

The Sovereignty Of God: Part Nine

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Previously, we saw that the purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind or to introduce some new thing to Him, as if He is unaware of what is going on. To attempt to change His mind denies His wisdom and the inherent goodness of His nature. To think He is unaware denies His omniscient oversight and His promise to be with us always.

That portion of last month's article sprang from a quotation from *The Christian Worker*, which also provides this similar paragraph:

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 results 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.

"God's policy is shaped"? Astounding! Who is running things? We can begin to see that this thought leaves the impression that perhaps God has no plan, been caught napping, been distracted while other things were going on, or has no overriding concern what direction His creation takes or how His children's lives turn out. He might even appear to be a bit befuddled by the confusion of events or to need His children's exhortations to be encouraged to go on. This sounds much like modern childrearing practices! It certainly elevates man's prominence and importance concerning prayer and the destiny of his life.

Psalms 121, the second of the "Psalms of Degrees," contains insight into God's watchful oversight and loving intervention in the lives of His children:

I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.

Once we recognize that the psalmist uses "hills" as an image of a problem to a pilgrim, we easily understand the rest of the psalm as an encouragement to those on a spiritual pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. It certainly does not give the impression that God—at any time—lets His mind wander, unaware of what is happening in His children's lives. Not only is He ever on guard, He is also ready, willing and able to intervene with strength. He is not a parent distracted by other concerns so that He neglects His children. We can be greatly encouraged that God is always alert to His responsibilities.

Does God Notice Our Sins?

Because God is this way, all things work together for our good, even though there are times when we sin and nothing evil appears to have happened to us. Human nature easily deceives itself into

thinking it has gotten away with something. This, however, is like saying we can defy the law of gravity, and nothing will happen! God does not let us get away with anything pertaining to His purpose, but He is never overbearing in thoroughly following through.

Any thought of an easy escape from sin's penalties should be quickly banished after reading these scriptures:

- » . . . and be sure your sin will find you out." (Numbers 32:23)
- » Because the 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. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked. . . . (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13)
- » Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. (Galatians 6:7)

To those walking more by sight than faith, it indeed may look as if they have gotten away with something. In reality, though, God is patiently using time to correct us in the most effective and merciful way. The broad principles given above let us know that the inexorable spiritual laws of God are working at all times, just like the law of gravity. We must understand that, because of who we are and what is at stake, God scrutinizes us much more carefully than others. He may, in mercy, mitigate the full effect of a sin or even delay punishment to give us time to repent, but in these occasions as in any other, He is just as much on the job and aware to supply what we need. To whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48).

We must strive to amplify our conception and appreciation of the magnitude of His great mind by studying and meditating on His Word and His creation. God is not simply a greater man. His mind's capacity so far exceeds ours that no comparison is more apt than the one He Himself gives in Isaiah 55:8-9: "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" Achieving a greater appreciation and understanding of His powers is hard work, requiring time and consistent effort. But the effort is well worth it because it builds faith, and the just live by faith. Doing this better equips the Christian for meeting the responsibilities God imposes upon him.

Why Pray?

Hebrews 11:10 tells us that Abraham looked for a "city . . . whose builder and maker is God," and verse 27 says that Moses "endured as seeing Him who is invisible." A true vision is important to successful living. God included these words in His Book as a guiding principle for our lives because He also lives and works by it. He knows where He is headed. In fact, He knows so well that He knows the end from the beginning and has the power to bring His vision to pass exactly as He foresaw it (Isaiah 46:10-11).

When we pray, we must remember that God need not change His mind for the all-sufficient reason that He made His plans under the influence of His perfect goodness and unerring wisdom. Men must frequently change their minds because humans are so shortsighted and unable to anticipate adequately what may arise after a project begins. Nor do humans possess the power to control all possible influences that might alter the course of the project.

But God is not a man, so an approach we may take with men is inadequate with God. He makes no mistakes, always knows what is occurring and can control countless possible influences that try to deflect Him from achieving His objective. Jesus says that when we pray, God already knows what we need (Matthew 6:8).

Jeremiah 10:23 reveals why humanity is the way it is and why prayer is important. "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." The prophet does not mention prayer here, but what he says has much to do with prayer's great value to mankind. The verse states the universal problem of mankind. By nature, the right way to live is not within us. Our nature must change. The purpose of prayer is to give us yet another, greater opportunity—an exceedingly important tool—to harmonize with the way God lives. God lives the only way that works, producing abundant life, endless peace, and supreme achievement for all.

