

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER FOR THE BELIEVER
IN LIGHT OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

by

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Perhaps one of the most neglected areas of Christians' lives is prayer; they do not pray. Not only is there a neglect in the practice of it, there is also a misunderstanding of the meaning and purpose of prayer. Believers have the tendency to emphasize either the human element (responsibility) of prayer or the divine element (God's sovereignty) of prayer. The result is a total misconception of the purpose of prayer.

Both the doctrine of prayer and the doctrine of the sovereignty of God are clearly taught in the Scriptures; both exist in reality. From the human perspective an antinomy exists, but the believer must realize that this is only an appearance of a contradiction. If God is totally sovereign and will carry out His eternal plan, why should the believer pray? Will not God carry out His will regardless whether the believer prays or not? Then what is the purpose of prayer knowing that God is sovereign?

This antinomy will never be totally solved in the mind of the believer. Therefore he needs to understand it as best he can and learn to live with it by faith. The understanding of the antinomy does not come by the exclusiveness or exclusion of one of these doctrines, but from an equal harmony of the two. The examination of the Scripture passages (Matt 6:8-10; Jas 5:16b; 1 John 3:22; 5:14, 15) reveals that prayer is not for the purpose of informing God of one's needs, but is an acknowledgment and submission to God's will. Those prayers that are in harmony with God's will will be made effective by God to accomplish His will.

God has decreed all things which include the means as well as the ends. Prayer, then, is one of the divinely-ordained means whereby God accomplishes His will in the lives of His children and on the earth. At the same time prayer is a true expression of the believer's heartfelt needs and desires, and the submission of that need to a God who hears, understands, and is willing and able to grant him his request. Whatever the result, the believer can be comforted that God's will is for his best and for His glory.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	Bauer, W., Arndt, W. F., Gingrich, F. W. and Danker, F. W. <u>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</u>
EDNTW	<u>An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words</u> by W. E. Vine
KJV	<u>King James Bible</u> or <u>Version</u>
NASB	<u>New American Standard Bible</u> (All Scripture citations taken from this version unless otherwise indicated.)
NIDNTT	<u>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u> 3 vols., edited by Colin Brown
TDNT	<u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u> 10 vols., edited by Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley

INTRODUCTION

Most believers will agree that prayer is one of the most vital elements to the Christian life. Books are written, classes taught, and sermons preached on prayer, but seldom is a balanced biblical teaching on prayer presented.

Many misconceptions about prayer have a definite effect on one's prayer life. For instance, most Christians understand prayer to be something that influences and moves God to change His mind and give the believer his request. Some believe that the more one prays, and the more people who pray, the more God is inclined to answer those prayers. Still others believe that no matter what one asks for in faith without doubting, he will receive it. In other words the emphasis of their doctrine on prayer is the human element--what the believer needs to do to receive answers to prayer.

Nothing is wrong with the human element in prayer unless there is a neglect of the divine element which leads one's doctrine and practice of prayer to a place in which it is no longer biblical, in which it is no longer in harmony with the totality of Scripture. The logical result of this is that prayer is a means by which one persuades God to change His mind, or that it manipulates God. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that God's plan and will are contingent upon

man. This is totally unbiblical.

The divine element in prayer deals with God's plan and character. The Scripture clearly teaches that God is sovereign, that He is in control of all things, and that what He has decreed (planned) He will carry out. It also teaches that God is compassionate and faithful and hears the believer's prayer. However, misconceptions can result from an emphasis purely upon the divine element in prayer. The results would be that prayer would become a simple spiritual self-exercise and that God simply carries out His plan regardless of believer's prayer.

In order for one's doctrine and practice of prayer to be biblical, both human and divine elements need to be in balance. To neglect one and emphasize another only results in a false concept of prayer. However, the harmony of these two elements proposes an antinomy. Can human prayers move a sovereign God to respond? If God is sovereign and has decreed all things that will come to pass, why pray? Human prayers would not and could not affect His eternal plan. Is there really power in prayer? Does prayer change things? What then is the purpose of prayer in light of God's sovereignty?

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

A clear understanding of what the Scripture teaches concerning prayer and God's sovereignty is necessary before considering the problem at hand. To neglect this study would result in a misconception of the purpose of prayer. The harmony of these two doctrines is necessary for biblical prayers. Therefore a brief study of these is vital.

The scope of this study is limited to the purpose of prayer for the believers today. By "believers" this author is referring to individuals who have responded to God's call to salvation through faith in the sacrificial death of Christ. These "believers" or Christians are those who are a part and make up the Body of Christ, the Church. Since those Scriptures concerning prayer for believers (the Church) are found in the New Testament, the study will be limited to this Testament.

Prayer of the Believer

Definition and Assumptions

Prayer can be simply defined as communion or communication with God. When one desires to communicate with God, one is praying. The believer is not limited to a set form of communication with God when praying.

Whether a believer is verbally addressing God or consciously addressing God, he is praying. Prayer may have various forms: petition (asking, requesting), confession, adoration (worship), intercession (praying for others), thanksgiving and supplication.

The basic Greek word in the New Testament for prayer is προσεύχομαι. It is translated "to pray" or "to entreat" and occurs 85 times in the New Testament; the noun form προσεύχη is used 37 times.¹ Its most frequent usage is in the Book of Acts and it is not found in the Gospel or the Epistles of John. Although it is difficult to give an exact definition or usage of the word, it tends to denote prayer "comprehensively."² The word can be used of prayer in general without further qualifications.

Another word used for prayer is δεόμαι which is translated "to ask, request, beseech or beg."³ It is used generally of a "courtesy formula" which parallels the idea of "I beg you." Sometimes the expression is used in "its full sense of making earnest entreaty, even imploring."⁴ "Whenever the request is addressed to God, deomai; it quite

¹NIDNTT, s.v. "προσεύχομαι," by Colin Brown and Hans Schonweiss, 2:867.

²TDNT, s.v. "προσεύχομαι," by Heinrich Greevan, 2:807.

³NIDNTT, s.v. "δεόμαι," by Colin Brown and Hans Schonweiss, 2:860.

⁴Ibid.

naturally assumes the meaning of to pray, and can often be so translated."¹

The Greek word αἰτέω is translated "to ask, ask for, demand, or request."² This word is used frequently in the Gospels, but is never used of Jesus' prayers. On the human level the word is used "almost always in addressing superiors."³

Another frequent word used of prayers, ἐρωτάω, is translated "to ask, ask a question, or request."⁴ The basic sense of the word is "to ask." It is the word used by the disciples when they asked theological questions (Mark 4:10; Luke 9:45; Acts 1:6); it is used by Jesus when He asked God the Father for things for His disciples.⁵

Therefore prayer is the communication of a believer to God which manifests itself in various forms. There are four basic words in the Greek which translate into the word or idea of prayer. Each word focuses upon a different aspect of prayer.

Several assumptions are behind all prayers. The most basic assumption is the existence and personality of God. If any person or system or philosophy (atheism, pantheism, materialism, etc.) denies God's existence or

¹Ibid., p. 861.

²NIDNTT, s.v. "αἰτέω," by Colin Brown and Hans Schonweiss, 2:855.

³Ibid.

⁴NIDNTT, s.v. "ἐρωτάω," by Gervais T. D. Angel, 2:879.

⁵Ibid.

personality,

there is either no one to pray to, or nothing to pray for. If there is no personal God, there is no one to pray to; and if God, supposing such a being to exist, has no control over nature or man, then there is no rational motive for prayer; there is nothing to be accomplished by it.¹

Another assumption is that God hears, understands and responds to one's prayers. If God did not hear and understand the prayers of a believer, there is no meaning to prayer. If God does not respond to prayer, it would be a meaningless exercise.

Thirdly, prayer assumes that God is sovereign and that He is in control of all things. By praying one is acknowledging and submitting to God's sovereign will; for example, by asking God for something (petition), one is simply saying that he realizes God is the One who answers and that it is not dependent upon one's own will but God's.

The last assumption of prayer is that God has the ability and resources to answer. If God could not answer prayers, then there is no reason or purpose to prayer.

Basis of Prayer

Based on the Ministry of Christ

The underlying basis of prayer for the believer is the sacrificial ministry of Christ, His death on the cross. Prayer in both the Old and New Testaments is something that was personal; it was a personal communication with God. Men

¹Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), p. 695.

in the Old Testament had direct communication with God, such as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, etc. During this time it was the ministry of the high priest to intercede for the people.¹

The emphasis in the Old Testament is upon the individual aspect of outstanding personalities (leaders, prophets, priests, kings). Often these prayers are in conjunction with sacrifices.

In the New Testament, believers have direct access into the presence of God. The author of the Book of Hebrews challenges and exhorts the believers to "draw near" to God because of the "confidence to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19-25). New Testament believers, all those in the Body of Christ, no longer need a high priest to intercede for them in the presence of God. There is no longer a need for the priest to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people, as in the Old Testament. All of this has been done away through the ministry of Jesus Christ.² In other words, direct access to God for the believer is a result of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross; Christ has bridged the gap between God and man. It is for this reason that believers can boldly and confidently approach God's throne in prayer (Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-25). When prayer is seen in light of Christ's work, it is a privilege. Every Christian has direct access into God's presence--the Creator of the universe,

¹See Leviticus 16:29-34 and Hebrews 5:1-3; 9:1-7.

