

Prayer and Praise #01: Sovereignty and Prayer

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I want to deal with a subject, in fact one of the sisters in the church raised the question this morning and I said, "That's the very subject I am going to be dealing with at the Sunday School hour and that is the question that if we, as reformed Christians, Presbyterian or Baptist or whatever, but you have, believe in the sovereignty of God. Let's say we believe in a predestinated plan that it is all going to work out the way God said it would, then why bother with prayer?"

That is basically the reason I wrote that little book for what it is worth, if God already knows what I pray, because in my...especially after I first went to the seminary I was going around as I do now just speaking a lot of places and in the south and in the country and in Great Britain. And one question that would continue to be raised to me in the places where I was speaking, especially when it was a bunch of Presbyterians was some form of the question.

But we thought God was being charged, "Who do you think you are telling us to pray like this? What difference does it make?"

And seminary students and you believe that these holy students planning for the ministry often want to come and say, "I don't understand. If the Lord has been charged...this emphasis on praying."

And I have gathered sometimes that maybe the ...it may be just an intellectual misunderstanding. That is possible. It may be the old fallen flesh that we all have to do battle with. And I fight it every day. For whatever reason I believe many of our people and I mean real Christians, I am not talking about hypocrites or terrible persons, but I mean real Christians I think use predestination as an excuse to keep from doing what God told them to do.

Now I wouldn't say a thing like that if I hadn't been around as much as I have and talked to as many people as I have. But let's look at this matter a little bit this morning.

It is a matter of no small importance as far as when you...the rubber hits the road as we say, whether or not we are going to take hold of the triune God and do what he says, trust him and pray.

If the evil one can get us to unbalance a doctrine he wins. He can get you so far in one direction that you lose the biblical balance and don't do what God said to do or he can get

you so far in another direction you lose the biblical balance and lose faith and cave in. But all will be well if you will stay in the biblical balance.

So how do these things fit together: the sovereignty of God and a prayer? And I don't know another place that would be any better to look at than Matthew six. Turn up there. We are going to look at the Lord's Prayer. I am not going to expound the Lord's Prayer, but I do that in the book to some degree. But I'm just wanting to talk about one aspect of it and that's all.

Matthew six. And I don't think I'll read the instructions ahead of the Lord's Prayer that don't be vain, don't be hypocritical and fancy not heard for much speaking. The Lord knows the position...verse nine. "After this manner therefore pray ye."¹ These are the words of Jesus.

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.²

And I particularly want to focus on the words that Jesus said. Tonight I am going to talk about the first words in the prayer, "Hallowed be thy name."³ But I am not going to talk about that now.

But I want to talk about the second thing he tells us to ask. It says in the Shorter Catechism, "The second petition" and that is Jesus said when you come and talk to your heavenly Father you start out by thinking that his name be praised and, as I say, we will deal with that this evening. But then the next thing is tell the Lord, "Father, above everything else, I want your will to be done."⁴ And then you go on and you deal with all the personal things you want to, every area of your life, the forgiveness of your sins, the provision of your financial, personal needs and victory from the powers of evil and so forth.

But Jesus says that one of the ways the final, glorious, triumphant, beautiful, all encompassing will of God is going to be accomplished in our generation and then finally at the end of the age, one of the ways that the will of God is going to come down from where it is, you can look round in heaven the saints that are up there now and see God's will fully accomplished visibly. But we don't see it fully accomplished visible down here yet. But one of the ways we see it more accomplished and heaven becoming more like earth in our generation is by asking God, pleading with God, "Lord, get your will done here and now."

¹ Matthew 6:9

² Matthew 6:9-13

³ Matthew 6:9

⁴ See Matthew 6:10

And that makes the difference. That, I think, is the key. Two things, two truths you have got to hold together from what Jesus said. You see if you think this is right.

That God has a will is the first point. And the second point is our pleading for him to have accomplished that will is one of the means he uses to carry it through. Let's look at the first point that God has a definite will. In other words, a way to put it is God has a definite plan.

