with Him. He *knows* where He is headed with you. Jesus said, "I go and prepare a place for *you*." He meant that individually, not generally, as the verse shows. We will not go into that. So we need to remember, that when we pray, there is no need whatever for God to change His mind, for the all-sufficient reason that His plans were set under the influence of perfect goodness and unerring wisdom.

It is necessary for men to change their minds, because we are so shortsighted and unable to adequately anticipate what may arise during the course of a project. But that is not so with God. Thus an approach that we would use in thinking about men is inadequate with God, because He does not make mistakes, and because He is always aware what is going on. Now we are told by Jesus to pray and that when we pray to God to know that He already

knows what we have need of. Now the major purpose of prayer then is not to change God's mind, because what He wants to bring out of the situation is always right.

Now let us read Jeremiah 10, as we begin to add to this understanding of the approach in prayer.

Jeremiah 10:23 O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walks to direct his steps.

Now, how good is our advice going to be to God? Our prayers need to have this understanding within them so that we will approach God in the right way.

Jeremiah 10:24 O LORD, correct me, but with judgment; not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing.

The purpose of prayer is to give us yet another greater opportunity—a tool to get in harmony with what God wants to do with a situation—to get in harmony with His will (not to get God to go along with us). Our destiny has already been determined. When He called us, our destiny is to be in His Kingdom. Our destiny is to be a son of God. That is already set. He also knows where He wants us to serve in His Kingdom. "I go and prepare a place for you." He has that in mind.

I tell you, as you go along, parents, you need to think about your childrearing practices in relation to your children. What I am saying, is that we need to study our children, and when we see proclivities arise, to turn their natural God-given talents and abilities in the right direction, because children are foolish, and they will not go in that direction without the guidance and encouragement and assurance of a parent. We have that responsibility to guide them in that direction. That is what God does with us.

Our destiny has been determined by God's calling, and He will not grant us anything that is outside that purpose. We can work things out for ourselves, and choose to believe that God granted our request; but that is not the same thing. He simply allowed us to "do our thing." He did not grant that request,

and our working things out for ourselves very likely held us back, and probably made our course toward the Kingdom of God and preparing for that more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

Because God knows the end from the beginning, does not mean that every event of a person's life has already been figured out and predetermined. Believe me (and I think you will believe this), in using our free moral agency, we are very resourceful with presenting God with challenges to keep us on track toward our destiny in His Kingdom. He has to keep abreast of what is going on in our life, to keep pushing us back on the track, because we will drift away if we do not watch ourselves. This world and its ways are so attractive to human nature, and it is almost like a magnet pulling us in that direction. So that combination, with our free moral agency, keeps God on the job. It helps to keep Him on the job.

Brethren, what I am talking about here are the events of life involving moral, ethical, and spiritual choices. Whether we choose a red or a blue car does not amount to a hill of beans morally; but whether we buy a car at all, or some other expensive purchase, when family needs cry for something else—this is another situation altogether. That choice may have impact on character, and therefore on destiny. Brethren, some of us are tough nuts to crack. We are really stiff-necked, opinionated, and self-willed. Sometimes it is because of ignorance.

But more often the cause is pride and self-righteousness, so much so that some are actually going to choose the Lake of Fire; and others, though their work is of such poor quality, their work is going to be burned, but they themselves will be mercifully spared (I Corinthians 3). In addition to that, God clearly shows different growth rates in His children. We are talking about a whole spectrum that we operate within, and I am sure that we give God *real* challenges to work out circumstances that will bring us to our senses and make us choose the right things in life.

So, much of the question still remains: Why pray? If God already knows, why pray? If God knows the end from the beginning, why pray?

The purpose of prayer (I am going to go over this again and again) does not include changing God's mind or informing Him of something that He does

not already know. The purpose of prayer is not dictating to God. Its major purpose is to give us an additional, very effective way of getting in harmony with *His will*. When we are in harmony with His will, that is when things happen!

We are going to go through a series of scriptures here without a great deal of comment. We are going to begin in Ephesians 2:18, right after that section where Paul is talking about both Gentile and Jew.

Ephesians 2:18 For through Him [through Christ's sacrifice] we both [Gentile and Jew] have access by one spirit unto the Father.

The subject is prayer here for you and me. We have access to the Father through prayer.

Hebrews 4:14-15 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. [Now the result, or the exhortation is:] Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace.

