

A.W. PINK'S
 THE
 SOVEREIGNTY
 OF GOD

CHAPTER NINE

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND PRAYER

"If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us" (1 John 5:14).

Throughout this book it has been our chief aim to exalt the Creator and abase the creature. The well-nigh universal tendency now, is to magnify man and dishonor and degrade God. On every hand it will be found that, when spiritual things are under discussion, the human side and element is pressed and stressed, and the Divine side, if not altogether ignored, is relegated to the background. This holds true of very much of the modern teaching about prayer. In the great majority of the books written and in the sermons preached upon prayer the human element fills the scene almost entirely: it is the conditions which we must meet, the promises we must "claim," the things we must do in order to get our requests granted; and *God's claims, God's rights, God's glory* are disregarded.

As a fair example of what is being given out today we subjoin a brief editorial which appeared recently in one of the leading religious weeklies entitled "Prayer, or Fate?"

"God in His Sovereignty has ordained that human destinies may be changed and molded by the will of man. This is at the heart of the truth that prayer changes things, meaning that God changes things when men pray. Someone has strikingly expressed it this way: 'There are certain things that will happen in a man's life whether he prays or not. There are other things that will happen if he prays; and will not happen if he does not pray.' A Christian worker was impressed by these sentences as he entered a business office and he prayed that the Lord would open the way to speak to some one about Christ, reflecting that things would be changed because he prayed. Then his mind turned to other things and the prayer was forgotten. The opportunity came to speak to the business man upon whom he was calling, but he did not grasp it, and was on his way out when he remembered his prayer of a half hour before, and God's answer. He promptly returned and had a talk with the business man, who, though a church-member, had never in his life been asked whether he was saved. Let us give ourselves to prayer, and open the way for God to change things. Let us beware lest we become virtual fatalists by failing to exercise our God-given wills in praying."

The above illustrates what is being taught on the subject of prayer, and the deplorable thing is that scarcely a voice is lifted in protest. To say that "human destinies *may be changed* and molded *by the will of man*" is rank infidelity—that is the only proper term for it. Should any one challenge this classification, we would ask them whether they can find an infidel anywhere who would dissent from such a statement, and we are confident that such an one could not be found. To say that "*God has ordained* that human destinies may be changed and molded by the will of man" is absolutely untrue. "Human destiny" is settled *not* by the will of man, but by the will of God. That which determines human destiny is whether or not a man has been born again, for it is written, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." And as to *whose* will, whether God's or man's, is responsible for the new birth is settled, unequivocally, by John 1:13—"Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, *nor of the will of man*, but OF GOD." To say that "human destiny" may be *changed by* the will of man is to make the creature's will *supreme*, and that is, virtually, to *dethrone* God. But what saith the Scriptures? Let the Book answer: "The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: *He* bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: *He* bringeth low, and lifteth up. *He* raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory" (1 Sam. 2:6-8).

Turning back to the Editorial here under review, we are next told, "This is at the heart of the truth that prayer changes things, meaning that God changes things when men pray." Almost everywhere we go today one comes across a motto-card bearing the inscription "Prayer Changes Things." As to what these words are designed to signify is evident from the current literature on prayer—we are to persuade God to *change* His purpose. Concerning this we shall have more to say below.

Again, the Editor tells us, "Some one has strikingly expressed it this way: 'There are certain things that will happen in a man's life whether he prays or not. There are other things that will happen if he prays, and will not happen if he does not pray.'" That things happen whether a man prays or not is exemplified daily in the lives of the unregenerate, most of whom never pray at all. That 'other things will happen if he prays' is in need of

qualification. If a believer prays in faith and asks for those things which are according to God's will he will most certainly obtain that for which he has asked. Again, that other things will happen if he prays is also true in respect to the subjective benefits derived from prayer: God will become more real to him and His promises more precious. That other things 'will not happen if he does not pray' is true so far as his own life is concerned—a prayerless life means a life lived out of communion with God and all that is involved by this. But to affirm that God will not and cannot bring to pass His eternal purpose unless we pray is utterly erroneous, for the same God who has decreed the end has also decreed that His end shall be reached through His appointed means, and One of these is prayer. The God who has determined to grant a blessing also gives a spirit of supplication which first seeks the blessing.

