

History and Theology of Calvinism #32: Prayer and the Sovereignty of God

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Let's begin with prayer.

Tonight, Father, we come before you as your people, as you have bidden us to do. You have commanded us and you have given us the high privilege of prayer. But, Father, because we are Calvinists and we believe in your utter and your great sovereignty, we have trouble, Father, reconciling sovereignty and prayer. So we ask, Father, that you would teach us that we may pray more properly and exalt your sovereignty even more highly. Bless us to that end, then, Father, tonight in Jesus' name. Amen.

The problem that we address this evening has two sides to it. Think in terms of a coin. On one side is inscribed, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" Or, in other words, if God has foreordained everything already, how can we pray in hopes of changing things? Turn the coin over and you have another inscription which is another problem. If we are commanded to pray, then how can it be said that God is sovereign and has ordained all that happens? That is the dilemma on both sides and that is the dilemma that we address this evening; prayer and the sovereignty of God.

Now, obviously this cannot be an exhaustive study. Prayer is one of those great Bible doctrines. You find it in virtually every book of the Bible. In fact, many books have been written about it. One scholar computed over 1000 books alone in English just within 50 years of the first half of the 20th century. So how are we going to cover it in only 45 or 50 minutes? Well, we are going to confine the study to just one aspect of prayer, namely, prayer in light of the sovereignty of God.

We have been going over the doctrines of Calvinism, the theology of the sovereignty of God, he has foreordained everything, he works all things in providence, man is still responsible. But what about the question of prayer and the sovereignty of God?

Last week we talked about divine providence in human responsibility. We are here as an example of that great paradox, because men are responsible to pray.

So as we look at this thorny issue we will get a tangible and practical illustration of the greater principle of sovereignty and responsibility.

We begin by trying to answer the question: What is prayer? In its simplest definition prayer is simply speaking to God. But that is not precise enough for tonight's message, speaking to God. Well, even the demons speak to God when they [?] God. So that is not

prayer by any means. So prayer is something more than simply speaking to God. It would be speaking to God properly in the way that he requires.

Well, the Westminster Shorter Catechism gives us a very succinct and very balanced definition of prayer from the Calvinistic perspective. And remember these were questions that little children had to learn and look at the profundity in it. "What is prayer?"

Answer: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies."

Well, the Bible describes prayer as both a duty and a privilege. And both of those are difficult to harmonize with the sovereignty of God. It's a [?]. We are commanded to pray.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing."¹ Luke 18:1, "Men ought always to pray."² And so forth.

There is no doubt about it. We are commanded to pray. Therefore prayer is part of the revealed will of God. What is the revealed will of God? That is when God speaks to us and tells us responsibility, our obligation. Therefore, as Christ said, "Men ought always to pray."³ So that is part of his revealed will to us. Consequently, not praying is a sin. It goes against God's will.

More than that we are given many great examples in the Bible to imitate and that encourage us in prayer. So we can't say, "Well, sovereignty of God, that negates it." No, other people in Scripture knew of the sovereignty of God, but they still prayed. So can we. If they did, so can we. So prayer is a duty.

Secondly, prayer is also a high privilege. Hebrews four it says that we have been granted entrance and access. Therefore we can come boldly because we have been given a royal invitation from the King of Kings to come into his very throne room, a high privilege has been granted to us.⁴

However, because we believe in the sovereignty of God we have to put two interesting observations to this. The first one is that God did not have to grant us this high privilege. First off, in the secret will of God he did not have to foreordain that we would have access to prayer. He could have foreordained everything so that we would still be saved, we would be elected and so forth, but there would still be a wall between him and us so far as prayer is concerned. Theoretically he might have, but he didn't. He chose to give us the opportunity to prayer. He granted us access.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

² Luke 18:1

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Hebrews 4:16

And so far as time is concerned, Christ has opened up the door and we now can approach his throne room. He has allowed us to. So it pleased him to bestow this high privilege on us.