This overall reason includes synchronizing with God's will in any present-day situation as He forms us into His image. Prayer's purpose is not to force or cajole God to go along with our narrow and shortsighted idea of what we think is going on. God has determined our destiny in life, and He will not give us anything that is outside that purpose. We can work things out for ourselves and choose to believe He granted our request, but that is not the same thing. Instead of granting our request, He simply allows us to do our thing. In addition, our working things out for ourselves holds us back to some degree, probably making our course toward God's ultimate aim for us more painful.

Because God knows the end from the beginning does not mean that He has figured out and predetermined every event of a person's life. In using our free moral agency, we are quite resourceful in presenting God with challenges to keep us on track toward our destiny to be in His Kingdom. God's concern is for events in life involving moral, spiritual and ethical choices. Whether one chooses a red or blue car makes no difference morally, but whether we choose to buy a car when other family needs are more pressing is another situation altogether. This choice may shape character and therefore destiny.

Some of us are tough nuts to crack! Some are quite stiff-necked, opinionated and self-willed. Sometimes this occurs because of ignorance or cultural influences. Far too often, the cause of our poor moral and ethical choices is pride and self-righteousness—to the point that some will actually choose the Lake of Fire! Others, though their inferior works burn because of their poor choices, God will mercifully spare them (I Corinthians 3:15).

So, why pray? If God knows the end from the beginning, if prayer does not include informing Him of something He does not already know, changing His mind or dictating a "gimmie" list to Him, why pray at all? Prayer's major purpose is to give us an additional, effective way to draw near to and harmonize with the Spirit having the only nature equipped to live eternally in peace and oneness. Do we want to do this? All of our lifetimes we have been subject to the spirit of the prince of the power of the air. Our personal experiences, reinforced by the history of life on earth under him, should be witness enough that there is a better way. Are we willing to make the effort to find it and live it? As Jeremiah says, "[T]he way of man is not in himself," that is, not in his nature. We must have access to God and His nature if we will ever live the right way, the way He lives.

Prayer Does Change Things

In Ephesians 2:18, Paul declares one of God's wonderful gifts: "For through Him we . . . have access by one Spirit to the Father." He adds in Hebrews 4:15-16, "For we do not have a High Priest who

cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." He reinforces his encouragement to use this great gift in Hebrews 10:19-22:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is His flesh, and having a 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.

Praying to the Father, through Jesus Christ, brings us into the presence of the most holy, positive, righteous, peaceful, serving, giving, humble, merciful and unchanging attitudes and character that exist in the entire universe! Previously, we saw a simplified effect of this in how the attitudes of people we spend time with affect us. Whether that person's attitude is positive or negative, unless we resist or our attitude is strong, our attitude tends to echo the strength of the other's attitudes. If the other is personally close to us—especially if we deem the relationship important to us—the effect of the transfer of attitudes intensifies. Similarly, physical nearness also intensifies the effect.

This is why men reflect Satan's spirit. Satan "broadcasts" it over our entire environment here on earth, thus, we are always "near" it. In fact, God has willed that at this time it have no strong competition among the unconverted. Even we cannot entirely escape its influence; even when in God's presence we can bring that spirit with us.

Notice that Hebrews 10:22 says, "[L]et us draw near. . . ." Nearness enhances the transfer of the qualities of God's Spirit, and He greatly desires we have these qualities because they will make us like Him. Being in His presence is a primary way this is accomplished. This is why a person can leave God's presence in prayer at peace, full of joy, or filled with confidence—or on the other hand, chastened, having been led to remorse and repentance. Drawing near to God has little to do with distance and everything to do with deepening our relationship with Him. As this occurs, prayer begins to change things—us.

Sovereignty, Humility and Prayer

To this point, we have looked at drawing close to God from a human perspective. Once we are converted, though, what motivates God to draw close to us? "Obedience" is a correct answer, but it is quite broad. Something else precedes obedience, an attitude. Isaiah 66:1-2 declares:

Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist," says the LORD. "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."