The example cited in the above Editorial of the Christian worker and the business man is a very unhappy one to say the least, for according to the terms of the illustration the Christian worker's prayer was not answered by God at all, inasmuch as, apparently, the way was not opened to speak to the business man about his soul. But on leaving the office and recalling his prayer the Christian worker (perhaps in the energy of the flesh) determined to answer the prayer *for himself*, and instead of leaving *the Lord* to "open the way" for him, took matters into his own hand.

We quote next from one of the latest books issued on Prayer. In it the author says, "The possibilities and necessity of prayer, its power and results, are manifested in arresting and *changing the purposes of God* and in relieving the stroke of His power." Such an assertion as this is a horrible reflection upon the character of the Most High God, who "doeth according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and *none can stay His hand*, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?" (Dan. 4: 35). There is *no need* whatever for God to change His designs or alter His purpose for the all-sufficient reason that these were framed under the influence of perfect goodness and unerring wisdom. *Men* may have occasion to alter *their* purposes, for in their short-sightedness they are frequently unable to anticipate what may arise *after* their plans are formed. But not so with God, for He knows the end from the beginning. To affirm God *changes* His purpose is either to impugn His goodness or to deny His eternal wisdom.

In the same book we are told, "The prayers of God's saints are the capital stock in Heaven by which Christ carries on His great work upon earth. The great throes and mighty convulsions on earth are the results of these prayers. Earth is changed, revolutionized, angels move on more powerful, more rapid wing, and *God's policy is shaped* as the prayers are more numerous, more efficient." If possible, this is even worse, and we have no hesitation in denominating it as blasphemy. In the first place, it flatly denies Ephesians 3:11 which speaks of God's having an "eternal purpose." If God's purpose is an eternal one then His "policy" is *not* being "shaped" today. In the second place, it contradicts Ephesians 1:11 which expressly declares that God "worketh *all* things after the counsel of *His own will*," therefore it follows that, "God's policy" is *not* being "shaped" by man's prayers. In the third place, such a statement as the above makes the will of the creature supreme, for if *our* prayers shape *God's* policy then is the Most High subordinate to worms of the earth. Well might the Holy Spirit ask through the Apostle, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? *or who hath been His counsellor?*" (Rom. 11:34).

Such thoughts on prayer as we have been citing are due to low and inadequate conceptions of God Himself. It ought to be apparent that there could be little or no comfort in praying to a God that was like the chameleon, which changes its color every day. What encouragement is there to lift up our hearts to One who is in one mind yesterday and another today? What would be the use of petitioning an earthly monarch if we knew he was so mutable as to grant a petition one day and deny it another? Is it not the *very unchangeableness* of God which is our greatest encouragement *to pray*? It is because He is "*without* variableness or shadow of turning" we are assured that if we ask anything according to His will we are most certain of being heard. Well did Luther remark, "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness."

And this leads us to offer a few remarks concerning the *design* of prayer. *Why* has God appointed that we should pray? The vast majority of people would reply, In order that we may obtain from God the things which we need. While this *is* one of the purposes of prayer it is by no means the chief one. Moreover, it considers prayer only from the *human* side, and prayer sadly needs to be viewed from the *Divine* side. Let us look, then, at some of the reasons why *God* has bidden us to pray.

First and foremost, prayer has been appointed that the Lord God Himself should be *honored*. God requires we should recognize that He is, indeed, "the *high and lofty* One that inhabiteth eternity" (Isa. 57:15). God requires that we shall own His *universal dominion*: in petitioning God for rain Elijah did but confess His control over the elements; in praying to God to deliver a poor sinner from the wrath to come we acknowledge that "salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:9); in supplicating His blessing on the Gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth we declare His rulership over the whole world.

Again; God requires that we shall *worship* Him, and prayer, real prayer, is an act of worship. Prayer is an act of worship inasmuch as it is the prostrating of the soul before Him; inasmuch as it is a calling upon His great and holy name; inasmuch as it is the owning of His goodness, His power, His immutability, His grace, and inasmuch as it is the recognition of His Sovereignty, owned by a submission to His will. It is highly significant to notice in this connection that the Temple wasn't termed by Christ the House of Sacrifice, but instead, the House of Prayer.

Again; prayer *redounds to God's glory*, for in prayer we do but acknowledge dependency upon Him. When we humbly supplicate the Divine Being we cast ourselves upon His power and mercy. In seeking blessings from God we own that He is the Author and Fountain of every good and perfect gift. That prayer brings glory to God is further seen from the fact that prayer calls faith into exercise, and nothing from us is so honoring and pleasing to Him as the confidence of our hearts.