Ezekiel 36:37, the Lord God says, “This also I will let the house of Israel ask Me to do for them.”⁵ In other words God lets us pray. If he didn’t we could pray all we want to, wouldn’t get anywhere. The fact that he allows us to now speaks about his sovereignty. He has sovereignly allowed us to.

Well, in reformed theology we divide prayer into four categories and each one has its own peculiar difficulties with the revealed will of God and the sovereign will of God, the secret will. First off, there is confession. We are commanded to confess our sins to God and we are promised forgiveness. If we confess he is just and righteous to forgive us our sins,⁶ 1 John 1:9. Son in this confession how does this deal with the two wills of God. On the one hand we confess that we have broken his revealed will. We confess that, as it says in the Book of Common Prayer, “We have not done that which we should do and we have left undone that which we should do.” That is we do what we shouldn’t do and we don’t do what we should do. So we confess we have broken his revealed will. And yet true confession will never use its chief excuse, “Well, after all, God, in your secret will your foreordained that I would sin anyway.”

No. That is a bad excuse so you cannot use the secret will as an excuse in prayer. That is not repentance. That is blasphemy.

Second kind of prayer, second aspect of prayer is supplication. That is when we pray for the things that we ourselves need. It is related to the third one which is intercession, when we pray for the needs of other people, friends, family, circumstances that don’t immediately concern us. We are asking for things.

Now, most of the rest of this study is going to be talking about the difficulties of those two aspects. So let me just briefly mention the fourth one. The fourth one is adoration and worship; thanksgiving, love, praise, worshipping God. We are commanded to in his revealed will. But the dilemma is that in the secret will God has foreordained that he will receive glory from all beings. Even the reprobate will give glory to God. We are going to look at that next week when we discuss the glory of God, the ultimate end in all things and even when we talk about reprobation.

So does that mean we should just resign ourselves to the fact that God will get glory from everything? Does that fulfill his revealed will that we should worship him? No. He is going to get it anyway, but we should actively seek to give him praise and honor and glory. And we find examples of that.

Well, again, more on that in a later study.

⁵ Ezekiel 36:37

⁶ See 1 John 1:9

But let's get back to the problem of supplication and intercession. How can we ask God for things if he has foreordained who gets what, when, where and in what circumstances? There are different problems with this.

Well, the questions of supplication and intercession when we come and pray, those are the first things that come to our minds.

If I were to say, "What do you pray about?"

The first thing that comes your mind is, "Well, I pray for this, I pray for that." In other words, we have a proclivity to zero in on the second and third aspect of prayer and tend to downplay the first and the fourth. In other words, in most of our prayer meetings, our personal devotions, we are asking God for things. Now there is nothing wrong in that because he has asked us to. He has commanded to. However, would that we were more familiar with personal confession as well as worship. Well, we can maybe get into that another time.

So God has given us the privilege and duty of asking things from him for ourselves and for others. But here is where the difficulty comes in. Is this an unconditional promise that whatever we ask he is obligated to give to us? Is God ever obligated to answer our prayers? Is he always obligated to answer our prayers?

Someone has said that prayer is simply filling in a blank check. God has filled out the check payable to such and such, signed the Lord Jesus Christ. Fill in the blank. Do you know what we call that in popular [?]? Name it, claim it. Name it and then you can claim it from God. You can cash it. Name it, claim it. You have all heard of that. One wag has called it not name it claim it, but blab it, grab it. Well, that is basically what it is, filling in the blank, blank check prayer.

But is that the biblical approach?

Now the answer to the question, "Is God obligated to answer our prayers," has been in three forms. Some say, "Yes. He always obligated." Others say, "No. He is never obligated." And the third answer is yes and no. In certain prayers he is and in other prayers he is not."

First there are those that say, "Yes, God is always obligated to answer our prayers. That is the answer of the name it, claim it, the blank check theology. They appeal to those verse in John 14, 15 and 16 where Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do."⁷ And they say, "Whatever. That is universal. That is anything we choose to name he is obligated to answer."