²See Hebrews 7:23-28; 8:1, 2.

the omnipotent God.

Based on the Character of God

Prayer is not only based upon the sacrificial death of Christ, it is also based upon the character of God. Knowing His character gives one a deeper understanding of prayer. A Christian must first realize to whom he is praying.

In praying we are never to forget whom we are addressing: the living God, the Almighty One with whom nothing is impossible, and from whom therefore all things may be expected. To doubt God is to do Him an injustice, for it belittles His deity, misjudges His character, and therefore receives nothing from Him.¹

When a believer realizes that he is praying to the omnipotent God of the universe, he can be assured that God has the ability and the power to fulfill or answer all prayer. If God were not omnipotent, He would not be able to answer all prayers. In that case, there would be no reason for the believer to seek God if he does not believe in God's omnipotence. In addition, the fact remains that the one addressed would not be God if He were not omnipotent.

God, being omniscient and omnipresent, gives believers confidence that He knows and hears their prayers. In Matthew 6:8 Jesus teaches His disciples that God the Father knows their every need before they even ask in prayer, even if one does not know how to pray.

In addition to all the above, God is a Person who is

¹NIDNTT, s.v. "αἰτέω," by Colin Brown and Hans Schonweiss, 2:857.

compassionate, loving and faithful. Being compassionate and loving, God understands the situation or circumstance in which the believer finds himself. He is sympathetic toward their heartaches. Because of His love, God is willing to give His children all things. Romans 9:32 assures the believer that if God gave His Son for him, "how will He not also with Him freely give us all things."¹ The believer is not praying to a God who is reluctant to give him all things, but He is a God who is willing.

God is faithful to all His promises. One of the greatest promises for the believer on prayer is found in 1 John 5:14, 15. God promises that "if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked from Him." This promise gives us assurance that God will hear and answer the believer if he asks "according to His will." God is faithful not only to this promise, but to all of His promises. The only step that needs to be taken is for the believer to fulfill his responsibility.

Nature of Prayer

The Commandment to Pray

Prayer for the believer is more than just a privilege; it is a duty. The Scripture instructs and commands believers

¹See also Matthew 7:9-11.

to pray. Ephesians 6:18 states that "with all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit and . . . be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." The composition of the words "pray at all times" emphasizes the need for continual prayer. The verb "pray" is προσευχόμενοι which is a present participle containing the idea of duration.¹ In addition to this durative idea Paul adds ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ translated "at all times" or "on every occasion." This also emphasizes the need to be continually in prayer, no matter what the circumstances.

Another familiar verse to most believers is "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). Christians are to be continually in prayer. In 1 Timothy 2:8 the encouragement is for "men in every place to pray." In the same chapter, Paul wrote, "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgiving be made on behalf of all men" (v. 1). There is a continual stress throughout the Scriptures concerning prayer.²

The Condition for Prayer

The Bible presents many conditions to fulfill in order for the believer's prayer to be answered. This will be dealt with briefly in summary.³ If any of these conditions are not

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philip-
pians (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 674.

²See Genesis 18:22, 23; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalms 5:2, 32:6 with 1 Samuel 12:23; Jeremiah 29:7; Matthew 5:44, 26:41; Luke 18:1, 21:36; James 5:13-15.

³For a detailed study on the conditions for prayer see Garold L. Paxson, Jr., "Conditions for Answered Prayer in the New Testament," (Th.M. Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1980).

met, one could expect the prayer to be unanswered.

Obedience to Christ and His Word is a characteristic of being His disciple. In 1 John 3:22 John states that "whatever we ask, we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight." God answers the prayer, not as a reward for meritorious action, but only because the believer is in God's will.¹

Proper relationships in the family are also a condition for answered prayer. 1 Peter 3:7 instructs the husbands to live with their wives "in an understanding way . . . and grant her honor as fellow-heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." Therefore a right relationship is needed for an unhindered prayer.

Asking with a proper motive is essential to prayer. Many reasons prayers are not answered are because believers ask with wrong motives, for their own pleasure (Jas 4:3). In other words, asking selfishly for things rather than for things that please God is a reason for unanswered prayers.

Faith is a vital factor in the believer's life which includes prayer. Hebrews 11:6 declares that "without faith it is impossible to please Him." The believer's prayer must be in faith, without doubting. Jesus told His disciples that anything that they would ask in prayer "believing" they would

¹John R. W. Stott, The Epistles of John, in The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. by R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 149.

receive (Matt 21:22; Mk 11:22-26).¹ Even while asking for wisdom in times of trials, believers are to "ask in faith without any doubting." Asking with doubt belittles the person and character of God.

Asking according to His will is the crucial condition for answers to prayer. 1 John 5:14 clearly teaches that if believers ask "according to His will" He hears and answers. This does not mean that believers must first know His decreed will before they pray. How then does one pray "according to His will"? First, the believer must be obedient to the will of God found in the Scripture (1 John 3:22). Second, the believer must be willing to submit to the will of God, just as Christ demonstrated in His life (Matt 6:10; Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 1 Cor 4:19). Third, the believer who is in close fellowship with God will, through the help of the Holy Spirit, understand the heart and will of God so that when he prays he does pray "according to His will" (Eph 6:18; Jude 20; Rom 8:26, 27).

This condition is the most crucial among all the conditions in that God's will is involved. If all other conditions are met and yet it is not God's will for that request to be fulfilled, then it will not be fulfilled.²

¹Jesus directed this promise to His disciples. It is not an open-ended promise to all believers. However the common factor between this promise and those to believers is faith. See later discussion on pg. 61 on "What About All Those Verses That Promise Answers to Prayer?"

²The question that must come to the reader's mind now is: "Why pray if God will carry out His will anyway?" This "problem" will be dealt with in the coming chapters.

It may not be God's will at that particular time for him to receive that request. God may redirect him so that he will know his will. Therefore it is vital for the believer to be in close fellowship with Him. But the believer can be assured that God's will is for his best and for God's glory.

There is a common misconception that all a believer has to do is "ask" and he shall receive. Scripture teaches that God's will is not subject to man's will; in fact, it is never subject to anyone or anything. Charles Hodge states:

All the promises of God are conditional. The condition if not expressed is implied. It cannot be supposed that God has subjected Himself in the government of the world, or in the dispensation of His gifts, to the short-sighted wisdom of men, by promising, without condition, to do whatever they ask.¹

Results of Prayer

In consideration of the results or effects of prayer, there are two basic areas involved. One area involves the believer himself, and the other involves fulfilling God's will. William Biederwolf in his book, How Can God Answer Prayer, gives six particular effects of prayer upon the believer:

- 1) Prayer enables us to realize the presence of God.
- 2) Prayer impresses the mind with the real character of God and consequently tends to produce in us a disposition consistent therewith.
- 3) Prayer, by directing the thoughts towards that which is holiest at best, tends to evaluate and ennoble the soul.
- 4) Prayer tends to keep the soul sensitive to spiritual impression and receptive to spiritual influence.
- 5) Prayer impresses the mind with becoming dependent

¹Hodge, Systematic Theology, 3:704.

upon God.

6) Prayer is a promoter of activity.¹

Prayer, then, can be seen as a means by which God brings the believer into conformity with Christ. Spending time in communion with God through prayer is just as vital as studying the Word of God.

Yet, prayer does more than just bring the believer to Christ-likeness; it is more than just a spiritual exercise. Any believer who prays "according to His will" will be heard by God and responded to by the Father (1 John 5:14, 15). If God responds to the believer's prayer, it means that he has prayed according to God's will.

Therefore, God's will is accomplished (in relation to that request) through prayer. The reader must realize that God's will is not accomplished just through prayer but through other means as well. In other words, prayer is one means by which He accomplishes His will.

Implications of Prayer

As has been previously discussed, prayer is both a privilege as well as a duty. In light of this, the believer is held accountable for this privilege and duty. If the believer does not pray, he has disobeyed the Scriptures; if he takes prayer lightly, he has abused his privilege of access into God's presence. Therefore the prayer life of the believer is just as vital as reading the Scriptures and evangelism.

¹William E. Biederwolf, How Can God Answer Prayer (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1910), pp. 53-64.

The Bible commands the believer to pray constantly (1 Thess 5:17). Yet how does one "pray without ceasing"? It is vital to understand "prayer" as more than just an action; it is also an attitude. In seeking to understand that prayer is an attitude, one must think of what is transpiring when a believer comes to God in prayer. When he prays, he is acknowledging God for who He is; the believer would not come to God if he did not think that God was omnipotent and sovereign and that only He could respond to his request. At the same time, the believer is acknowledging his dependence upon God. Arthur Pink so succinctly summarizes:

Prayer is not so much an act as it is an attitude--an attitude of dependency, dependency upon God. Prayer is a confession of creature weakness, yea, of helplessness. Prayer is the acknowledgement of our need and spreading of it before God. We do not say that this is all there is in prayer; it is not.¹

Prayer is also an attitude of submission to God's will. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of One who was in submission to the will of the Father. He continually prayed "not my will but Thine be done."² The believer also needs to submit to God's will in prayer. As the reader will see in the next section, God is sovereign and therefore the believer needs to commit his ways to the Lord . . . "leaving Him to deal with it as seemeth Him best. This makes my will subject to His, instead of, as in the former case, seeking to bring His will into subjection to mine."³

¹Arthur W. Pink, The Sovereignty of God (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint ed., 1968), p. 121.