In Ephesians 1:11 the second part of verse 11 it says that God works all things after the counsel of his will.⁵ That means God's will or God's plan encompasses everything that can possibly happen from the beginning to the end. Every drop of rain, as Calvin said, every puff of wind, the fall of every sparrow, the numbers of hair or lack of it on every head. And every...the rise and the fall of every kingdom, the election or the discomfiture of every politician, the birth of every baby, the death of every person is all some way or other encompassed in the will of God because as Ephesians 1:11 he works not many things after his will. Interestingly it doesn't say he works good things after his will, although that is true. He works all things—and that includes the bad—according to his will.

That is why we can so triumphantly say with the apostle Paul in Romans 8:28 and 29 and 30, along there, that triumphant chapter. "For we know that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord, to them that are called according to his purpose."⁶

I remember many years ago on a...the...at least 25 year ago and the conservative religious journal that was then popular somebody—and they had ought to have known better—they published a sermon by a minister on Romans 8:28. And he said that when it says that God causes all things to work together for good he said, "Now the only thing that can mean is God causes good things to work for the good. But God hasn't got one thing to do with the bad things."

But that is not what the text says. It doesn't say he works good things after his will. Do you know if it did wouldn't it be an awful world to live in? Look at how much evil there is. Look at even the machinations of Satan. The worst thing Satan could ever do was to kill the Son of God according to the flesh. That's the worst thing he ever could do and God was working even in that. By the determinate foreknowledge and counsel of God he delivered up Jesus whom ye by wicked hands took and slew, the prince of life.⁷ And through the work that evil could ever do, the killing of Jesus, is no more higher...no higher point than evil reached than smashing the one who said, "I am the light." And it said, "Put it out. Put it out." It hurt to put it out and that is the highest point evil ever reached.

⁵ See Ephesians 1:11

⁶ See Romans 8:28

⁷ See Acts 2:23

What came out of it? The salvation of the world, the purchase of the Church, the cleansing of the elect, the renewal of the entire universe. The worst was so encompassed in the counsel of God that the best and the greatest and the highest came out of it.

God has a plan, beloved people. There is no doubt about that.

I put it this way. I don't think I need to insist on this too much. I imagine that the majority of you have understood this from early childhood as I was taught. But the building we are in there was a blue print or it wouldn't have held up this long.

I was visiting [?] house yesterday, one of you very kindly took me to go see it, but some say it was built in 1636 and some are claiming it wasn't until 1680. I don't know, but certainly the...somewhere in the 1600s it was built and it has withstood every hurricane and it is still there. It must have had a pretty good blue print when they constructed that brick [?] house in the early years of the Virginia colony. And it is still there. I am glad it is.

Well, you drove here in a car this morning. Now Henry Ford and the people that developed the combustion engine had a blue print. They had a plan for the pistons and the rods and the thing to be turned in reciprocal motion with the wheels and all that that I am not a mechanic. I don't understand how it all works. I can change a tire and put in oil, but not a whole lot beyond that. But there is a plan or your car wouldn't have got you here.

Anybody with a good sense knows this is a watch. There was a watch maker. And all of the atheistic philosophers cannot remove the common sense of human kind that we look at this amazing, marvellous, complex and yet harmonious creation with the rotation of the planets and the day and the night and the regularity of the seasons and how it is just right for the human race to exist on this earth and...and the whole thing someway is hanging together. You don't think that if a car requires a plan, if this building requires a plan, if a rabbit box requires a plan, you don't think something as complex and as stupendous as the cosmos, as the universe is going to be here without a plan, do you? And it is still working. I hate to distress the atheist, but unfortunately for them this world points as it says in Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day, night unto night uttereth speech."⁸

Paul said in Romans one God is known.⁹ The invisible God, yes, we don't see him. You might say, "I don't see God with my eye this morning. You are talking things I can't see."

Yes, but you can know him in some sense the reality of God through the visible that you behold. And it teaches us. Any good sense—unless you just fight day and night to go against the sense God gave you—any good sense says there is a God and he has a remarkable plan.

⁸ See Psalm 19:1-2

⁹ See Romans 1:19

So nature instructs us, unless we totally hold it down, it tends to make us [?] according to Romans 1:18 we tend to suppress the natural knowledge we have and we have got to have some other help so we have got the Bible. And it tells us even more.