"On this one will I look" means "I will pay attention to this person." It is another way of saying He will draw closer to such a man or woman. James 4:6-8, 10 reinforces the importance of humility in our relationship with God:

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify

your hearts, you double-minded. . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (see I Peter 5:5-6)

Why is humility so important? It plays a major role in producing obedience and thus a good relationship with God. Put another way, humility manifests itself in obedience. It is the attitude of ready submission to God's will, as well as an expression of dependence upon Him. This quality of character is essential to growth, witnessing for God, glorifying God, receiving honor from God and salvation itself. The Bible reveals an order to these things: humility, submission, obedience and honor.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 16 contains a vital lesson regarding humility, our relationship with God and our ultimate destiny:

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you, and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. . . . [W]ho fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end. . . .

Here God explains why we have our experiences on our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. He specifically mentions humbling and testing three times. They are ultimately the means by which He will achieve our inheritance of His Kingdom. Humility is essential to our character and the out-working of His purpose because humility motivates us to bow before God's sovereignty. Those who submit to God's will have their prayers answered and receive additional blessings from Him.

Three scriptures from Proverbs clearly teach us this:

- » The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility. (15:33)
- » Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honor is humility. (18:12)
- » By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life. (22:4)

When one has a relationship with God, humility precedes honor, riches and eternal life itself. Humility is a prerequisite to receiving the blessings only God can give, the kind that will prepare and equip us for His service now and in the Kingdom to come. If we are not humbled, we will not submit. No submission means no obedience; no obedience, no preparation; no preparation, no honor, exaltation or glory. One would have lived life in vain.

Where or how does this fit into prayer? We can begin to see this more clearly by examining what we are supposed to do in prayer. A serious study of the psalms, many of which are prayers—along with Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6—will disclose many of its necessary elements.

First, we should honor God in prayer. We must recognize Him for what He is, the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, the great and almighty Creator, Father, Provider, Healer and Savior. Such honor recognizes His universal dominion and sovereignty and, at the same time, acknowledges that

we are the created and dependent ones humbling ourselves before His awesome majesty. Prayer glorifies God because we are stating our dependency. This is amplified because prayer is an exercise in faith, which always glorifies Him.

Prayer is worshiping God. We are prostrating ourselves before Him, calling upon His great name and recognizing His power, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, wisdom, mercy and grace. Interestingly, Jesus called the Temple, in which God dwelt, "a house of prayer" (Luke 19:46). We now are temples of His Holy Spirit in which he dwells (I Corinthians 3:16).

Can we grasp it? Prayer is for our spiritual blessing as a major means of growth in grace because God's blessings flow to those who humble themselves before His sovereignty. Prayer is a daily verbal exercise in humbling ourselves before Him by forcing us to admit our humanity, inadequacy, dependency and need. It is an admission we are not self-sufficient. We desperately need a vital relationship with God and all that He will give us, if we have caught the vision of the gospel and want to succeed in achieving His purpose for us. His gifts flow to the humble because they will submit to God's will if they know it, and God will reveal it to the humble. It is a measure of His blessings to them.

If we compare the purity and extent of God's greatness to our humanity with all its physical, spiritual, moral and ethical frailties, we must recognize how ignorant, shortsighted, weak in character, unfeeling, uncaring, hard, bitter, complaining and self-centered we are. We need a specialized kind of help, and its only source—if we truly want to change—is God. Surely, if we are open to it, this humbles us.

Prayer brings us into God's presence to honor, worship and glorify Him. It is designed to humble us by making us recognize His greatness and our creaturehood each day. God also appoints it so we can seek our physical needs, giving Him another opportunity to evaluate what we hold dear, "[f]or out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

Prayer is not for informing God of something of which He is ignorant; rather it is designed to confess to Him our sense or knowledge of our need. In other words, it acknowledges that we have grown to recognize that we lack and thus need what He has and desires to give us so we can be like Him and His Son.

I Thessalonians 5:17 commands us to "pray without ceasing." Luke 11:9-13 adds an important principle:

And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or, if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

God has ordained that we ask for His gifts, honor Him for allowing us to ask, praise Him for making such wonderful things available to us, and just as surely, thank Him afterward for giving the blessing. Each of these steps is humbling.

Herbert W. Armstrong remarked that, almost invariably, the first thing he uttered in prayer was thanks to God that He is God and not somebody else. God does not need our honor and praise; He has no ego that needs to be stroked. He is without pride. We are the ones who need conscious and thoughtful awareness of our nothingness and unworthiness in comparison to Him.

Honoring, praising and requesting of Him are conscious acknowledgements of our dependency on Him, and this can do wonderful things in destroying pride and vanity. At the same time, it encourages the growth of humility. This, in turn, produces more intense submission, and God gives His Spirit to the obedient (Acts 5:32).