²See Matthew 6:10; John 4:34.

³Pink, The Sovereignty of God, p. 118.

The Sovereignty of God

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is vital to a biblical understanding of prayer. This is the divine element in prayer that cannot be neglected. Many believers lack a knowledge of this doctrine and the implications behind it. Therefore a brief study of this is vital.

Definition of His Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is His absolute authority in everything, since He is the Creator of all things that are visible and invisible. Since "in the beginning" there was only God (Gen 1:1; John 1:1-3), anything after God was created by Him and is therefore subject to Him. "The sovereignty of God is not an attribute, but a prerogative of God arising out of the perfections of His nature."¹ Because God is God, He is sovereign.

The Scripture declares that He is the owner and ruler of all (1 Sam 2:6-8; 1 Chr 29:11, 12; Ps 24:1; Matt 6:13, 20:15; Eph 1:11). Therefore He is sovereign or has absolute authority over all things and is not limited by space or time. Lewis Sperry Chafer presents three areas of God's sovereignty as it relates to existing things:

1) He is Creator and His dominion is perfect and final. He is free to dispose of His Creation as He will; but His will, as has been seen, is wholly guided by the true and benevolent features of His person. All majesty and glory belong to God. All material things are His by the most absolute ownership.

¹Henry C. Thiessen, Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), p. 128.

2) The authority of God is established over the redeemed by the purchase with that redemption which was wrought.

3) He is in authority over those among the redeemed who will yield their lives to Him.¹

It should also be added that God has authority over those who will not yield their lives to Him.

Exercise of His Sovereignty

God's sovereignty is exercised through His decrees. The decree of God speaks of the sovereign determination from all eternity to form an all-wise plan for His entire creation. The Apostle Paul wrote that God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines the decrees of God as "His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."² Every event that occurs was planned by God for His own glory. God's decree is only concerned with His creation and not God Himself. He did not decree His own existence, nature or attributes. The decrees primarily involve the acts of God Himself in creation, providence, preservation, etc., but also in the acts of His creatures (Acts 4:27, 28; Gen 50:20).

The ultimate purpose of all His decrees is for His own glory; everything that God has decreed is for this purpose--to glorify Himself.

¹Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:222-223.

²James R. Boyd, The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1854), p. 54.

Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things and because of Thy will they existed, and were created (Rev 4:11).

All of His decrees such as creation and the plan of salvation are designed to reveal the glory of God (Num 14:21; Ps 19:1; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Eph 2:8-10). No matter what event has occurred, no matter how small the detail, it was planned (decreed) by a sovereign God for His own pleasure and glory. Simply because He is God, He can do as He pleases and for His own pleasure (Rom 9:10-24; Eph 1:9, 11).

God's decree can be observed to a one all-inclusive, all-comprehending plan. His decrees were made in eternity past and are eternal (Eph 1:4, 11; 3:11); although the individual actions or decrees are not, they exist in time. For example, the sacrificial death of Christ was made in eternity past although the actual event happened in history (Rom 11:33-36; 1 Pet 1:20, 21). His decrees are not made one by one as the need arises but are all a part of one all-comprehending plan.

The decree of God is also absolutely unconditional, freely made in His sovereignty. His plan was not made out of necessity but as a determination of His own sovereignty. He was not influenced by anyone or anything in forming His plan.¹ It would be false and inconsistent with the nature of God to assume that His decrees are conditioned upon something else

¹See Job 36:22, 23; Isaiah 40:13, 14; Rom 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16.

or someone else, which would mean that there is suspense and uncertainty with God.

The decree of God is not only unconditional, it is also efficacious and immutable or unchangeable. In other words, what God has foreordained will come to pass; and it cannot be changed. God who is perfect and immutable must also have a decree that is also perfect and immutable (Jas 1:17; Isa 46:9, 10). The Lord declares in Isaiah 14:24, "Surely, just as I have intended, so it has happened, and just as I have planned, so it will stand."

Many theologians distinguish between the "efficacious" decrees and the "permissive" decrees of God. By "efficacious" decrees, they refer to those that God purposes to do Himself, such as creation; these are direct actions of God. The "permissive" decrees are those that God does not do Himself but "permits" His creation to do. This term, "permissive", is a poor choice due to a lack of words to describe the situation. The word is used to avoid making God responsible for the action. An example would be that of sin in the world. Since God is holy and cannot look at evil, He could not have created evil. Therefore, God "permitted" sin to exist. However, this word conveys the idea that it was permitted or allowed in spite of opposition or hesitation.

It is vital to understand that the term "permit" does not mean that the event is uncertain to God or that it is "allowed" with a hesitation. All events are equally in the decree of God whether they occur by His own actions or are "permitted" to occur through the agency of His creation.

Both are just as certain to occur. To say that God has not decreed something that has occurred or that something He decreed has not occurred, is taking God from His place as God and reducing Him to a level of a creature.

Lastly, the decree of God includes all events. God who is infinite in knowledge, wisdom and resources made a total plan that included all events. It would be inconsistent with the nature of God to think that He would not form a plan that included all events and that He could not carry out His plan. In other words, God has decreed not just the end but also the means to the end. Nothing will occur but that which has been decreed by God.

Implications of His Sovereignty

Doctrinal Implications

One must be careful in the use of the term "sovereign" or "sovereignty." God is totally sovereign or He is not sovereign at all. If God is not in control of one thing or area, He is not in control of any area.

When this issue is reduced to its lowest dimensions, there remain but two general overtures: either (1) that God is sovereign and all that ever has existed or will exist is within His plan, or (2) that He is not sovereign and there is more or less in the universe which exists in defiance of His holy character and over which He has no authority. No modifications of divine sovereignty can be allowed without challenging the worthiness of God.¹

Since God is sovereign over all His creation and He is in control of all things, it can be concluded that

¹Chafer, Systematic Theology, 1:226.

nothing can surprise Him. He can never be taken off-guard or taken unexpectedly. If God did not absolutely determine what is to occur, but has to wait until an undetermined condition is fulfilled or unfulfilled, then one must conclude that He is not sovereign and therefore His purpose changes according to conditions. To conclude this would be to make God subject to His creation. But God is not subject to anyone or anything.

God will always carry out what He has decreed. His purposes are neither hindered nor changed. Job 42:2 declares that no purpose of God can be changed. God declares that "from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass" (2 Kgs 19:25). Scripture teaches that God will carry out what He has planned independently of all things.¹ His plans are never frustrated and are carried out "as He wills, when He wills and where He wills."²

Since every detail of God's plan is under His control, the steps or means to the ultimate end of glorifying Himself have also been decreed. The means to the end are just as important as the end itself. For example, if God decreed that a man would be saved through the reading of a gospel tract, then the way in which this man received the tract and the tract used had both been decreed by God.

¹See Isaiah 14:24, 27; 43:13; 46:9, 10.

²Pink, Sovereignty of God, p. 22.

Nothing happens by chance. Proverbs 16:33 states "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."

Consider the implications of a statement like this! Ultimately there is no chance in this universe because even the workings of probability and statistics are controlled by God. There are no real accidents and God is surprised by nothing.¹

The hardest implication to grasp for the human mind is the relationship between the human will and the sovereignty of God.² How does the human will fit into God's sovereignty? Does man have a "free" will? It would all depend upon the definition of "free." If by "free," one means that man has a choice, that is, to decide between alternatives, the answer is "yes." If by "free," one means "sovereign," the answer is "no." There can only be one sovereign will in existence; all others are subject to it. God is the only One who is sovereign, man is not. In addition, man's choice is determined by the situation or circumstance in which he finds himself. In other words, he is subjected to circumstance that he cannot change.

The question now is, "What is the relationship between man's will (choice) and God's sovereignty (decree)?" Man makes decisions and acts of his own choice; God does not force or coerce him. Every decision that he makes, he is

¹Kenneth Boa, God, I Don't Understand (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1976), pp. 48, 49.

²Since this subject relates indirectly to this study on prayer and God's sovereignty, it will be dealt with briefly. For an excellent section on this subject see Arthur Pink, Sovereignty of God, pp. 92-108.

held accountable. Yet, at the same time, God is sovereign and He carries out what He has decreed from eternity past.¹ If nothing can happen apart from the decree of God, then the acts and actions of men, free as they are, have been decreed by God. Man freely chooses and is responsible for his decision, yet what man chooses is what God has decreed. If man's actions and choices are uncertain to God, then God is not sovereign and therefore has no control over His creation.

Some respond to this problem saying that God knew what man would choose by His foreknowledge or foresight and therefore decreed it. If God had to foresee man's choice, then God is subject to man's decision which takes away God's sovereignty and lowers Him to the level of a creature. God's decrees are not based upon His "foreknowledge" of man's actions, but rather God's "foreknowledge" is based upon His decree. In other words, God knew the future because He planned it. To the finite mind there will always be a question how man could freely choose and yet God decreed; yet it is consistent with Scripture (Gen 50:20; Acts 4:27, 28).

It must be clearly understood that man is accountable and responsible for the decision he makes even though God is sovereign. To this antinomy J. I. Packer correctly concludes:

¹Scripture clearly teaches both sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Compare Luke 22:21-22a and 22b; Acts 2:23; Romans 9 and Romans 10:9-13.