John Calvin said, “The Bible like a pair of spectacles of old and bleary eyed men like me can put on and see further away.” And the Bible teaches us that God has a plan. And the book of Revelation is the last chapter of it. It is already written.

A book came out two years ago. I was asked by one of the religious periodicals in this country to review it and there was four of us reviewed it. I don't even want to give you the title of it it was so bad. But anyway this particular book, which I shall refrain from naming you the title of it—said for the human personality...and they go the opposite direction of a few Presbyterians. They go the other extreme. They say the human personality if you have any significant, God couldn't know the future. And it said but we haven't got any doubt that God hopes for the best. That he doesn't know how it is going to turn out.

I felt, “Mmm.” It made...I had to restrain myself and be very polite while using, I hope the Lord's weapon against such teaching, attack the error without in any sense attacking the person. That is not always the easiest thing to do, is it? But we have to seek to carry on the Lord's battle in the Lord's Spirit.

Well, anybody knows that can't be right if the Bible is true, that God doesn't know it. It says, “Known unto the Lord from the beginning are all his works.”¹⁰ And he has a plan and the book of Revelation says this is how it all ends. The triumph of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, the marriage supper of the Lamb, and here comes the bride, this blood washed, beautiful church. All of history ministered to the preparation for the bride and now she is presented to the heavenly bridegroom and we go into the far reaches of the never ending vistas of the glory of eternity just as God said.

But that is one truth and I hope you will understand that I in no sense, in no way for a split second would ever wish to underemphasize the biblical teaching that our God reigns, that he has predestinated purposes which even now are being worked out though most of them worked out in a way that we do not yet discern them. And God is going to win and there is not the slightest doubt he is in charge.

However on the...at the same time the second point I want to make is this. In his plans he constructed the world in such a way that he put in it persons, men and women who are created in his image, who have a mind, who have a spirit. You are a spiritual being. The devil doesn't want you to know that, young people. He wants you to think, “I'm a just a blob, a body. And it doesn't matter all that much what I do with my body. It's mine.”

But you are more than a body. You are an embodied spirit. You are an immortal spirit. You will always be somewhere. And you are in God's image.

¹⁰ See Acts 15:18

One of the things about that is that you therefore have a personality and you can deal with God. That is what prayer is all about, a relationship with God, talking to God, person to person. You are a created person you are true. You are limited person. And God is an infinite person and I uncreated. So because we be both are...have...we both are spirits, we both are genuinely personal. He is the original and I am the...a poor copy, I guess and...because of my sin, but...I would be a good copy if it wasn't for that. But God has made the world and put us in it. And he set it up that one of the major ways he would carry out this predestinated plan is by our getting concerned that his will be done, as Jesus said, by our getting under a burden and then taking hold of the promise of his Word and said, "Lord, do what you said you would do to get your will done here." And that the prayers of the saints to one of the major means God hath set up to accomplish this plan. They are not contradictory, they are complementary.

You might say, "Couldn't God do without prayer?"

That is the wrong question. Don't ask what God could do? You don't know. That is none of your business. None of my business.

It's not what God might could have done, it is how he chose to do it. He chose that he will not bless his church except through prayer. Does that mean it is indefinite how it is going to turn out? No. You have got the book of Revelation. It is definite. But it is definitely going to happen because the saints will get under the burden and they will go to praying.

They used old fashioned English and if they don't pray they won't see his will accomplished in their corner as they could have seen it if they did pray. And that doesn't men finally God's will won't be done because it will be. But we will miss out on the blessing.

There is no conflict here. One of the old Puritans used to say, "The praying of the saints is the beginning of the execution of the purposes of God."

But when you...if you could slip in a room where some saints, some sinners saved by grace—that's what they are—if praying, that is actually the beginning of the execution of the eternal predestinating purposes of God rolling in space and time as his people pray.

You might say, "Well, I believe it would be easier to do it another way."

You might think it would, but you are not smarter than God and I am not either. I don't try to be. This is how he does it. Amazing the fertility of the human mind to think of some other way God can do it, to keep myself, to get myself off the hook from praying or don't do that, please.