So we have access to the Father through Jesus Christ, and now we are told to come there *boldly*. He is talking about prayer.

Hebrews 4:16 That we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 10:19 Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.

Each one of these verses has clarified and expanded upon the purpose of prayer. Access has been made to God, and we are taken into, by prayer, in the spirit, *right into God's very presence in heaven*. This is no illusion, brethren. This is no mysticism. We are talking about a spiritual reality.

Hebrews 10:20-22 By a new and living way, which he has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

So prayer, through Jesus Christ, brings us into the very presence of the most positive, righteous, unchanging attitudes that exist in the entire universe. I illustrated this in a greatly simplified way in that last sermon by reminding us of how the attitudes of people with whom we must spend more than just a passing moment of time affect us, regardless of whether that person's attitude is positive or negative.

Unless we are resisting where our own attitude is so strong, our attitude has the tendency to follow the strength of the other person's attitudes. If the person is close to us in terms of relationship, the transfer of attitudes is intensified. Now what happens if you are far from either of this person's exhibiting attitudes? (I mean positive or negative.)

Say you are in an adjacent building. Their attitude does not affect you in the least. Why? Because you are not even near enough to know what is going on. Even if we are near, distance-wise, but the relationship with the person having the attitude is not important, we are going to be much less affected by it. We can just say to this person in our minds—"Bug off. I don't need you. What you're doing is of no concern to me."

Now it is the *spirit* of these people radiating out from them by which we are affected, and perhaps even changed in our spirit. This is why, carnally, we reflect Satan's spirit. It permeates our environment, and in the illustration that I just gave, we are always near to it, because it is being broadcast everywhere. In that last series of verses it says, "Let us draw near."

It is the qualities of God's Spirit that He greatly desires that we have, and this is one way in which this is accomplished—by being literally in spirit in His presence. This is why people can leave God's presence in prayer and be so at peace, or full of joy, or filled with confidence; or on the other hand, chastened, because they have been led to remorse, intense guilt, or repentance.

Please remember that the illustration is not intended to show that we need to be close to God in terms of distance, but rather close in terms of relationship. Now that is a major purpose of prayer. It brings us into the presence of the most wonderful, positive, uplifting attitudes we could possibly ever be around—encouraging, inspiring. If we do not take advantage of it, well, we just do not get that benefit.

Once we are converted, what is it that causes God (that motivates Him) to draw close to us? We might say "obedience," and be correct. But there is something that precedes obedience, and that something is an "attitude."

Isaiah 66:1-2 Thus says the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that you build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things has my hand made, and all those things have been, says the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at my word.

God's statement here compares His dwelling in a temple (a building), with dwelling in a living human being. Now that is really drawing close. Now, who is God going to get close to? The humble. It is like a magnet that attracts Him to them.

Again, we are going to go through a series of verses that I will not expound a great deal, because they are pretty much self-explanatory. The first one is back in the book of James, the 4th chapter.

James 4:6-8 But he gives more grace. Wherefore he says, God resists the proud, but gives grace unto the humble. [This is quoted from Proverbs 3:34] Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

See that? What impresses Him? Humility! If we draw before Him in humility, it draws Him to us. So much the better, so much effective the prayers.

James 4:8-10 Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

Now the next verse, very similar to it. Peter is quoting exactly the same source that James just did. Notice the similarity, the advice.

I Peter 5:5 Likewise, you younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. [Was submission mentioned in the other series of verses? Yes it was.] Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble.

It is just as if Peter is saying that if you want to get things from God, if you want Him to be close to you, if you want His guidance, if you want His exhortation, if you want His attitudes, if you want to get good things from Him and be close to Him—*humble yourself*.

I Peter 5:6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Now why is humility so important? Humility is so important because humility produces obedience. Another way of putting it is that humility manifests itself in obedience. Obedience is the proof that humility is there. Now humility is the attitude of willing submission to the will of God and is a quality of character absolutely essential not only to salvation, but to *growth*.

Hang on to that. It is essential not only to salvation, but to growth, to witnessing for God, glorifying God, and receiving *honor* from God. Now you put these two verses together with others that are going to be read, or can be read, (especially out of the book of Proverbs) and you get a distinct sequence that goes like this: Humility, submission, obedience, honor.