God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught us side by side in the same Bible; sometimes indeed in the same text. Both are thus guaranteed to us by the same divine authority; both, therefore are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other. Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is reality, and man's responsibility is reality too.¹

Practical Implications

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is not some far-off doctrine that is devoid of practical value. This doctrine should be a blessing to all believers for it gives a deep sense of appreciation and awe for the person of God. The believer can be assured and comforted that whatever circumstance or situation he is in, God is in control (Rom 8:28). God is not only working things out for the believer's good, but He is also conforming the believer to the image of His Son. The final and ultimate purpose is that He might be glorified.

The sovereignty of God is something more than an abstract principle which explains the rationale of the Divine government: it is made known to us for the promotion of righteous living, it is revealed in order to bring into subjection our rebellious hearts. A true recognition of God's sovereignty humbles as nothing else does or can humble, and brings the heart into lowly submission before God, causing us to relinquish our own self-will and making us delight in the perception and performance of the Divine will.²

¹J. I. Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1961), pp. 22, 23. Packer has an excellent discussion on the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility on pp. 18-36.

²Pink, Sovereignty of God, 123.

The Antinomy of Prayer
and God's Sovereignty

Having considered the doctrine of prayer and the doctrine of God's sovereignty separately in the previous section, one must now consider the original problem presented in the introduction. How do these two vital doctrines harmonize into a biblical understanding of prayer? If God is sovereign and has decreed all things, then what is the purpose of prayer? Both the divine element and the human element pose an antinomy.

The Description of the Antinomy

An antinomy is defined as "a contradiction or inconsistency between two apparently reasonable principles or laws."¹ It can also be added that these principles are equally logical, reasonable or necessary. The believer must realize that this antinomy in Scripture is only an appearance of a contradiction. It is clear that the believer is commanded to seek and ask God in prayer for needs or desires. But it is also clear that God is totally and absolutely sovereign; He has decreed all things, and all things happen according to His plan. Yet when these two principles are placed side by side, they present an antinomy; they appear to be irreconcilable.

This antinomy not only exists in the mind but also

¹Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 2nd college ed. (1953), s.v. "antinomy."

in the experience of the believer. In times of difficulties, the child of God pours out his heart to God in prayer (request, intercession, e.g. for the life of a loved one) and yet God does not always answer the request as the believer had prayed. The believer has already examined his life and has made sure that his prayers are not hindered. Perhaps he needed to pray more? Or maybe he prayed wrong? The next thought would be that God is sovereign; He will accomplish His will regardless of how earnestly one prays. Obviously it was not His will to answer the request. Why then should one pray?

But then at other times the believer experiences "answers" to his prayers, right before his eyes. And in the excitement the believer encourages others to pray, saying, "there is power in prayer! We need to pray more! Prayer really changes things!" The question arises, did that human prayer actually influence and move a sovereign God to respond or act on something that He otherwise would not have done if the believer had not prayed? Does not God then make His plan contingent on man?

The question of this antinomy goes on and on and has stretched and exercised the minds of believers through all ages. How then is this appearance of an antinomy solved? The answer is that it can never be totally solved; it will always exist. This author is not trying to solve this antinomy, but is seeking to understand it better. It must be kept in mind that the finite mind can never totally understand the infinite thoughts and wisdom of God (Isa 55:8, 9). God never intended

the believer to totally understand His thoughts but only to accept them by faith and live in light of that faith.¹ What then should be the believer's attitude toward this antinomy? J. I. Packer, in handling the antinomy between evangelism and God's sovereignty, makes an excellent suggestion:

Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the resemblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other. Be careful, therefore, not to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other (such deductions would, for the very reason, be certainly unsound). Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference (i.e., the area delimited by the evidence from which the principle has been drawn). Note what connections exist between the two truths and their two frames of reference, and teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.²

This also needs to be the attitude of the believer in seeking to understand the antinomy between the purpose of prayer and God's sovereignty.

The Approach to the Antinomy

The reader must remember that this study is for the purpose of understanding the antinomy better, not trying to solve it. It was clear from the previous considerations that both the command for prayer and God's sovereignty exist;

¹A perfect example was Habakkuk who did not understand why a holy God was using an evil nation to discipline the nation of Judah. In the midst of his struggle to understand, he learned to live by faith, trust God's infinite wisdom, and rejoice. See Habakkuk 1:1-3, 3:16-19.

²Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p. 21.

both are true. Therefore in seeking to harmonize them, there are two points that must be made clear. First, the understanding of this antinomy is not found in the exclusion or exclusiveness of the believer's responsibility to pray. Second, the understanding of this antinomy is not found in the exclusion or exclusiveness of the total sovereignty of God. Both doctrines must be equally considered and upheld in order to gain a biblical understanding of the antinomy.

For our minds dislike antinomies. We like to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out. Hence we are tempted to get rid of antinomies from our minds by illegitimate means: to suppress, or jettison, one truth in the supposed interest of the other, and for the sake of a tidier theology. So it is in the present case. The temptation is to undercut and maim the one truth by the way in which we stress the other: to assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or to affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man. Both mistakes need to be guarded against.¹

To exclude the believer's responsibility to pray and to emphasize God's sovereignty is to conclude that prayer is just a spiritual exercise which only benefits the one who prays. Prayer is seen as a "spiritual bootstrap" whereby the believer is able to lift up his Christian life and has no effect or results from God. This is both unscriptural and false in light of the commands to pray and the promises concerning prayer. In his book, Taking Hold of God, Samuel Zwemer believes that "every injunction to prayer, every command to make our requests known to God would be hollow mockery if

¹Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p. 25.

prayer did not prevail."¹

To exclude the sovereignty of God and to emphasize the believer's responsibility to pray is to conclude that human prayer can move, influence and change the will of God. The result is that God's will is subject to man's desire and will. Prayer becomes a "Master Charge" in which the one who prays can ask for and receive anything from God at will; God is like a "genie" who fulfills the desires of man. This again is unscriptural and false in light of the clear teaching of the Scriptures on the sovereignty of God. He is never subject to anyone or anything. All things are subject to His authority and power. Having considered these two vital points, one can seek to harmonize these truths and better understand this antinomy.

¹Samuel W. Zwemer, Taking Hold of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1936), p. 70.

CHAPTER II

UNDERSTANDING THE ANTINOMY

In seeking to better understand the antinomy between prayer and God's sovereignty, this author will approach it from three directions. First, there must be an understanding of what the Scripture teaches on the purpose of prayer. Second, a better understanding can come from the harmonization of the scriptural teaching on prayer and God's sovereignty as best as possible without the exclusion or exclusiveness of either. Lastly, one can better understand the antinomy from thinking through questions related to the antinomy.

Understanding the Antinomy

Through Scripture

Matthew 6:8-10

In Matthew chapter six, Jesus is teaching His disciples concerning practicing righteousness. The contrast that is made is with the "hypocrites" who love to be noticed for practicing righteousness. The three areas of practice Jesus deals with are giving alms (6:1-4), praying (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). The basic concept that Jesus is teaching His disciples is that practicing righteousness is for God to see, not for man. If one practices righteousness

to be seen by men, then there is no reward from God, but if one practices in secret, God will reward the individual. God knows whether the individual is practicing righteousness to please Him or men, because He is both omnipresent and omniscient.

In verse five Jesus instructs the disciples not to pray like the "hypocrites" who "love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men." The word, "pray" is προσεύχομαι; as seen in the previous chapter, it denotes the general comprehensive idea of prayer (intercession, petition, adoration, etc.). Yet the purpose of their prayers was to be seen by men.

What the Lord condemns here is ostentatious praying, that is, having one's private devotions in the most public place, with the intention of being seen and honored by people.¹

In correcting this Jesus instructs them in verse six to pray in secret or in private. The instruction is two-fold. First, God hears prayers even in secret. Second, God will reward the individual who prays in secret. In continuing with instruction on prayer (v. 7), Jesus instructs them not to use "meaningless repetition." The word comes from βατταλογέω which can be translated "to babble" or "to utter a lot of useless and superfluous words."² It is interesting that this is the only occurrence of the word in the New

¹William Hendriksen, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew in the New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 322.

²BAGD, p. 137.

Testament. The reason given why prayer is not to be in "meaningless repetition" is because prayers are not "heard for their many words." The Gentiles thought that the more words they used and the longer they prayed, the more chances their prayers would be heard and understood. Jesus is not condemning the length of prayer but the motive.

In tying together the instruction on prayer, Jesus exhorts His disciples not to be like "them" (v. 8a) referring to the "hypocrites" (v. 5) and the "Gentiles" (v. 7).¹ They are not to pray for the purpose of being noticed by men but by God in secret. Also, they are not to pray in "meaningless repetition." The reason for this is introduced by the conjunction γάρ. Jesus states that God the Father "knows what you need, before you ask Him." The word for "know" is οἶδεν which sometimes suggests knowledge in the fullest sense, an absolute knowledge, although not always.²

What is clearly taught here is that prayer is not for the purpose of informing God of one's request, situation, etc. God already knows the believer's situation, his needs, and in fact, his prayers before he even prays. Many believers feel that they must inform God of all the details or else He will be left in ignorance and will not know how to answer their requests. This is totally false; in fact, it is an

¹The words for this exhortation, μή οὖν ὁμοιωθῆτε αὐτοῖς, are in the aorist imperative; these words commanded the disciples not to be like "them" in their prayers.