In the second place, prayer is appointed by God *for our spiritual blessing*, as a means for *our growth in grace*. When seeking to learn the *design* of prayer, this should ever occupy us *before* we regard prayer as a means for obtaining the supply of our need. Prayer is designed by God for our *humbling*. Prayer, real prayer, is a coming into the Presence of God, and a sense of His awful majesty produces a realization of our nothingness and unworthiness. Again; prayer is designed by God for *the exercise of our faith*. Faith is begotten in the Word (Rom. 10:8), but it is exercised in prayer; hence, we read of "the prayer of faith." Again; prayer calls *love* into action. Concerning the hypocrite the question is asked, "Will he delight himself in the Almighty? Will he always call upon God?" (Job 27:10). But they that love the Lord cannot be long away from Him, for they *delight* in unburdening themselves to Him. Not only does prayer call love into action but through the direct answers vouchsafed to our prayers our love to God is increased-"I love the LORD, *because* He hath heard my voice and my supplications" (Psa. 116:1). Again; prayer is designed by God to teach us the *value* of the blessings we have sought from Him, and it causes us to rejoice the more when He *has* bestowed upon us that for which we supplicate Him.

Third, prayer is appointed by God for our seeking from Him the things which we are in need of. But here a difficulty may present itself to those who have read carefully the previous chapters of this book. If God has foreordained, before the foundation of the world, everything which happens in time, what is the use of prayer? If it is true that "of Him and through Him and to Him are *all things*" (Rom. 11:30), then why pray? Ere replying directly to these queries it should be pointed out how that there is just as much reason to ask, What is the use of me coming to God and telling Him what He already knows? Wherein is the use of me spreading before Him my need, seeing He is already acquainted with it? as there is to object, What is the use of praying for anything when everything has been ordained beforehand by God? Prayer is not for the purpose of informing God, as if He were ignorant (the Saviour expressly declared "for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him"-Matt. 6:8), but it is to acknowledge He *does* know what we are in need of. Prayer is not appointed for the furnishing of God with the knowledge of what we need, but is designed as a confession to Him of *our sense* of need. In this, as in everything, God's thoughts are not as ours. God requires that His gifts should be sought for. He designs to be *honored* by our asking, just as He is to be *thanked* by us after He has bestowed His blessing.

However, the question still returns on us, If God be the Predestinator of everything that comes to pass, and the Regulator of all events, then is not prayer a profitless exercise? A sufficient answer to these questions is that God *bids* us to pray, "*Pray without ceasing*" (1 Thess. 5:17). And again, "*men ought always to pray*" (Luke 18:1). And further: Scripture declares that "the prayer of faith shall save the sick," and "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:15, 16); while the Lord Jesus Christ, our perfect Example in all things, was preeminently a Man of Prayer. Thus, it is evident, that prayer is neither meaningless nor valueless. But still this does not *remove* the difficulty nor *answer* the question with which we started out. What then is the relationship between God's Sovereignty and Christian prayer?

First of all, we would say with emphasis, that prayer is *not intended* to *change* God's purpose, nor is it to move Him to form fresh purposes. God has decreed that certain events *shall* come to pass through the means He has appointed for their accomplishment. God has elected certain ones to be saved, but He has also decreed that these shall be saved *through* the preaching the Gospel. The Gospel, then, is one of the appointed means for the working out of the eternal counsel of the Lord; and prayer is another. God has decreed the means as well as the end, and among the means is prayer. Even the prayers of His people are included in His eternal decrees. Therefore, instead of prayers being in vain they are among the means through which God exercises His decrees. "If indeed all things happen by a blind chance, or a fatal necessity prayers in that case could be of no moral efficacy, and of no use; but since they are regulated by the direction of Divine wisdom, prayers have a place in the order of events" (Haldane).

That prayers for the execution of the very things *decreed* by God are *not* meaningless is clearly taught in the Scriptures. Elijah *knew* that God *was* about to give rain, but that did not prevent him from at once betaking himself to prayer (James 5:17, 18). Daniel "understood" by the writings of the prophets that the captivity was to last but seventy years, yet when these seventy years were almost ended we are told that he set his face "unto the Lord God, *to seek by* prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes" (Dan. 9:2, 3). God told the prophet Jeremiah "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end"; but instead of adding, there is, therefore, no need for you to supplicate Me for these things, He said, "*Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you*" (Jer. 29:11, 12).