Now let us go back into the Old Testament to that wonderful chapter 8 in the book of Deuteronomy. I say wonderful because God shows very clearly here why we have to wait so long, as it were, for salvation, why there is a pilgrimage, why we go through trials.

Deuteronomy 8:1 All the commandments which I command you this day shall you observe to do [why?], that you may live, and multiply.

Look in the margin. It says "increase" or "grow." They have applied it to numbers. I am applying it individually, personally.

Deuteronomy 8:1-2 And go in and possess the land [the Kingdom of God—our inheritance] which the LORD swore unto your fathers. And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God led you these forty years in the wilderness [all during our pilgrimage. What for?] to humble you, and to prove you. [To test our mettle; to see what is there.]

Do we really believe Him, or is it just so much words, so much fluff? What is it? Is there really going to be character there—faith in action, in terms of love?

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 To know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commands, or no. And he humbled you, and allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know: that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD does man live.

Deuteronomy 8:16 Who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not, that he might humble you, and that he might prove you, to do you good at your latter end.

Now, there is a vital lesson for all of us here—God is showing us why we go through things on the way to the Kingdom of God. Three times he

specifically mentioned *humbling* and *testing*, and it is for the purpose that the latter end will work out according to God's purpose.

Connect this now with what we just read in Ecclesiastes 8. The wicked may be praised to death. It may look like they had a good life, but Solomon was inspired by God to say that they will not prolong their days. Now God wants us to prolong our days eternally, so He is a lot harder on us than He is on them because of the stakes—and they are high. So we are in need of being humbled and tested so that it works out at the end. Humility is absolutely essential to our character and the outworking of His purpose.

Let us begin to look at another series of verses in the book of Proverbs. All of these Proverbs have all the same basic theme to them.

Proverbs 15:33 The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom; and before [preceding] honor is humility.

There is an order by which the good things are accomplished.

Proverbs 18:12 Before destruction the heart of man is haughty [proud, arrogant], and before honor is humility.

This is pretty clear.

Proverbs 22:4 By humility and the fear of the LORD [the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom] are riches, and honor, and life [eternal life].

Without humility there is no eternal life. It is a major, major key—and prayer is vital to humility. I am still building up to something here so that we will see this clearly. So humility precedes honor; humility precedes riches, honor, and life. Humility is a prerequisite before receiving the blessings that only God is able to give—the kind that will prepare and equip us for service in His Kingdom. If we are not humbled, we do not submit. If there is no submission, it means there is no obedience. No obedience means no preparation. No preparation means no honor, no exaltation, no glory. We have lived life in vain. It has been useless.

Where or how does this fit into sovereignty and prayer? I think that we can begin to see this clearly when we stop to examine what we are supposed to do in prayer. If we study the Psalms seriously, and analyze them (many of them are prayers), we begin to see the elements that they contain, and why Jesus gave the model prayer, or the outline in Matthew 6 that He gave. That model prayer is an analysis of the Psalms—the prayers that others made, and that God caused to be recorded.

First of all, God is to be honored in prayer. This we must do when we pray. He is to be honored. ("Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.") God is to be recognized for what He is—the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity—the great and awesome Creator, Father, Provider, Healer, Savior.

It is recognition of His dominion and His sovereignty, and of our being created, and dependent—humbling us before His awesome majesty. When Isaiah saw God, he flopped dead on the ground like he was unconscious. He just had a little glimpse of the Almighty in a bit of His majesty. That is instruction for us. When we pray, there has to be recognition of God's almighty holiness and power.

Prayer must also be the *worship* of God, because we are prostrating ourselves and calling upon His great name in recognition of His power, of His immutability, of His wisdom, mercy, and grace. Remember Isaiah 66—the comparison between the Temple and a human being. God is implying that "I'd rather be in a humble man than in this temple you're building." Is it not interesting that Jesus, when He referred to the Temple, said, "It's a house of prayer."

Is a human being in which God dwells intended to be a vehicle for prayer? You had better believe it! We are to worship God in prayer—honor Him and worship Him in prayer. So prayer is glorifying to God, because we are stating our dependency, and this is amplified because prayer is an exercise in faith, and faith always glorifies God.

Are you not coming before Him because you believe that He is? That's faith. Are you not coming before Him because you believe that He hears you? That is faith. Are you not coming before Him because you believe that He wants to give you good things that are necessary for being in His Kingdom? That is

faith. So prayer is honoring God. Prayer is worshipping God. Prayer is an exercise in faith.