²EDNTW, s.v. "οἶδα," by W. E. Vine, p. 298.

insult to the character of God. The believer must not forget that God is omniscient, that He knows one's every need. Plummer says that "we are not to suppose that prayers are incantations and act upon God like a charm, compelling Him to do what He is unwilling to do."¹

The question that immediately came to the minds of the disciples and no doubt comes to the minds of believers today is that since God knows all the needs of an individual, is not prayer unnecessary? The answer is "no." Jesus, after explaining that the Father already knows one's need, began (v. 9) by saying "pray, then, in this way." The verb "pray" is, again, the same root for the word "prayer" which is a general comprehensive word. The verb προσεύχεσθε is a present active imperative, which gives a command in a continuative force, "pray, and keep on praying." Jesus then commands them to pray even though God the Father already knows their needs!

The words "in this way" or "thus pray" or "in this manner" suggest that this should serve as a pattern or model prayer and not to be repeated exactly. A. T. Robertson suggests that this

should be called "The Model Prayer" rather than "the Lord's Prayer." He Himself did not use it as a liturgy (cf. John 17). There is no evidence that Jesus meant it for liturgical use by others. In Luke 11:2-4

¹Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew (Minneapolis: James Family Christian Publishing Co., reprint ed., n.d.), p. 94.

practically the same prayer though briefer is given at a later time by Jesus to the apostles in response to a request that He teach them how to pray.¹

Lange considers this "a formula of prayer."

We may call it a formula provided we remember that its leading characteristic is to be free from πολυλογία and formality, and that in briefest form it bodies forth the deepest and the fullest thoughts and feelings.²

Since Christ used οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς, translated literally "in this way therefore pray," "like this therefore pray," He is giving a pattern for prayer. If He wanted the exact prayer to be prayed, He would have instructed them to "pray this." Therefore the elements of this prayer are vital to the believers' prayers. There are many things that can be learned through this model prayer.

Following this command to pray is the model prayer. It consists of two basic parts in the form of a total of six petitions. The first three petitions are in reference to God and the last three are in reference to the needs of the one praying.

The prayer begins with a definite acknowledgment of the Person of God; the One addressed is "Our Father." It signifies the special relationship of the one praying to the One who hears the petition; it is used in a "definitely soteriological or redemptive sense, a sense in which God is the Father not of all (though He is kind to all, 5:45; Luke

¹A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, n.d.), 1:52.

²John Peter Lange, Matthew in Commentary of the Holy Scriptures, 12 vols., translated from German, and edited, with additions by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 1:124.

6:35, 36) but of some."¹

After this acknowledgment, there are three imperative passives; all of them are in the third person. They can be literally translated, "Let be sanctified Thy name, let come Thy kingdom, let be done Thy will." Being aorist and in the third person, these phrases have a sense of urgency.²

These first three have a mandatory sound; what they say must be done. God could not consent to the opposite, nor could God's children. The aorist tense helps to emphasize this: God will certainly do what He is in this striking way asked to do. For back of these imperatives is God Himself.³

The first imperative ἀγιασθήτω means "to hallow" or "to sanctify."⁴ It has the idea of setting apart for honor. Hendriksen suggests that this means

that the worshiper is so completely filled with unrestrained eagerness that the Father's name be adored, honored, and glorified, that he cannot wait to communicate his consuming desire that it receive⁵ this honor from the lips, hearts, and lives of everyone.

The second imperative translated "thy kingdom come," again has the sense of urgency. The desire of the one who prays is that God's kingdom would come. It is difficult to determine what Jesus actually referred to when He said "Thy kingdom." Some believe that He is either referring to the universal kingdom of God or to the future Messianic kingdom

¹Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 326.

²Ibid., p. 329.

³R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 266.

⁴BAGD, p. 8, 9.

⁵Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 329, 330.

of God on earth. In a universal sense, the kingdom of God is already in existence and has been since the beginning. God is king of the universe and His will is being done on both heaven and earth (Ps 103:19; Eph 1:11). Dr. Alva J. McClain in his classic book, The Greatness of the Kingdom, believes that the key to understanding this is found in the phrase "on earth as it is in heaven" (v. 10).

Although the kingdom of God was already ruling over all, there was nevertheless a profound difference between the exercise of its rule 'in heaven' and 'on earth.' This difference arises out of the fact that rebellion and sin exist upon the earth, sin which is to be dealt with in a way not known in any other place in the universe, not even among the angels which sinned. It is here that the great purpose of what I have named the Mediatorial Kingdom appears: On the basis of mediatorial redemption it must 'come' to put down at last all rebellion with its train of evil results, thus finally bringing the kingdom and will of God on earth as it is in heaven.¹

The third petition is translated "Thy will be done" and can be understood as the revealed will of God. It is clear that God's decreed will is always accomplished both on earth and heaven.

It is the ardent desire of the person who sincerely breathes the Lord's Prayer that the Father's will shall be obeyed as completely, heartily and immediately on earth as this is constantly being done by all the inhabitants of heaven.²

In his commentary on Matthew, Stanley Toussaint suggests the idea that this third petition "is simply an amplification of the two former requests."³

¹Alva J. McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), p. 35. Dr. McClain has an excellent discussion on the kingdom of God.

²Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 311.

³Stanley D. Toussaint, Behold the King (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 110.

In other words, the first two petitions, "Hallowed be Thy name," and "Thy kingdom come," are two expressions of how God accomplishes His will (Thy will be done).

The remaining three petitions are for one's own needs: physical (v. 11) and spiritual (vs. 12, 13). Note that these needs come after submission to the will of God.

From this passage, the believer must understand that prayer is not for the purpose of informing God of one's needs or circumstances. God already knows one's need and even one's prayer, before the prayer is offered. Jesus clearly commanded them to pray and in addition gave this prayer as a model or pattern for the disciples. However, the principles from this pattern or model can be used as a guideline for the prayers of believers today. There are many things that believers today can learn from this prayer.

Prayer must begin with an acknowledgment of God before one makes his petitions to God. The petitions in this model prayer suggest that the attitude and desire of the one praying are that God's revealed will would be accomplished in his own life and then in the world. His attitude should be that of dependence upon God and his desire should be to glorify God and to do His will. "The glory of God must come first; and our aim must be that His will may be done in us, not that it may be changed in accordance with ours."¹

In other words, prayer is the placing of one's will

¹Plummer, Matthew, pp. 95, 96.

into complete harmony with God's will and since God will always accomplish His will, the believer must learn to accept what His will brings into his life.

James 5:16b

This verse has been used by many to support the idea that the prayers of a righteous man are always answered and that his prayers are powerful. The NASB version reads, "The effectual prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Does this verse really mean that any time a righteous man prays, his prayers are answered and that his prayers are powerful?

After rebuking the rich for their selfish and ungodly living (5:1-6), James encourages the believers to be patient for the return of the Lord. They are to be patient (v. 8), not to complain (v. 9), and to endure suffering with patience because the Lord will reward them when He returns. In verse 12 he encourages the believers not to make an oath or swear by anything but to simply let their words be true.

James then instructs the believers to pray under all circumstances, in suffering and joy (v. 13), and for those who are sick (vs. 14-18). The emphasis is upon "faith," as is the whole epistle. In fact, faith is essential to the Christian life (Heb 11:6). The prayer in faith of the elders (v. 14) will in a sense "heal the sick;" in reality it is God who heals the individual.

That every patient for whom the elders prayed would promptly recover, and that none would die, is certainly not the meaning of James. To argue that prayer is

therefore not effectual is fallacious; for God does grant recovery in answer to prayer.¹

And if there are any sins which may have caused the illness, once the believer is healed, it can also be said that he has been forgiven; it assumes that he had a change of heart. Lenski believes that "the Lord will not withhold His answer to the prayers that are made in true faith, will not withhold recovery because of such sinning in the past. He will forgive and graciously heal."² This is not true. Confession of sin is necessary before any petition is offered. It would be logical that the one who is ill and calls for the elders has examined his own life. Or the elders would help encourage him to examine his own life. Therefore James in verse 16 instructs believers to confess their sins to each other.

This confession of sins to each other is to be kept up continually; the present imperative ἐξομολογεῖσθε stresses the fact that it is to be made a practice. It is interesting that James does not make restrictions as to the kinds of sins to be confessed. The believers are also to pray for each other continually. Again the present imperative εὐχεσθε gives the idea that it is to be a continual practice. The purpose, identified by ὅπως, is so that believers may be healed. The verb, ἰαθεῖτε is used for the healing of the body or the healing of the soul. According to the context it is a reference to bodily healing.

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 664.

²Ibid., p. 665.

The second part of verse 16 is the basic consideration of this study. The NASB version reads, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." The word for "prayer," δέησις, can be translated, "petition." Primarily it refers to the asking of a desire or need. The anarthous use of δέησις leaves the petition undefined.

These are petitions of a righteous man (δικαίου). The righteous man is one who is in a right relationship before God; not only one who has been declared righteous but also one who is obedient to God's commands.¹ If he were not obedient, his prayers would not be answered (1 John 3:22). The KJV version translates πολὺ ἰσχύει "availeth much;" NASB version, "can accomplish much." The verb, ἰσχύει, is in the present active indicative form and gives the idea of a continuous action at the present time or a customary force. The petition of a righteous man continually has power to do or accomplish much.