Jesus says, I mean, wouldn't it be useless...do you think Jesus taught us an empty liturgical form, that every time we pray near the beginning of the prayer we are supposed

to say and plead, “Oh, Father, thy will be done”? And that means it is going to make a difference. What do you really want for your children is the will of God isn’t it? You don’t know exactly whom they should marry. You might think you do and you might be right, maybe not. But you would say, any Christian parent would really say, “What I...if my children and I have a conflict.” I mean when they get old enough to make their own decisions, or mostly make their own decisions, but you have some say so when they are asking you for money. That’s fair enough. Wouldn’t you say real Christian parents what you truly want for your child is the will of God because you know that the will of God, the center of the will of God as Andrew Murray said, is always the center of the blessing of God. And don’t you want that for your husband?

You say, “I’d like to change my husband in a few ways, maybe not too many, but a few.” And possibly he would like to change you in a few ways, maybe. You may both be so far perfected beyond the rest of us that you don’t need that and if so you would be too humble to know it. That would be part of the deal. So I hope you are like that. I am not.

The beginning of the praying of the saints is the execution of the purposes of God. Jesus teaches that when he says, “If you pray, ‘thy will be done’ that is going to bring down to the streets the great things that God can accomplish out of evil and out of every good work.”

It is like this. It...I mean this seems stupendous to say it. This would seem irreverent to say it, but I am going to say it because it is the clear implication of the teaching of Scripture. Jesus is teaching, basically, that our prayers, when they are in accordance with his Word in the Spirit of God, that our prayers actually activate God’s eternal counsel. That’s amazing. Isn’t that something?

Now I just...I must not...Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphans. I will send you the Holy Spirit”¹¹ writing John 14, 15 and 16. You are in the vine. And Jesus said, “I am not going to leave you by yourself, beloved. I am sending you the Holy Spirit and he will make my personal presence known with you. He will even make the Father present with you.”

And part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is in prayer if we read in Romans eight. Sometimes we don’t know how to pray. Have you ever been like that? I would be surprised if you hadn’t. I have. How to begin. And it says the Holy Spirit maketh intercession for us and intercedes inside us with groanings too deep to be uttered and sometimes, “Oh, Lord,” and how you can’t even articulate it.¹²

And the Holy Spirit is doing it, activating the eternal counsel of God through you. So, you see, it is not like a humanist telling God what to do in the sense of independently. But the saints are in union with Christ and the Holy Spirit. He is leading them.

¹¹ See John 14:18

¹² See Romans 8:26

And the great southern Presbyterian preacher Benjamin Morgan Palmer of New Orleans in the last century originally from Charleston, South Carolina once said that what Romans eight means about the Holy Spirit helping the saints pray is that the Holy Spirit is like a mirror in the soul of the believer. And he is sort of like a mirror on a car, you know, that you can turn to get it just right. And the Holy Spirit turns the mirror of maybe the burdens and the concerns and the motivations of my life, he turns them up, up towards where they will catch the face of Christ interceding on the throne. And then the intercessions of Christ reflect in the mirror of my soul as the Holy Spirit is ministering in this way. And therefore the praying of the saints is a reflection of the intercessions of Christ. Isn't that wonderful?

You might say, "I don't know how it fits together. You say this is a predestinated plan and then I know psychologically sometimes I pray when I ought to and sometimes I don't when I ought to and how is this going to fit together? Doesn't it make God depend on me?"

No, it doesn't because one thing God can put you under a burden to pray. You could come...he would rather you come voluntarily.

I remember in one of my congregations many years ago...well, she would have been a young woman then, be about as old as I am now, but that stage and sort of worldly side, I reckon and got in...a very attractive woman and thoughtful and so forth, but not really much spiritual concern. And started having some health problems and had to go to the hospital. I went to see her.

She said to me, "Well, I am thinking that maybe he Lord has put me down flat to make me look up."

And I called her name. In fact, she is a very distant cousin that I could speak frankly to. I said, "I think that is exactly what he is doing. Let's look up together. Think about it. Talk to him. Pray some."