Are you beginning to see it? Prayer is for our spiritual blessing and is a major, major means for our growth in grace, because God's blessings flow to us as a result of humility. Prayer is a daily, verbal exercise in humbling ourselves before God by forcing us to admit our humanity, our inadequacy, our dependency, our need.

Prayer is an admission that we are not self-sufficient. Without God, we die. But is that the way we live? We need God and all that He is willing to give, and if we have caught the vision of the gospel and are going to succeed in meeting His purpose for us, the gifts flow to the humble because they will submit to God's will, if they know God's will. God reveals His will to those who are humble. It is a measure of His blessing to them.

Now, if we are thinking about God and His greatness, and our humanity with all its physical, spiritual, and ethical frailties, it cannot help but lead us to recognize how ignorant, how short-sighted, how weak in character, how unfeeling, how uncaring, how hard, bitter, complaining, and how self-centered we are. We need help, and the only place we can get what we truly want in order to be changed, is from God.

So prayer is *the* vehicle through which our need, our inadequacy, brings us to humility, because we are verbally recognizing it before Him. This will not work if our prayers are just given by rote. If you go before Him and say, "Our Father, which are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." and say "Amen,"—there has not been one conscious thought of the real greatness of God, and how much in need we are.

That will not bring a single person to humility. Can you see how stupid saying 50,000 "Hail Marys" is? It means absolutely nothing. God wants prayer based upon a real recognition of need, and the corresponding recognition of how great He is. The two go together, or we will not be humbled. So He makes us think about how great He is, not because He needs it. He does not need it in terms of puffing up His ego.

We are the ones that need to think of His greatness and our depravity. That is why Jeremiah said, "I know that the way of man is not in himself." He was confessing his need. That prayer will be answered, and it was answered. So prayer is to bring us into God's presence, to honor Him, to worship Him, to glorify Him. Prayer is to humble us, as a daily exercise of recognition of His greatness and of our creature hood.

There is another use for prayer too, and that is, it is also appointed by God for the seeking of our needs. Again, prayer is not informing God of something of which He is ignorant; but rather it is designed as a confession to Him of our sense, of our knowledge, of our need. In other words, it is an acknowledgment on our part that we have grown to the place where we recognize that we lack, and therefore need what He has and wants to give us so that we can be like Him and His Son.

There is the basis of answers—"so that we can be like Him." In I Thessalonians, is that not what God is working out—creating us in His image? So prayers that fit within that are surely going to be answered. We find in I Thessalonians 5:17 a command—"Pray without ceasing." That is abrupt and clear. So even though He knows what we have need of, He still wants us to ask. Again, why? Because it is good for us.

Luke 18:1 And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint [not to give up; to persevere].

Luke 11:9-11 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks, it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?

Luke 11:13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

That is interesting—"Give the Holy Spirit." God has designed that His gifts be asked for, and He has designed that He should be honored by our asking, and praised that such wonderful things are made available to us. Just as surely as He has designed, He is to be thanked *after* He has given His blessing.

Every one of these is a step in our humbling. I remember Mr. Armstrong has said that almost invariably the first thing that he uttered in prayer was thanking God that He is God, and not somebody else. It is not because God needs our honor and praise, because He is without pride. It is we who are in need of conscious and thoughtful awareness of our nothingness (our unworthiness) by comparison to Him

If we are ever going to be in God's Kingdom, it is going to be because we have seen what truly is our need, that those things are according to His will, and He is the only One who can give them. Honoring, praising, and requesting of Him is a conscious acknowledgment of our dependence on Him, and this can do wonderful things in destroying pride and vanity, and encouraging the growth of humility. This in turn produces a more intense and greater yieldedness.

James 5:15-16 And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Again, prayer is not intended to change God's purpose, or to move Him to come to fresh ideas. God has ordained that we are saved through the preaching of the gospel. It is a means of salvation; but so is prayer a means of salvation. As we have seen in just a few scriptures, it is His will that we pray. We are commanded to pray. Therefore prayer fits into His design for things pertaining to His purpose.

From the very beginning, before the foundation of the world, He ordained that His children would pray to Him, and that this would be a major means

toward their growth and salvation. Prayer therefore is not a vain exercise, but is rather among the means by which God exercises His decrees. Now His decrees (the statements He has made about things that He will do—His will) are expressed in His Word.

