

## Lesson 7

### God's Sovereignty and Christian Prayer

#### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The doctrine of prayer is not free from theological problems. The issue is how can an absolutely sovereign God, with a perfect plan, be moved by the prayers of men? Or how can the prayers of men affect God who has an unchanging plan?
- B. This is the problem of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility (free will). God is one hundred percent sovereign and man is one hundred percent responsible. This is a mystery, an antinomy, a paradox. The human mind will never be able to solve it completely this side of glory. We are to accept both as true because the Bible teaches both.
  1. Sovereignty: The most casual reader of Scripture can see that it teaches that God has all things under control (Dan. 4:35; 1 Sam. 2:6-8). The Westminster Confession of Faith says,

God, from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

2. Responsibility: It is obvious that man has the responsibility to pray consistently and diligently (1 Thes. 5:17; Luke 18:1; James 5:15-16).  
NOTE: When we pray, things happen. When we do not pray, God does not work. Our responsibility is to pray and attempt, with our finite minds, to understand the infinite workings of a sovereign God.
- C. It is a tragedy that today man's responsibility is preached (faith, conditions, perseverance, etc.) to the exclusion of God's purpose, which has brought much confusion into the minds of God's children. The tendency is to exalt man and degrade God, so that His claims, His rights, His glory are discarded.

#### II. WRONG CONCEPTS ABOUT PRAYER

- A. Introduction: It is a common saying today that "prayer changes things." The shallow thinker never gives much contemplation to this saying, but what does prayer change? Does it change God, His plan, His will?
- B. That Prayer Changes the Purpose of God: To pray, some say, changes the mind and plan of God. But, to affirm that God will not and cannot bring to pass His eternal purpose unless we pray is utterly erroneous. God's plan is in no way conditioned on man's efforts. ANSWER: Prayer does not change the purpose of God but it does bring the purpose of God into the subjective experience of the Christian. God will become more real to the believer and His promises more precious. God does not change His secret plan, but it appears to us that He does and as far as we are concerned our prayers move God to do His sovereign will.

Through prayer, the Christian enters into the plan of God for him. NOTE: 2 Kings 20:1-6, Jonah 3:4-10.

- C. That the Lack of Prayer Changes the Destiny of Men: To say that human destinies may be changed and molded by the will of man is rank infidelity. Human destiny is settled in God's purposes and man's response to the gospel, not because men have failed to pray per se. ANSWER: Prayer is essential in the salvation of all who believe in Christ and without prayer no one will ever be saved. However, there are many who have been prayed for who have never trusted in Christ.
- D. That Prayer Can Change the Policy of God: Believing numerous prayers can somehow change God in His providential dealings with men is really folly. ANSWER: This refutes again that God has a purpose (Eph. 3:11, 1:11). It also makes the will of the creature greater than the will of the Creator. If our prayers shape God's policy, then is the Most High subordinate to worms of the earth.

### III. RIGHT CONCEPTS OF PRAYER

- A. Prayer Is Acknowledging God's Sovereignty: When a person prays for another, he is acknowledging that God is sovereign over the wills and affairs of men. Prayer is asking God to do something for the one being prayed for. If a Christian has ever asked God to save another person, he is acknowledging the sovereignty of God in salvation. If a person thought that the unsaved brought themselves to salvation, he would never pray because God could do nothing. On our knees all Christians believe that God saves; on our feet we may have arguments as to how God saves, for most people have a better practice than their theology.

There is a second way in which you acknowledge that God is sovereign in salvation. You pray for the conversion of others. In what terms, now, do you intercede for them? Do you limit yourself to asking that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves, independently of Him? I do not think you do. I think that what you do is to pray in categorical terms that God will, quite simply and decisively, save them: that He will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Savior. You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation. You would not dream of making it a point in your prayer that you are not asking God actually to bring them to faith, because you recognize that that is something He cannot do. Nothing of the sort! When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith. You entreat Him to do that very thing, and your confidence in asking rests upon the certainty that He is able to do what you ask. (J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*).

NOTE: Also thank God for salvation. Why? Because God did it.

- B. Prayer Is a Means to an End: God has planned that certain events shall come to pass, but He has also decreed that these events shall come to pass through the means He has appointed for their accomplishment. God knows those who shall be saved, because of His purpose, but He has said that they shall only be saved by the preaching of the gospel and prayer. Prayer is a means for carrying out the eternal purpose of God. POINT: Our job is to pray and God will answer these prayers as He sees fit.