God can get us praying. Think of revival. History shows that revivals come after there has been a great deal of praying. Who gives the prayer? Holy Spirit tells us, helps us.

It might be that God has to let the national situation get so bad that we sometimes plead—excuse me for using language like this—but we sometimes thick headed Christians suddenly say, "Oh, oh, you know what? We need God. Oh, yes. I believe we could pray in Jesus' name and God might help. It is that bad."

Did you ever hear the story...got in a pretty bad storm in the North Atlantic and she was just most anxious and she sent...was in the first class section. She sent a word to the captain could she speak to him when he got a chance. And she was a very important person and he spoke to her in the state room and she said, "Captain, captain, this is so bad. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He said, "Well, you could pray."

She said, "Is it that bad?"

How about it? And say, "It might...it might be. I don't know what God is going to do in the land. He may have to do all kinds of things. Till we say, "Is it that bad? Maybe we better pray.

Or we could come gladly, voluntarily and say, "Lord we are here to make it known that we beg your will to be accomplished in this child's life, in this congregation." And be specific and...we are praying for somebody in Malawi, Korea. We are praying for our enemies. Do you pray for your enemies?

Every time you feel a hateful thought towards an enemy pray for them. It is amazing what it will do.

Thy will be done and God has set it up in such a way that if we pray and seek his face it is the activation of his eternal counsel.

Now let me give you an illustration or two before we close. I have a...my wife and I have friends from...that we were classmates with in University of Edinburgh several years ago. And this particular student you ought to have heard the broad Scottish accent he had from the borders of Scotland. He had the nerve to accuse me of having an accent. But I said, "You are the one that talks funny."

He said, "You are the one."

But anyway, he was a real Christian if he did talk a bit funny. And he was an effective ministry of a highland's congregation up in the northwest of Scotland for some years, had a lovely Christian wife and two or three little girls. And so they decided to have a missionary conference and so they had I think Overseas Missionary Fellowship or somebody send a person to speak in this Presbyterian Church there in the northwest of Scotland for a few days, present the cause of missions.

And it wasn't that the visiting missionary was so effective to affect my friend whose name was Willie Black. He wouldn't mind my telling it. But before the missionary even started preaching Willie was in the pulpit with him. And he said it was like this tremendous weight started coming down on his head. If he had been in South Carolina he would have said it was like a bale of cotton. I can't remember what expression he used. It was some great weight. I would say a bale of cotton starts coming down on your head in the pulpit, minding his own business.

And then I know this may shock some of you, but take it or leave it. I'm just telling you what he said. It felt like God was saying, this before the guy had even spoken, "Willie, you have got to go to Korea." Willie is not [?] anything but a five point conservative Calvinist, Presbyterian and so forth, nothing...any kind of unusual experiences he has

ever had. To this day as far as I know, but he felt God was communicating his Spirit. “You have got to go, boy, to Korea.” He didn’t know any Korean.

It took me a month to learn how to say thank you in Korean. And then there he was. I don’t know old he was. He was certainly in his 30s anyway. And God had...he felt it was God saying, “Go to Korea.”

Now the next thing, again, you might not like this but you argue with Willie, not me. They...he and his wife and little girls started then...at the end of the missionary conference they planned it, they were going to take a little vacation and another one of our classmates, who at that time was down at Glasgow. So they got on the train to go to Glasgow from up the country. And I am not arguing that this is a good way for you to get [?]. I wouldn’t say it was. But here is what he said to the Lord. “Lord, if it was really you, how do I know it was you telling me to go to Korea? If it was really you, I wish you would let the first person that meets me when I get off the train at the Queen Street Station in Glasgow say something about Korea.”

That is how he prayed. I am not justifying it or criticizing it.

Well, they got off the train and were met by our classmate who hadn’t known anything about all this and it is kind of a...this particular classmate is kind of a very fine person, but slightly impetuous at times and he just blurted out to us. He said, “Willie, have you ever thought about going to Korea?”

All this really happened.