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. Did not the Son of God *know* for certain that after His death and resurrection He *would be* exalted by the Father. Assuredly He did. Yet we find Him *asking for* this very thing: "O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine Own Self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:5)! Did not He know that none of His people could perish? yet He besought the Father to "keep" them (John 17:11)!

Finally, it should be said that God's will is immutable, and cannot be altered by our cryings. When the mind of God is not toward a people to do them good, it cannot be turned to them by the most fervent and importunate prayer of those who have the greatest interest in Him: "Then said the LORD unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet *My mind could not be* toward this people: cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth" (Jer. 15:1). The prayers of Moses to enter the promised land is a parallel case.

Our views respecting prayer need to be revised and brought into harmony with the teaching of Scripture on the subject. The prevailing idea seems to be that I come to God and *ask* Him for something that I want, and that I *expect* Him to give me that which I have asked. But this is a most dishonoring and degrading conception. The popular belief reduces God to a servant, *our* servant: doing our bidding, performing our pleasure, granting our desires. No; prayer is a coming to God, telling Him my *need*, committing my way unto the Lord, and 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. No prayer is pleasing to God unless the spirit actuating it is "*not* my will, but Thine be done." "When God bestows blessings on a praying people, it is not for the sake of their prayers, as if He was inclined and turned by them; but it is for His own sake, and of His own Sovereign will and pleasure. Should it be said, to what purpose then is prayer? it is answered, This is the way and means God has appointed for the communication of the blessing of His goodness to 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. When they are blessed with a spirit of prayer it forebodes well, and looks as if God intended to bestow the good things asked, which should be asked always with submission to the will of God, saying, *Not my will but Thine be done*" (John Gill).

The distinction just noted above is of great practical importance for our peace of heart. Perhaps the one thing that exercises Christians as much as anything else is that of unanswered prayers. They have asked God for something: so far as they are able to judge they have asked in faith believing they would receive that for which they had supplicated the Lord: and they have asked earnestly and repeatedly, *but* the answer has not come. The result is that, in many cases, faith in the efficacy of prayer becomes weakened, until hope gives way to despair and the closet is altogether neglected. Is it not so?

Now will it surprise our readers when we say that *every* real prayer of faith that has ever been offered to God has *been* answered? Yet we unhesitatingly affirm it. But in saying this we must refer back to our definition of prayer. Let us repeat it. Prayer is a coming to God, telling Him my *need* (or the need of others), committing my way unto the Lord, and then leaving Him to deal with the case as seemeth Him best. This leaves God to answer the prayer in whatever way He sees fit, and often, His answer may be the very opposite of what would be most acceptable to the flesh; yet, if we have *really LEFT* our need in His hands it will be His *answer*, nevertheless. Let us look at two examples.

In John 11 we read of the sickness of Lazarus. The Lord "loved" him, but He was absent from Bethany. The sisters sent a messenger unto the Lord acquainting Him of their brother's condition. And note particularly *how* their appeal was worded-"Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick." That was all. They did not ask Him to heal Lazarus. They did not request Him to hasten at once to Bethany. They simply spread their need before Him, committed the case into His hands, and left Him to act as *He* deemed best! And what was our Lord's reply? Did He respond to their appeal and answer their mute request? Certainly He did, though not, perhaps, in the way they had hoped. He answered by abiding "two days still in the same place where He was" (John 11:6), and allowing Lazarus to die! But in this instance that was not all. Later, He journeyed to Bethany and raised Lazarus from the dead. Our purpose in referring here to this case is to illustrate the proper attitude for the believer to take before God in the hour of need. The next example will emphasize rather, God's method of responding to His needy child.

Turn to 2 Corinthians 12. The Apostle Paul had been accorded an unheard-of privilege. He had been transported into Paradise. His ears had listened to and his eyes had gazed upon that which no other mortal had heard or seen this side of death. The wondrous revelation was more than the Apostle could endure. He was in danger of becoming "puffed up" by his extraordinary experience. Therefore, a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, was sent to buffet him lest he be exalted above measure. And the Apostle spreads his need before the Lord; he thrice beseeches Him that this thorn in the flesh should be *removed*. Was his prayer answered? Assuredly, though not in the manner he had desired. The "thorn" was not removed but grace was given to bear it. The burden was not lifted but strength was vouchsafed to carry it.