1. Elijah knew that God was about to give rain, but that did not prevent him from praying about it (James 5:17-18; cf. 1 Kings 18:1, 2, 42-46).
2. Daniel realized in his study of the Word that the seventy years of captivity was about to end, but this stimulated him to prayer (Dan. 9:2-3).
3. Jesus Christ knew after his death and resurrection that he would share once again the glory of the Father, but he still prayed about it (John 17:5). Christ also knew that none of his people would ever perish (John 6:37); yet he pleaded with the Father to “keep” them (John 17:11).

Here then is the design of prayer: not that God’s will may be altered, but that it may be accomplished in His own good time and way. It is because God has promised certain things, that we can ask for them with the full assurance of faith. It is God’s purpose that His will shall be brought about by His own appointed means, and that He may do His people good upon His own terms, and that is, by the “means” and “terms” of entreaty and supplication. (A.W. Pink, The Sovereignty of God).

4. Our prayers are the means God has set down to bring about His own sovereign plan. Without prayer, nothing happens spiritually; with prayer, things happen. There is a mystery and we will never grasp it completely. Because faith is a means, Christians can “make it happen” as well as “let it happen.” The “make it happen” must always be controlled by the sovereignty of God.

- C. Prayer Makes God’s Plan Real to the Christian: Prayer does not change God’s plan but it does change the believer’s relationship and attitude to the plan of God. It brings God’s purposes into the experience of the Christian.

We, of course, clearly understand that prayer does not change God’s purposes and plans; it but releases them and permits God to do in, for, and through us all that which His infinite love and wisdom want to do, but which because of lack of prayer he has not been able to do. (William Evans, Why Pray?)

- D. Prayer Is Submitting to God’s Will: Some, when they pray, demand that God answer the prayer the way they want it answered. This attitude in prayer reduces God to a servant of man. Prayer is asking God to meet our needs or requests, and humbly leaving them with Him to answer as He sees fit. It is learning to say, “Not my will but Thine.” Real prayer produces a spirit of dependence upon God. NOTE: Prayer is the way and means God has appointed to bless His people. For though He has purposed, provided, and promised them, yet He will be sought unto to give them, and it is a duty and privilege to ask.
- E. Prayer Is Asking According to God’s Will: The real confidence that the Christian has is that if he asks anything according to God’s will it shall be answered (1 John 5:14-15). It becomes very exciting to learn to pray according to God’s will. NOTE: Every real prayer of faith that has ever been offered to God has been answered! Prayer is asking God and expecting Him to answer.

There are only three answers to prayer—yes, no, and wait awhile. God answers prayer according to what He thinks is best for His children, and sometimes that answer will be just the opposite of what is prayed. NOTE: Praying according to God's will, one begins to anticipate the workings of God.

IV. WHAT CAN THE CHRISTIAN PRAY FOR?

- A. For the unsaved (Rom. 10:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-4).
- B. For governmental rulers (1 Tim. 2:1-2).
- C. For the furtherance of the gospel (2 Thes. 3:1; Col. 4:3; Eph. 6:19).
- D. For all believers under Satanic attack (Eph. 6:18).
- E. For believers to speak the gospel boldly (Eph. 6:19-20).
- F. For deliverance from opposition because of preaching the gospel (2 Thes. 3:2).
- G. For the saints to stand boldly for Christ and His Word (Heb. 13:18; 1 Thes. 3:10; Eph. 6:18; 2 Cor. 13:7; Rom. 15:30).
- H. For God to send out laborers (Matt. 9:38).
- I. For the spiritual growth of Christians (Paul's prayers).
- J. POINTS TO PONDER:
  - 1. Most prayers in the New Testament are for believers to preach the gospel with conviction and boldness. We are told only in a few places to pray for the unsaved. Prayer is the best preparation for evangelism.
  - 2. In the Book of Acts, the evangelistic book of the New Testament, there is not one recorded prayer for the unsaved, nor are Christians exhorted to pray for the unsaved. The prayers in Acts are almost always for believers to be strengthened for witnessing (Acts 1:14; 2:46-47; 4:31; 6:4; 9:11; 12:2-3; 16:25).

V. CONCLUSION

- A. To neglect God's sovereignty in prayer will bring great confusion into the minds of God's people.
- B. Nothing can be accomplished without prayer. Yet prayer is a divinely appointed means whereby we may obtain from God the things we ask, providing we ask for those things which are in accord with His will. Get excited about prayer! Anticipate God's answer as He fulfills His plan.