Well, you can imagine where he went. He went to Korea. And worked very, very hard, he and his wife to learn Korean. He said they had to watch not to get jealous of each other who was learning the most. But some ways their marriage survived that. And about two years later after he had...they had got out there in Puson and my wife and I visited them one time. We were speaking in Korea and went to see them. About two years later the ministry that he felt God calling him into and that LMF was willing to subsidize him in was to help ministers in Korea learn, develop their skills in expository preaching and in explaining passages about...on biblical preaching. You know, you can preach and just take ideas or whatever you want to do from humanity and it may be interesting, but the real preaching is explaining God’s Word.

And so he was to be out there particularly to minister to preachers, how to explain God’s Word better, how to preach it better. I wish he would help me.

And after two years five—I believe it was five—Korean ministers, Presbyterian ministers—said, “We want to take you out to eat a meal.” So they took him to this very nice restaurant and said to him, “Willie, we wan to tell you something.” Two years ago at such and such a time—they told him exactly the time—the five of us met together and we started praying that God would bring somebody from Great Britain that would teach us how to expound the Bible better because we really felt we didn’t quite know how to

preach the Bible effectively. And the five of us got down on our knees and said, “Lord, send somebody from Britain to help us preach.”

Willie looked back in his personal diary, in his notes and he found that the day that the spiritual bale of cotton descended on his head in this church in the highlands you had five Presbyterian ministers in South Korea going to their knees praying for God to send somebody.

Do you think that is an accident? Of course not. It was in the eternal plan of God that Willie Black and his wife Katie should go to Scotland to Korea and they are still there and having a very, very effective ministry. I get their prayer letter.

But Willie wouldn't be impelled to go till those five men get under a burden and go to praying.

I will give you another little illustration to try to make it real to you. I remember I keep a diary and write in it every day and I have forgotten the...exactly when it was, but I could dig back and look it up. It was maybe in 1976 or seven or something like that when I was in the ministry. I got prayer requests from various missionary organizations and I still do. And I would give them to people in the prayer meetings at [?] in South Carolina on Wednesday nights. And one request I read out that came from one of these missionary organizations said, “Pray for the province of Fukeen on the coast of China,” and one of the things is to pray...and this is odd request, but I read it out. “Pray that the coastal defense of Fukeen Province will be confused.”

A strange thing for a missionary organization to ask. I believe it was World [?] True Faith. And I read out that request and we had a man who was retired head of the South Carolina National Guard, a general, a wonderful, humble Christian. And General Hinnegan took up that request that night and prayed that God would confuse the coastal defense system of Fukeen Province. That was on a Wednesday night. I believe it was the following Monday. And I saved the newspaper article. It was written in my diary so this is not some kind of preacher's story to make a point. This is true. On Monday in the South Carolina state paper about the third or fourth page—I didn't always have time to read the paper that closely, but on the Monday I did. I was taking the day off. I saw, “Fukeen Province.” I was amazed because it said that one of the air force pilots, one of the Chinese air force pilots in the coastal defense had left, flown out of Fukeen, had landed in I don't remember where it was Nagasaki or somewhere, sought political asylum among the Japanese and had taken a considerable amount of gold and also state secrets.

And the time he was leaving—and I figured it out—was the time that we were praying in the First Presbyterian Church of Dillon, South Carolina. And he made it.

The praying of the saints is the execution of the purposes of God.

Let me conclude with a little quotation from a great Baptist preacher last generation or really four generations ago I reckon, Charles H. Spurgeon of London. And this is what

Spurgeon says that I think ties it together wonderfully about the plan of God instead of discouraging our prayer, encouraging it. Listen to Spurgeon. "It is well said that asking is the rule of the kingdom. It is a rule that will never be altered in anybody's case. If the royal and divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that he may have, you and I cannot expect to have the rule relaxed in our favor. God will bless Elijah and send rain on Israel. But Elijah must pray for it. If the chosen nation is to prosper Samuel must plead for it. If the Jews are to be delivered Daniel must intercede. God will bless Paul and the nations shall be converted through him, but Paul must pray. Pray he did without ceasing. His epistles show that he expected nothing except by asking for it. We are told men ought always to pray and not to faint, pray without ceasing."

May God send us home not just with something we heard about, but with something we are going to do. It will make a difference. Amen.