Well, their prayers are remarkably like the one in Mark 10:35. The disciples came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."⁸ That is the

⁷ See John 14:13

⁸ See Mark 10:35

name it, claim it approach. “Lord, do for us whatever I ask of you.” In effect, they are telling God rather than requesting from God.

But that approach is very unbiblical. It fails to balance those texts with other texts. And you know the old thing. A text without a context is a pretext. And that is just what the name it, claim it idea is. They don’t balance it with other texts that lay other conditions to biblical prayer.

For example, James 1:6 says that without faith we won’t get what we ask for. So you have to have faith. The next couple of verses go on to say that if you don’t have faith you will not receive. You are double minded in all your ways. That man won’t receive anything. So you have to have faith.⁹

Also James 4:3 says not to pray for things out of greedy motives, “You have not because you ask not. You have not because you want to spend it on your own desires.”¹⁰ So you have to ask with faith and without greed. In other words, unselfish faith.

Also 1 John 3:22 says that we must also obey God in our prayers. It is not saying that we earn things in prayer by obedience, therefore we can say, “Well, God I filled out the check. I have done so much therefore you are obligated to reward me with what I am asking.” No, that is not what he is saying. What he is saying is if we come in an unfaithful, disobedient mood, we can’t expect God to answer our prayers. If we are asking in disobedience that is the same as asking just for our own personal lusts.

So these are certain qualifications that must be laid down to balance the other passages in John 14 to 16.

Philippians 4:6 also uses the word “requests.” And the very idea of requests is against the idea of name it, claim it for this reason. Name it, claim it is basically prayer by demand rather than request. But, brethren, we can never demand things from God because God is our Father. The idea of name it, claim it, demanding from God treats God as our servant, not as our sovereign. It treats him as our butler rather than as our king. So we are to bring requests humbly to God and not proudly demand things from him.

Also the blank check idea contradicts the very secret will of God, not just the revealed will, but the secret will. For example, I have quoted Mark 10:35. “Master, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.”¹¹ Anybody remember what Jesus’ answer was? First off he said, “You don’t know what you are asking for.”¹² We are going to look at that in a minute. But he goes on to say, “However, to assign seats in the kingdom of God is not mine to give. It is for them for whom it has been prepared.”¹³ When was it prepared? In the secret counsels of God.

⁹ See James 1:6-8

¹⁰ James 4:3

¹¹ See Mark 10:35

¹² See Mark 10:38

¹³ See Mark 10:40

In other words he is saying, “This is not an object for prayer. This is something that has already been settled. You don’t know what you are asking for.”

But it was a very gentle rebuff to their inappropriate prayer. He did it by reminding them of the secret will of God, foreordination. God has already foreordained so this is not a matter of prayer, much less, jostling for rivalry amongst Christians. And that is generally what it boils down to.

So on the one hand blank check prayer is not biblical. Well let’s don’t overreact to the other extreme and say, “We can never have assurance that God will answer our prayer.” We have got to be very careful. We can know certain things will be given to us in prayer when these sort of conditions are met because God has laid them down in his Word.

We’ll just turn to the key verse in the Bible on that, 1 John chapter five, 1 John chapter five verses 14 and 15 echo what the Lord Jesus said actually in the very hearing of John the apostle back in the upper room discourse. And here the apostle writes:

And this is the confidence [or the assurance] which we have before Him, 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 which we have asked [for] from Him.¹⁴

Now the name it, claim it bunch will say, “Well, that’s just the same as these other verses back in John.”

No. There is one slight difference. Notice the phrase in verse 14. “If we ask anything according to His will.”¹⁵ Now that is very similar to when the Lord Jesus said, “If you ask in my name,”¹⁶ but here is something a little bit different. What does this mean and what does this have to do with praying according to the will of God? Well the gist of this passage is this. If we pray in faith for those things which God has, in his revealed will, commanded us to have, he will give it. That is the answer. That is the key that opens up this problem.