The last word, the most difficult word to handle and the most crucial word to the understanding of this verse, is the participle, ἐνεργουμένη. The root of this participle is where the English word "energize" comes from. There has been much debate among scholars as to whether this is a present participle used as a middle voice or a passive voice.

The participle used in the middle voice can be

¹BAGD, p. 194.

translated, "in its working."¹ The meaning behind this is that the prayer of the righteous man itself has effect or results when completed. In other words the prayer itself has power. In this sense the participle is taken adjectivally belonging to δέησις (the effective prayer).²

The use of passive voice can be translated: "when it is exercised," "when made energized," "when it is exerted." The emphasis is that the prayer is "being made effective." The participle is taken as a verbal participle linked to the verb ἰσχύει. The righteous man's prayer has no power in itself, but it is God or the Holy Spirit who does the energizing of the prayer. This is in harmony with Romans 8:26 which states that the Holy Spirit intercedes for the believer. However, the context of James 5 does not mention any empowering agent.

J. H. Moulton in his grammar of the New Testament states that "the same form can be used indifferently as active or passive in meaning."³ A. T. Robertson suggests that ἐπεργουμένη is "probably" in the middle although the passive is possible.⁴ Mayor holds strongly to the passive

¹Paul uses the present middle participle in Galatians 5:6, 2 Corinthians 4:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

²H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 224.

³James H. Moulton, A Grammar of New Testament Greek, vol. 1: Prolegomena, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1906), p. 156.

⁴Robertson, Word Pictures, 6:66.

use.¹ Lenski believes strongly in the middle use.² It is clear that scholars are aware of the difficulty.

However, the grammatical construction of this verse is vital to the understanding of what James is trying to convey. It should be noted in the Greek sentence, πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη, that the participle ἐνεργουμένη comes last. Lenski suggests that this becomes emphatic. There is also emphasis upon the verb which comes first in the sentence. More specifically, it is a conditioned participle modifying the verb ἰσχύει.³ With this construction the emphasis of the verse is upon the verbal idea. The sentence should then be translated, "the petition of a righteous man has power to accomplish much when (being) made effective."

It should be clear from this passage that not all prayers of the believer are made effective. The condition for prayer accomplishing much is "when" it is made effective. In other words, God is the implied condition behind the prayer.

James concludes with an illustration concerning the "prayer of righteous man." Elijah was a mere man who had "a nature like ours." The word used here, ὁμοιοπαθής, can

¹Joseph P. Mayor, The Epistle of St. James (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954; reprint ed., New York: Macmillan and Company, 1913), p. 177.

²Lenski, Hebrews and James, p. 668.

³Dana and Mantey, Grammar, p. 227.

be literally translated "suffering the same things." Elijah was subject to the same emotions and weaknesses as all men, yet his prayers accomplished much by stopping the rain for three and a half years. James is referring to the account in 1 Kings 17 and 18. From observing this account, it should be clear that it was not Elijah who decided or desired that it would not rain. God had determined that the event should happen and commanded Elijah to tell Ahab that it would not rain (1 Kings 17:1) and later that it would rain (1 Kings 18:1). Elijah was simply obeying the command and decision of God. In other words, Elijah was praying and asking God for something that God was going to do. In a sense, one can say that prayer "moves" the hand of God to accomplish what He had planned. Prayer, then, is a means whereby God accomplishes His end.

1 John 3:22

"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis mine). These are words written by the author, John, concerning the purpose of his epistle. His desire is that the believers addressed may have knowledge of their eternal life and that this would result in confidence, assurance and boldness.

Throughout the epistle, John stresses the importance of knowing one's relationship to God. The word, γινώσκω translated "to perceive" is used 15 times in this epistle.

The word εἶδον, "to know," is used 25 times. The frequency of these words reflects the purpose and the background of this letter. It is difficult to determine from the context whether John was addressing a specific local congregation or a group of churches within his acquaintance. However, it is clear that these believers were in a state of uncertainty and confusion. At the time of John's epistle, false prophets and teachers were gaining in popularity which brought confusion and heresy to these young believers. There was also an antagonism between the Church and the world that brought confusion; some were in danger of being drawn into the world.

There had crept in a want of brotherly love, a development of spiritual laxity and internal dissensions, and a lessening of a steadfastness in the fellowship with the Father and the Son. The lessening of a vivid sense of antagonism between them and the world was making them more susceptible to the seductions of worldliness; they must be warned against loving the world (2:15-16). Their readiness to welcome elements of speculative philosophy foreign to the Christian faith had made them less sure of their own position.¹

It was under these circumstances that John wrote his epistle.

Throughout the book several "tests" are given for believers in order that they may know that they have eternal life. The first is the test of fellowship (1:5-2:2); the one who has fellowship with God "walks in the light." The second test is that of keeping God's commandments (2:3-24); the true believer will continually be obedient to God's Word. The third test is the test of practicing righteousness

¹D. Edmond Hiebert, An Introduction to the New Testament, vol. 3, The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 199.

In chapter three, John stresses the importance of doing those things that are righteous. What an individual practices in his life determines the kind of person he is. Since the believer is a child of God (3:1), he is to be righteous "just as He is righteous" (3:7). Practicing righteousness includes that of loving the brethren, not only in words but also in action (3:10-18).

In verse 19, John begins, "We shall know by this that we are of the truth." The words "by this," ἐν τούτῳ, refer back to the immediate context of the preceding paragraph about love. The believer will know he is "of the truth" by whether he loves "in deed and in truth." Later in the next chapter John clarifies the fact that the one who loves is "born of God and knows God" (4:7). Therefore one test of assurance is love. But yet in verse 19, John continues by saying this "shall assure our hearts before Him." The believers' love for God and others gives assurance to his heart.

The next verse continues the thought that this test of love assures one's heart before God "in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." The word for condemn, καταγινώσκω, can be literally translated "knowing against" or "knowledge against."¹ "It means to know something against one to condemn."² In the

¹BAGD, p. 410.

²Robertson, Word Pictures, 6:226.

context, it is referring to the believer's heart that may know something that condemns him that he is not "of the truth" (v. 19). The words, ὅτι ἐάν , translated "whatever," leave it open as to what condemns.

"The suggestion seems to be that it may not be either an unusual or an infrequent experience for the Christian's serene assurance to be disturbed."¹ Whatever it may be that condemns the heart of the believer, "God is greater than our heart; and knows all things." The believer's heart is not the judge of his salvation but God is. God knows more of the believer than the believer knows about himself.

In verse 21 John begins with the condition, "if our heart does not condemn us." The use of ἐάν . . . μή presents a third class condition, which states that the condition is a "matter of doubt, but with some expectation of realization."² In other words, it is doubtful that the believer's heart will condemn him, but it is possible. But if it does, the believer still has "confidence before God." The word for confidence, παρρησίαν, can be translated "outspokenness, frankness, plainness of speech, that conceals nothing and passes over nothing."³ In the context it has the idea of "courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness." In spite of the believer's heart condemning him, he has the confidence and courage "before God," literally

¹Scott, The Epistles of John, p. 145.

²A. T. Robertson and W. Hersey Davis, A New Shorter Grammar of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977; reprint ed. Harper and Brothers, 1931), p. 353.

³BAGD, pp. 635-636.

"face to face."

This confidence before God has a definite effect upon the believer's prayer life (v. 22), in that "whatever we ask we receive from Him." The verse begins with καί which can be taken as epexegetical, explaining the concept of confidence in verse 21.¹

By καί the following is closely connected with the preceding, in as much as it states what further happens when, in consequence of non-condemnation on the part of the heart, the παρησία πρὸς τὸν θεόν exists.²

The words ὃ ἐὰν αἰτῶμεν, translated "whatsoever we ask," are an indefinite relative clause. Burton in his book, Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek, says that this clause speaks of a general condition and not a particular one.

If it states a general principle or expresses a general injunction which applies to any instance of the event described in the relative clause, the implied supposition is usually general.³

In other words, it refers to asking in general and not specifically.

In whatever the believer asks from the Lord, he "receives." The word for "receives," λαμβάνομεν, is found in the present tense, not future. "The subject is here not

¹ Alfred Plummer, The Epistles of St. John (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980; reprint ed., Cambridge: The University Press, 1886), p. 89.

² Joh. Ed. Huther, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude in Meyer's Commentary of the New Testament, vol. 10, trans. Paton J. Gloag and Clarke H. Irwin (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884; reprint ed., n.p.: Alpha Publications, 1980), p. 575.

³ Ernest De Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in the New Testament Greek (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), pp. 121, 122.

something future, but what constantly occurs in the life of believers."¹ However it is probably best to take it as a customary present; it is happening habitually or is most likely to occur.² It is clear that the believer does continuously receive "whatever he asks."

The next word, "because," ὅτι, indicates reasons for the receiving of what the believer asks. The two-fold reason (or better "condition") for receiving is first, keeping His commandments and second, doing those things that please Him. It is important to see that these are not conditions by which one meritoriously receives answers to prayer.

But John does not mean to imply that God hears and answers our prayers merely for the subjective reason that we have a clear conscience and an uncondemning heart. There is an objective moral reason, namely 'because we keep His commandments,' and more generally, 'do those things that are pleasing in His sight.' Obedience is neither the indispensable condition, nor the meritorious cause, of answered prayer.³

In summary, the purpose of these verses is to give assurance and confidence to the believers of their stand before God. If they have believed in the name of Christ (v. 23), they are children of God and therefore can have the confidence to approach God in spite of what their heart may feel.