A Key to Answered Prayers

James writes:

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

God never intended prayer to change His purpose or move Him to come to fresh ideas. He has ordained that we be saved through the means of preaching the gospel, but prayer is also a means of salvation. We have seen that it is His will that we pray; it fits into the design of His purpose.

Prayer is therefore not a vain exercise but a means by which God exercises His decrees. When we pray for things God has already decreed, things happen! These prayers are not meaningless. Elijah was a man close to God, and he knew God's will, but that certainly did not prevent him from asking God in prayer for rain (I Kings 18:41-46). Therefore, even though we know His will and that He knows our need, He requires we ask for it. Does not Jesus command us to do this regarding end-time events? "Watch . . . and pray always," He says in Luke 21:36. Prayer keeps our minds focused on what is important to God's purpose.

Perhaps we need to change our views about prayer. Frequently, the prevailing idea of many is that we come to God and ask Him for something we want, expecting Him to give it if we have enough faith. But this is actually degrading to God! This popular belief reduces God to a servant—our servant, like a genie in a bottle—performing our pleasures and granting our desires. No, prayer is worshipfully coming to Him, humbly acknowledging His sovereign authority and loving wisdom, telling Him our need, committing our way to Him, and then patiently allowing Him to deal with our request as it seems best to Him. This does not mean we should not confidently present our needs to God as we see them, but then we should leave it with Him to deal with in His time and manner. Remember, He already knows what He wants to accomplish and when.

Doing this works to make our will subject to His. No prayer is pleasing to Him unless the attitude motivating it is "not [m]y will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). When God grants blessings on praying people, it is not because of their prayers, as if they motivated Him to act, but He acts for His own name's sake and His sovereign will.

He intensely desires that His thoughts become ours because we reflect His image this way. If we think like God, we will act like Him, which is the purpose of conversion. Much of the communication of His thoughts to ours takes place in prayer. God answers every faithful prayer, but

not always in the way or when we think best. Often His answer is the opposite of what we feel to be best, but if we have really left it with God, then at least we know it is indeed His answer.

The story of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 illustrates this well. Interestingly, Mary and Martha never directly ask Jesus to heal Lazarus, though they clearly suggest it in calling Him to come. God in the flesh, however, responds in a way totally different from what they anticipated. Nonetheless, their approach is still a good example of the proper attitude in presenting a need to God. They do not even go into much detail in expressing their need—just simple trust that He could and would do the right thing.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 shows us two examples regarding prayer: First, it illustrates how God can respond to our prayers, and second, how Paul reacted to God's answer. We, like Paul, want God to remove our afflictions any time we are in discomfort, but especially when the affliction is chronic and, we feel, inhibits accomplishment. God's response to Paul, however, fit a far greater need, perhaps to keep Paul humble so that his many gifts did not become a curse. Instead, God gave him strength to bear up under the affliction, thus keeping him in a constant state of dependency for strength to go on. Paul humbly accepted this and continued his ministry despite his affliction, knowing it was fulfilling God's will.

A Blank Check?

Is it true that God has given us a blank check to ask anything of Him just as one might ask a genie in a fairy tale? Some may misunderstand this to be the case, but I John 5:14 qualifies what He will grant: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." Real prayer is communion with God, and what is necessary for communion are common thoughts between His mind and ours.

What we need is for Him to fill our minds and hearts with His thoughts. Then His desires will become our desires flowing back to Him in the form of prayer. James 4:3 confirms this: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." If we ask amiss, we are certainly not asking according to His will, and we will not receive.

But does not Jesus say in John 16:23, "[W]hatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you"? He most assuredly does, but we still do not have a carte blanche. To ask God for anything in the name of Jesus Christ, it must be in keeping with what He is. To ask in Christ's name is to ask as though Christ Himself is asking. Therefore, we can only ask for what Christ Himself would ask. It is therefore necessary to set aside our own will and accept God's. Jesus says in John 8:29: "And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him." If we do as Jesus did, we are sure to receive answers as He did. He adds in John 11:41-42: "Father, I thank you that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me."

We must come away with the realization that prayer is not dictating to God, but a humble and heartfelt expression of our attitude of dependency and need. Because of this, the one who truly prays is submissive to God's will, content with Him supplying his need according to the dictates of His sovereign pleasure. The result of this, combined with the infusion of God's attitudes and thoughts as we draw near to Him, will work to create us in His image.