We are to read them, believe them, and are commanded to bring them to Him so that He can give them to us. Now, when we pray for things that God has already decreed—things happen! In this area, prayer is *not* meaningless. Whenever Elijah prayed for rain, he already knew it was going to rain. Let us turn to it. We have the time. He knew that it was God's will that it was going to rain.

I Kings 18:1 And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, show yourself unto Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.

See, God had already decreed it. Do you see what we're getting at here? What God has decreed? Whenever Elijah prayed, it rained! It was God's will that it occur. Now Elijah was a man close to God, and he knew God's will, but I want you to see that it did not prevent him from asking God in prayer for rain, did it? Do you get the point?

Even though God has said He will do something, He still wants us to ask. He wants us to ask because He wants us to come to see our need. He wants us to learn where the only source of filling these things is. It is Him! These things turn us toward humility. Humility produces submission.

Submission produces obedience. Obedience produces honor, glory, exaltation. "To this man will I look, to him that humbles himself," you see, because that leads to the successful use of free moral agency. It keeps us on the path of His will when we are humbled before Him. So every day—a couple of times a day—He wants us to come before Him and acknowledge that He is God, because it is good for us to be humbled by that.

Daniel 9:1-4 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; in the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came

to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said. . . .

A wonderful prayer! Why did Daniel pray it? Because he knew it was God's will. The 70 years was just about up, and so He asked God to fulfill it. He, like Elijah, knew in advance, so he was asking God for something that God had already decreed. You will find a similar occurrence in Jeremiah 29:10. This is what Daniel looked at.

Jeremiah 29:10-11 For thus says the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Did He say, "Don't pray"? "Don't even bother praying about that because in seventy years it's going to come to pass anyway"?

Jeremiah 29:12-13 Then shall you call upon me, and you shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And you shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your heart.

See that? Is that not clear? When we ask things from God that He wants to give, that He has already decreed, things are going to pop. Let us look at one more. This is back in the book of John, the 17th chapter. It involves our Savior, and I think it is good to look at it because Jesus believed this too.

John 17:5 And now, O Father, glorify you me with thine own self with the glory which I had with you before the world was.

He knew that God was going to resurrect Him and glorify Him. It was God's will that that occur. He had already decreed it; but even somebody who was as close to God as Jesus Christ, asked for it anyway. That is a pretty good lesson. Now it works the other way too. There is a place in Jeremiah where

God said to Jeremiah, "Don't you dare pray for those people." He was saying that His mind was closed and He would not hear the prayer.

The people were going to be punished, and He did not care how much Jeremiah would appeal, He was not going to answer. A similar thing happened with Moses. Moses appealed to God, and God just shut His ears. "Forget it Moses. You're not going into the Promised Land." And he did not. So there are some occasions when He said things like that. That was God's decree. So things that He has willed to do, He is as willing as anybody could possibly be to give them.

I think that some of our views respecting prayer need revision. The prevailing idea of some is that we come to God and ask Him for something that we want, and then we expect Him to give it. But brethren, this is actually degrading to God. This popular belief reduces God to a servant—our servant. He becomes much like a genie in the bottle—"Your wish is my command" kind of thing. It becomes Him to do our bidding. You know, this is the way of the "genie in the bottle" thing—to do our bidding, performing our pleasures, granting our desires.

No, brethren, prayer is coming to God, telling Him our need, committing our way to Him, and leaving it with Him to deal with it as He sees fit. So, when you pray, present your need to God. There is nothing wrong with going into detail and presenting your case as you see it; but then leave it with Him, as He sees fit, and in His good time. I might add that as well. You know why? Because He already knows what He wants to do with it.

What He wants to see is what we are going to do with it. You see, this approach makes us subject to His will; not the other way around. No prayer is pleasing to Him unless the attitude motivating is, "not my will be done, but *Your* will be done." When God grants a prayer like that to His people (I mean according to His will), He is not doing it because they motivated Him to act; but for His own name's sake and sovereign will. You will see that throughout the Bible. "It's not for you He says, "I'm doing this. It's for My name's sake that I'm doing this." It is His purpose.

In short, prayer is the way and the means by which God has appointed for the communication of the blessings of His goodness to His people. Even

though He has purposed and promised His blessings, yet He has also commanded that we seek them, and brethren, this is both a privilege and a duty. He intensely desires that His thoughts become our thoughts, because then this becomes the means by which we reflect the image of God, and much of the communication of His thoughts takes place in prayer. Every real prayer of faith ever asked of God has been answered, but not always in the way that we think best.