Yet although John emphasizes that our assurance ultimately depends on God Himself, nevertheless he insists that we

¹Hunter, James, p. 575.

²Dana and Mantey, Grammar, p. 183.

³Stott, The Epistles of John, p. 89.

must continue to keep his commands to believe in Jesus and love one another. When we do this the Spirit inwardly assures us of our spiritual position.¹

In verse 22 there is no specific limitation mentioned except complete fellowship with God. In other words, a total surrender of the believer's will to that of the will of God is necessary for prayer to be answered. Obedience is the key evidence that the believer is in harmony with God. The one who is obedient to God's Word and is pleasing to God will ask those things that please Him and are in harmony with His will. John makes this clear later in his epistle when he stresses that the one who asks "according to His will" is heard and answered by God.

This may seem to be a circular statement: surely if we ask God to do His will, He is going to do it anyway since it is His will to do so. But the point is surely rather that we ought to ask for those things which are in accordance with God's will rather than for those things which arise from selfish motive.²

1 John 5:14-15

Immediately following John's statement concerning the purpose of the epistle, he speaks of confidence before God in prayer. Again, he impresses upon his readers that knowledge of eternal life gives one confidence before God.

The phrase αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ παρησία translated, "this is the confidence," is defined by the ὅτι clause which follows; it explains what "that" confidence is. The confidence

¹J. Howard Marshall, The Epistles of John in NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p. 196.

²Ibid., pp. 199-200.

is this: "if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." As in 3:22, εἰν αἰτῶμεθα, the asking is left general and indefinite, but yet at the same time, κατὰ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ limits it. In other words, the believer is to ask for "whatever" he desires and yet he is limited by God's will.

The word for "ask," αἰτῶμεθα, is in the middle voice. Some believe that this refers to asking for things for oneself; it has a reflexive idea, whereas in 3:22 the active voice. Since the middle is used some believe that this is the reason why the limitation, "according to His will," is used. Moulton says that "if the middle is really the strong word, we can understand it being brought in just where an effect of contrast can be secured, while in ordinary passages the active would carry as much weight as was needed."¹ In his book, Syntax, Nigel Turner, states concerning this issue:

An attempt was often made by exegetes to distinguish these in the NT, the active being described as a simple requesting and the middle an asking for what is due by contract. It is true that the middle has a commercial or contractual favour where the active serves for requests to God.²

Turner concludes by saying that there is no rule or principle. Both forms are used and even vary within the same context.³ Since no rules apply to 1 John 5:14, Turner concludes "the

¹Moulton, Prolegomena, p. 160.

²Nigel Turner, in A Grammar of New Testament Greek, vol. 3: Syntax by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), pp. 54-55.

³Ibid. See Matthew 20:20 (act.), 22 (mid.); Mark 10:35 (act.), 38 (mid.).

change may have significance, but what?"¹

Stahlin notes that the usage of αἰτέω in both secular and religious writings makes no striking distinction between the active and the middle voice; in the religious usage; "it is almost impossible to distinguish between the mid. and act."²

The prayer is limited by the phrase κατὰ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ, which can be translated "according to the standard of His will." This does not mean that the believer must ascertain God's will and then pray. He must offer his prayer "according to His will" in the same way that the Lord Jesus prayed, "not what I will, but what Thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). The believer probably does not know what God's will is but he can be assured that whatever God's will is for him, it will be done. It also should be noticed that one should not pray for things that are not according to His will (i.e. sinful or selfish motives).

The protasis is "if we ask . . ." and the apodosis is "He hears us." If the conditions set by the protasis are fulfilled, then the apodosis is true. The specific promise is that God will "hear us," not answer us. It is not until the next verse that it is clarified. It is clear that the believer who has asked according to God's will is heard by God. This in itself is and should be a great assurance and

¹Ibid.

²TDNT, s.v. "αἰτέω," by Gustav Stahlin, 1:192.

comfort to the believer. It is "not just that our petitions register and He takes note of them, but He listens favourably to us, He gives ear to our cry (as in Jn 9:31, 11:41, 42)."¹

In verse 15 John makes it clear that by knowing that God hears one's request, he knows that the request has been answered. Again the stress is upon the assurance of knowledge.

The first phrase καὶ ἔάν οἶδαμεν is a condition with the perfect active indicative οἶδαμεν assumed as being true.² This condition "assumes the reality of the condition."³ It is an assumed fact; the believer can assume that "if" God hears his request, He will answer. The confidence of the believer in his prayer is the use of οἶδαμεν again. The believer "knows" that his prayers are answered as well as knowing that God hears him.

The verse concludes that the believer knows that "we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Note the emphasis in the verbs. First the believer is said to have, ἔχομεν, which is present tense. The believer receives his request immediately. Plummer suggests that "our petitions are granted at once: the results of the granting are perceived in the future."⁴ Second the believer has what he has asked from God. The verb ᾠτήκαμεν is in the perfect tense which signifies that the action has been completed;

¹Stott, The Epistles of John, p. 186.

²Robertson, Word Pictures, 6:243.

³Robertson and Davis, Short Grammar, p. 350.

⁴Plummer, The Epistles of St. John, p. 121.

it views the action as a finished product with present results.¹ The prayer of the believer is considered past and the results from it are in existence.

The child of God does indeed have confidence before God. Knowing that he has eternal life gives him comfort and confidence before God. One primary area of confidence is in his prayer life. He can be confident that in whatever he asks that is according to the standard of God's will, he knows that God hears. Since God hears him, he has the confidence that he has the answer to his request.

From this passage, the reader should clearly see that God's will is the determining factor in prayer. Prayer is not a "convenient device for imposing our will upon God or bending His will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to His. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it."²

This promise concerning prayer should be a motivation for the believer to seek God's will in prayer. He is never told not to ask for the desires of his heart or that he must pray only what God wills. He is assured that he has confidence before God in whatever he asks that aligns his will with God's, and that God will hear and answer.

Summary of Passages Studied

Prayer, according to these passages, is not a means whereby the believer changes God's will. It is a means that

¹Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar, p. 200.

²Stott, The Epistles of John, p. 185.

brings the believer into submission to God's will.

From Matthew 6:8-10, it was observed that prayer is not for the purpose of informing God of one's needs or situation because God already knows one's prayer before he even asks. God is not concerned about the length of the prayer or the words that are used but about the content that is in it. Jesus gives a model or pattern prayer in which He emphasizes the content of prayer. First, it must be an acknowledgment of God for who He is. Second, prayer should be an expression of the believer to glorify the name of the Lord. It is also to be a personal submission to and dependence upon the will of God. Lastly, prayer includes the needs of the believer. Note that in spite of the acknowledgment and submission to God's will, the believer is to pray for the physical and spiritual needs of himself and others. Prayer is both an expression of the heart as well as submission to the will of God.

Most Christians see James 5:16 as a support to the "effective prayer" of a godly man, that all his prayers "accomplish much." Based upon the previous study, the reader should remember that the prayer of a righteous man has power to do many things only "when it is made effective." The underlying and implied condition is that God is the One who makes the prayers effective, not the one who prays. The righteous man, like Elijah (v. 17, 18) is one who is obedient to God's commands. The reason that Elijah's prayer was able to stop and start the rain was because he was praying what God had

commanded him to do (according to God's will). James did not say that all prayers are made effective but that the prayers have the power (ability) to do much when they are made effective by God.

All believers have confidence before God simply because they know that they are born of God, that they have eternal life. This knowledge, as seen in 1 John 3:22, gives confidence to one's prayer life. The reason he will receive answers is conditioned upon the fact that he is obedient to God's commandments and that he does things that please Him. He does not receive answers to his prayers as a meritorious reward, but because his heart is desiring those things that honor and please God.

The basis for answers to prayer is the will of God. The believer has the promise found in 1 John 5:14, 15 that whatever he asks that is according to God's will, he can be assured that God hears and answers. This verse does not instruct the believer to find God's will and then pray for it. The believer is to ask for the desires of his heart, knowing that God listens favorably to his prayer and then to submit his will to God's. Thus the believer can have the confidence that God will accomplish His perfect will for his life.

Understanding the Antinomy from Harmonizing the Doctrine of Prayer and God's Sovereignty

As the reader will remember, all believers are commanded to pray; it is a responsibility before God. To

neglect prayer is to be disobedient to God's command and is therefore sin. Prayer is also a privilege; the believer can come at any time under any circumstance into the presence of God. It is through prayer that the believer expresses his heart to God, not to inform God, as if God were ignorant of one's needs or circumstances. It is a true means by which the believer can express himself before his heavenly Father with full confidence that He is personally concerned with his life. Prayer is an expression of the believer's deepest concerns, no matter how small or how large, with an infinite and loving God who has all the ability, wisdom and power to answer that prayer.

Knowing that God is sovereign should not hinder one from praying for the desires of one's heart. God continually opens His arms to His children because He is love. Matthew 7:9-11 teaches how an earthly father would not give something bad to his son and how much more the heavenly Father would only give good gifts to His children.¹ Prayer is not begging an unwilling God to bless His children, but a willing God. If believers could know how much their heavenly Father desires only what is for their good and His glory, they would readily submit themselves to His will. God simply desires the believer to come to Him and ask. God's sovereignty should only encourage one to pray, knowing that God has all the power to answer.