Does someone object that it is our privilege to do more than spread our need before God? Are we reminded that God has, as it were, given us a blank check and invited us to fill it in? Is it said that the promises of God are all-inclusive, and that we may *ask God for what we will*? If so, we must call attention to the fact that it is necessary to compare Scripture with Scripture if we are to learn the full mind of God on any subject, and that as this is done we discover God has *qualified* the promises given to praying souls by saying "If ye ask anything

according to His will He heareth us" (1 John 5:14). Real prayer is communion with God so that there will be common thoughts between His mind and ours. What is needed is for Him to fill our hearts with His thoughts and then His desires will become our desires flowing back to Him. Here then is the meeting-place between God's Sovereignty and Christian prayer: If we ask anything according to His will He heareth us, and if we do not so ask He does not hear us; as saith the Apostle James, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" or desires (4:3).

But did not the Lord Jesus tell His disciples, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you" (John 16:23)? He did; but this promise does not give praying souls *carte blanche*. These words of our Lord are in perfect accord with those of the Apostle John: "If ye ask anything according to His will He heareth us." What is it to ask "in the name of Christ"? Surely it is very much more than a prayer formula, the mere concluding of our supplications with the words "in the name of Christ." To apply to God for anything in the name of Christ, it must needs be in keeping with what Christ is! To ask God in the name of Christ is as though Christ Himself were the suppliant. We can only ask God for what Christ would ask. To ask in the name of Christ is therefore to set aside our own wills, accepting God's!

Let us now amplify our definition of prayer. What is prayer? 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 acknowledgment of our need and the spreading of it before God. We do not say that this is all there is in prayer, it is not; but it is the essential, the primary element in prayer. We freely admit that we are quite unable to give a complete definition of prayer within the compass of a brief sentence, or in any number of words. Prayer is both an attitude and an act, a human act, and yet there is the Divine element in it too, and it is this which makes an exhaustive analysis impossible as well as impious to attempt. But admitting this, we do insist again that prayer is fundamentally an attitude of dependency upon God. Therefore, prayer is the very opposite of dictating to God. Because prayer is an attitude of dependency, the one who really prays is submissive, submissive to the Divine will; and submission to the Divine will means that we are content for the Lord to supply our need according to the dictates of His own Sovereign pleasure. And hence it is that we say every prayer that is offered to God in this spirit is sure of meeting with an answer or response from Him.

Here then is the reply to our opening question, and the scriptural solution to the seeming difficulty. Prayer is not the requesting of God to alter His purpose or for Him to form a new one. Prayer is the taking of an attitude of dependency upon God, the spreading of our need before Him, the asking for those things which are in accordance with His will, and therefore there is nothing whatever inconsistent between Divine Sovereignty and Christian prayer.

In closing this chapter we would utter a word of caution to safeguard the reader against drawing a false conclusion from what has been said. We have not here sought to epitomize the whole teaching of Scripture on the subject of prayer, nor have we even attempted to discuss in general the problem of prayer; instead, we have confined ourselves, more or less, to a consideration of the relationship between God's Sovereignty and Christian prayer. What we have written is intended chiefly as a protest against much of the modern teaching, which so stresses the human element in prayer that the Divine side is almost entirely lost sight of.

In Jeremiah 10:23 we are told "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (cf. Prov. 16:9); and yet in many of his prayers man impulse presumes to direct the Lord as to His way, and as to what He ought to do: even implying that if only he had the direction of the affairs of the world and of the church he would soon have things very different from what they are. This cannot be denied: for anyone with any spiritual discernment at all could not fail to detect this spirit in many of our modern prayer-meetings where the flesh holds sway. How slow we all are to learn the lesson that the haughty creature needs to be brought down to his knees and humbled into the dust. And this is where the very act of prayer is intended to put us. But man (in his usual perversity) turns the footstool into a throne from whence he would fain direct the Almighty as to what He ought to do! giving the onlooker the impression that if God had half the compassion that those who pray (?) have, all would quickly be right! Such is the arrogance of the old nature even in a child of God.

Our main purpose in this chapter has been to emphasize the need for submitting, in prayer, our wills to God's. But it must also be added that prayer is much more than a pious exercise, and far otherwise than a mechanical performance. Prayer is, indeed, 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. These pages will have been penned in vain unless they lead both writer and reader to cry with a deeper earnestness than heretofore, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

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