Remember, prayer is coming to God, presenting our needs, then leaving it with Him to deal with as He sees fit. Oftentimes, brethren, His answer may seem the opposite of what humanly we might have felt best. But please remember this out of this sermon: If we have really left it with God, then we at least know that it was His answer. I want to show you an interesting episode in John the 11th chapter.

John 11:1 Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.

John 11:3 Therefore his sisters sent unto him, [because Lazarus was sick] saying, Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick.

I want you to notice the simplicity of this prayer, this request. "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick." They did not even ask Him to heal him! But that is certainly implied. Remember, here we have Jesus—He is God in the flesh. The mind of God is in this man. How is God going to react? Humanly, you know very well that Martha and Mary were saying, "God, get here on the dime. Get here right away. This guy looks like he's pretty sick. If you don't get here, he's going to die." But we find in verse 6:

John 11:6 When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.

He did not even leave. It did not seem to bother Him—"bug" Him—at all.

John 11:11 These things said he: and after that he said unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleeps: but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

Lazarus was dead!

John 11:17 Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.

We already know that Jesus raised him.

John 11:40 Jesus said unto her, Said I not unto you, that, if you would believe, you should see the glory of God?

God in the flesh responded in a way totally different from what they undoubtedly expected. Was God glorified in the way God responded? Far better, than if they had had their will, because they got the witness. Lazarus was one of the few people in history who was ever resurrected! Which brought God more glory?

Learn something from this: God is always going to respond in the way that is going to bring Him glory. It is not good that we get puffed up. That works the opposite of humility, does it not? It would puncture us. A terrific example of this is the apostle Paul.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure [lest I get puffed up]. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Here is another way that God can respond. We, like Paul, would have an affliction like Paul that we would like to have removed. But God's response to him was to a far greater need—the need to keep Paul humble. Perhaps Paul was in danger because of the many gifts He received. He said in the

book of I Corinthians that he had received more gifts than they all. He was a tremendously gifted man by God; but maybe God saw a flaw there. He undoubtedly did, and Paul was beginning to be puffed up with all of his gifts. So God said, "No, Paul. But on the other hand Paul, I will give you sufficient strength to keep you going."

So Paul had to operate bearing the affliction and knowing that every day he had to go before God and say, "Please give me the strength for today." So we are allowed to ask God for our daily bread—what we need for each day. That is His will, and He will give it. So it is a way that God can answer. Paul, in his humanity, would have liked to have been healed completely; but God, in His spirituality said "No." That was more glorifying to God in the long run than it would have been for Paul to have had the affliction removed.

One final thought: Is it true that we are given a blank check, as you might say, to ask God for anything? The Bible appears to say that. In John 16:23 it says that "Whatsoever you shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you." Jesus undoubtedly said that. You see, right there is a qualifier. What does it mean: "to ask in the name of Jesus Christ"? We usually quickly brush this off and say that it means to ask "by His authority."

Let us just extrapolate on that a little bit. To ask God for anything "in the name of Jesus Christ," it must be in accord with what Christ *is*. To ask in Christ's name is to ask as though Christ himself was asking. Let me rephrase it. We can only ask then for what Christ Himself would ask for. So to ask in Christ's name is therefore to do what?—to set aside our own will, accepting God's. He Himself said three different times, in different ways, "I always do what pleases the Father." So we can only ask God according to His will. You see, it is qualified. So there is not a blank check to ask God for anything.

Certainly we can ask Him for things that might be outside of His purpose, and He will grant them; but when He does something like that, it is something that has nothing at all to do with His purpose. It is just given to you to please you, because He loves you. But if we ask Him for things that are beyond His purpose, in terms of doing things for us that might be destructive to character and destructive to preparation, He will not grant that at all.

Finally, please understand that these two sermons in no way exhaust the subject of prayer. The main objective has been to focus on God's sovereignty and its relationship to prayer. In that light, I think we must come away with the concept that prayer is not dictating to God, but a manifestation of our attitude of dependence and need. Because prayer is an attitude of dependency, the one who really prays is submissive to God's will, and submission to His will means that we are content for Him to supply our need according as it dictates of His sovereign pleasure while we manifest its submission in our obedience before men.