¹See Romans 8:31-39; James 1:17.

In addition, God's sovereignty is not moved by human prayers, that are not according to his will. Prayer does not in any way alter the plan of God. It does not manipulate God. R. C. Sproul shares how Christians think that God is manipulated by their prayers:

I sometimes hear Christians saying, 'If you pray like this or that or if you claim this or that, God is obligated to answer your prayer.' I hear them say, 'If I claim the answer to my prayer before I have any evidence that God is pleased to give it to me (I am not talking about an explicit promise in God's Word), God will do it.' I see them stand up before others in the church and say, 'I know that God is going to do such and such for me,' and it sounds like an exercise in faith. Moreover, it sounds as if (now that they have said it publicly), if God does not do it, He is going to get a bad reputation. But God does not have to do that.¹

Prayer does not twist God's arm into answering. The length of the time one prays or the number of believers praying does not manipulate God. Many times there seems to be conflict between the believer's will and God's will. It would be absurd to think that man's will would prevail.

What then is the relationship between prayer and God's sovereignty? If God has decreed all events and nothing can surprise Him, it means that He has decreed how His ends will be achieved. In other words, God has not only decreed the end, but He has also decreed the means by which that end will come about. If prayer has been commanded by God, and He answers prayers according to His will, then prayer has been decreed. Prayer is one of the means whereby God accomplishes His end; God has predestined to accomplish His will through

¹Robert C. Sproul, "Does Prayer Change Things?" Tenth: An Evangelical Quarterly (July 1976): 54-55.

prayers of His people.

For example, if God has decreed in His plan that a believer would receive money through prayer in order to purchase a transportation vehicle, then that believer would have to pray in order to receive it. If God had decreed that a believer's relative would be open to the Gospel through his prayers, then it could only happen if the believer prays. In other words, prayer is "a divinely-appointed means whereby we may obtain from God the things we ask, provided that we ask for those things which are in accord with His will."¹

If the believer prays for something that God has decreed that he would receive in answer to prayer, he has prayed "according to His will," and therefore will receive the answer to his prayer. Since the believer does not know what or when God has decreed that he would receive in answer to prayer, he must continue to pray. In fact, he is commanded to pray.

Yet prayer is not the only means by which God accomplishes His will. If He wants something done in which prayer is not the means, then He will accomplish it without the prayers of anyone. In other words, not all prayers accomplish His will; only those that are decreed are effective.

How then should the believer pray knowing these implications? The believer needs to acknowledge his dependence upon God in all things. He should express the

¹Pink, The Sovereignty of God, p. 122.

desires and needs that are on his heart with comfort and confidence that God hears and is concerned about every detail of one's life. Realizing that God is sovereign, that He has the right to do as He pleases, one needs to submit his will totally to the Lord. He needs to trust God for the results with full knowledge that God's will is perfect and good.

Prayer is coming to God, telling Him my need, committing my way unto the Lord, leaving Him to deal with it as seemeth Him best. This makes my will subject to His, instead of . . . seeking to bring His will into subjection to mine.¹

Understanding the Antinomy

Through Basic Questions

Does Prayer Change Things Or God?

Humanly speaking, prayer does change things. If nothing else, prayer changes the believer. Anyone who spends time in the presence of God in communion with Him will be changed. Through prayer the believer brings his mind and heart into submission to God. It has been described as "a vehicle of progressive sanctification."²

Prayer, in itself, does not change things such as circumstances or people; all things are within God's control. Prayer is never intended to produce a change in God. It does not change His will or plan. "He cannot be manipulated by incantations, repetition, public utterances, or your own

¹Ibid., p. 118.

²John D. Hannah, "Prayer and the Sovereignty of God." Bibliotheca Sacra 136:544 (Oct-Dec 1979): 352.

predictions. God is sovereign."¹ Does prayer influence God? If by "influence" one means coercion, then the answer is "no." However, in a sense it does "influence" Him in that He responds to prayers that are according to His will (1 John 5:14, 15). E. M. Bounds in his popular book, The Possibilities of Prayer, incorrectly states that "prayer can lay its hand upon Almighty God and moves Him to do great and wonderful things."² Prayer does not "lay its hand upon Almighty God." This idea gives the impression that prayer somehow has a control over God and that it "moves" Him to do things that He would not otherwise do. Prayer does not physically control or move God. "Prayer then functions as a moral not a physical stimulus to God; it is limited by the will of God, which always takes precedence over the will of His creatures."³

Is There Power in Prayer?

Prayer, in itself, has no power. It is a divinely-commanded means whereby the believer expresses his dependence upon God for all his needs and desires. It is also a divinely-ordained means whereby God accomplishes His will in His people and upon the earth. God is the One who makes the prayer powerful. The prayer itself has no inherent power.

R. A. Torrey incorrectly concludes that

¹Sproul, "Does Prayer Change Things?", p. 55.

²E. M. Bounds, The Possibilities of Prayer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 41.

³Hannah, "Prayer and the Sovereignty of God," p. 348.

Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power. All that God is, and all that God has, is at the disposal of prayer. But we must use the key. Prayer can do anything that God can do and as God can do anything, prayer is omnipotent.¹

God's "infinite grace and power . . . is at the disposal of prayer" only when that prayer is in accordance with His will and is made effective by Him. It is incorrect to say that "prayer can do anything God can do," and that prayer is omnipotent. This would make prayer equal to God. Prayer can only do those things that God has planned.

What About All Those Verses That Promise Answers to Prayer?

Many Christians believe that the New Testament promises answers to all prayers. They feel that verses such as John 14:14 apply: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it."² In order to apply these types of verses correctly, they must be interpreted correctly. In context many of these verses are disciple-directed promises and commands. They are specifically addressed to the apostles and not to believers today. Therefore, it would be hermeneutically incorrect to apply these promises of prayer for the disciples to the believer today.

Burkholder, in his post-graduate seminar paper, makes it clear that

¹R. A. Torrey, The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), p. 17.

²See also Matthew 7:7, 8; John 15:7, 16; 16:23, 24.

The apostles had a unique function of foundation laying, accompanied by special power and authority (as manifested in their authenticating signs), and if Christ's time with them involved personalized instruction with a view towards their future ministry, then it logically follows that He taught them certain things, promised them certain things that had direct bearing in their ministry.¹

In other words, these commands and promises should not be applied without discretion and consideration of their contexts.

There are, however, commands and promises that can be applied to believers today as the reader has seen in this chapter. The Scripture does not contain any open-ended promises to answered prayers for believers. By studying all the passages on prayer that do apply to believers today, it is clear that all prayers are limited by the will of God.

¹Jared T. Burkholder, "Are the Disciple-Directed Commands and Promises for Today?" Post-graduate seminar paper, Grace Theological Seminary, 1973, pp. 13-14. Burkholder has excellently handled this issue hermeneutically.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Scripture clearly presents prayer as a vital essential in the believer's life. Prayer is both a privilege and a responsibility. It is a privilege because one has direct access into the presence of God through the ministry of Christ. Yet at the same time it is a responsibility given by God; He has commanded believers to pray.

The believer comes to God in prayer because he realizes that he is totally dependent upon Him for his needs and situation; he knows that God has the ability, power, and resources to fulfill his request. In other words, prayer is an attitude of total dependency and submission to God's will.

Scripture also presents the God of all creation as sovereign. He has the prerogative to do as He pleases when He pleases, and what He pleases, simply because He is God. God is totally in control of all things. He exercises His sovereignty through His decree for His entire creation. Since He has decreed all things, there is nothing that can surprise Him and nothing that can hinder Him from accomplishing His plan. In addition, every detail is included in His plan; in other words, He has not only determined the ends but also the means or steps to those ends.

When both the doctrines of prayer and God's sovereignty are placed side by side, an antinomy exists. There is a seeming contradiction between the two: if God is sovereign and has planned all things and will carry out His plans, why should the believer pray for anything? Will not God accomplish His will whether one prays or not?

As the reader has seen, the antinomy will always exist in the minds of God's finite creatures. Yet the believer needs to learn to accept it for what it is and to learn to live by faith realizing that these two truths do exist in reality, both in harmony with each other. The understanding of this antinomy does not come by the exclusiveness or exclusion of one of these two truths. Both must be upheld equally in order to better understand the antinomy.

What then is the purpose of prayer for the believer in light of God's sovereignty? Prayer is a divinely-commanded means whereby the believer can express his heart-felt needs and desires to God. It is an attitude (as well as an act) of dependency upon and submission to the sovereign God. It is through prayer that the believer develops and deepens his trust in God.

Prayer is also a divinely-ordained means whereby God accomplishes His will in the lives of believers and on the earth. Through prayer one makes himself an instrument of God's will. It is one of the means which God has appointed through which believers will receive blessings.

God's sovereignty does not contradict the prayers

of believers; it should only be an assurance to them. It should assure them that God has at His disposal all the power to fulfill any requests. It should also assure the believer that God will carry out His perfect, all-wise and loving plan in which he has a vital part. The child of God can be assured that no matter what the results will be (answered or unanswered prayer), God's will is the best even though it may not appear that way.

The pull of our prayer may not move the everlasting throne, but, like the pull on a line from the bow of a boat, it may draw us into fuller harmony with His holy will in the harbor of rest.

--Anonymous

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