But what is the key? Let’s explain that a little bit further. What does it mean, “According to his will?” Well, what is his will? We don’t know, for example, that he is going to do certain things. That is up to his sovereign will, his providential will. But there are other things in his revealed will he has commanded us to do, to have, to be and there is excuse is accepted if we are not those things. Therefore if it is his will, for instance, that we be holy as he is holy¹⁷ it says in 1 Peter 1:16, we can’t be holy of ourselves and yet that is his will for us to be holy. So if we ask for holiness from him who is the only one who can give it, we can be assured he will give it in his own way.

¹⁴ 1 John 5:14-15

¹⁵ 1 John 5:14

¹⁶ John 14:13, John 16:26

¹⁷ See 1 Peter 1:16

Let me give you another example of that. We know, for instance, in the revealed will we are commanded to be wise. Jesus said, “Be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.”¹⁸ So we are commanded in his revealed will to be wise, to have wisdom, to be wise people. However, we are born fools. We are born in sin. We are born ignorant. We are not born wise. So we can’t muster wisdom up of ourselves.

However, here is where 1 John 5:14 and 15 apply today. He has commanded us to be wise, but only God can give wisdom. So if we ask for that which we must have, but only he can give, he will give it to us when we ask in faith and obedience and so forth.

And this is what James one tells us. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”¹⁹ So this principle of praying according to the will of God has to do with the things which he has commanded us to have, no excuses acceptable if we don’t have them. So we come and say, “Lord, you commanded I must have it, but I can’t have it unless you give it to me. Therefore, Lord, give it to me.” You can have the assurance if prayed properly it will be answered. This is what Augustine meant when he said, “Give what thou commandest and command what thou will.” God supplies that which he requires according to his revealed will.

But where does the problem come in? Where is the rub? Well, the problem is we are like those disciples. Jesus rebuked them gently and said, “ You do not know what you are asking for.”²⁰ We are confusing what is in the revealed will with that which is kind of icing on the cake. We are dictating to God rather than submitting to his revealed will. And it says in James we are confusing our needs with our greeds. God will not answer greedy prayers except by way of punishment.

Remember our series on the book of Numbers, Numbers 11. They kept crying out for quail saying, “God, we want food. We don’t want the manna.”²¹

Now that was greedy. They should have been satisfied with God’s provision. God’s revealed will is that they eat. Ok, they should eat it. Now they wanted something else. So sometimes God does give answers to greedy prayers, but it is always by way of chastening. It is like God said, “Oh, you want quail? I’ll give you enough quails. You’ll be sorry you asked for it.” So, you see, when he gives answers to greedy prayers it is always because of our sin. On the other hand he will give us that which is according to his revealed will. If he requires wisdom of us, salvation and so forth, but if it is something only he can give we are not only invited to come to him for that, but we are commanded to. So, you see, rather than it being presumptuous to say that God is obligated to give us these things, it is presumptuous of us to think we cannot ask in confidence for them. If presumption could pray, like the old song said, “Oh, Lord, won’t you buy a Mercedes

¹⁸ See Matthew 10:16

¹⁹ James 1:5

²⁰ See Mark 10:38

²¹ See Numbers 11:4

Benz.” He hasn’t commanded us to have Mercedes Benz, to have one or not to have one is not a sin. But if we are commanded to have obedience, faith and so forth and we cannot have it of ourselves, therefore we are required to come to ask God to give it to us.

So then the question boils down to discern: What is the revealed will of God? He has not commanded us to be healthy and wealthy. But he has commanded us to be wise. And here is where, say, the name it, claim it bunch goes wrong. They always talk in terms of healthy and wealthy. God has not commanded us to be that. We should try to be healthy and try to work hard, but God doesn’t hold us accountable if we are not, not if we have done all we can. No. It is him that gives health, him that gives wealth. But those that go in for blank check theology should actually go in for the third of these. He has commanded us to be wise.

So the proponents of the prosperity gospel of health and wealth are generally very unwise. So it takes wisdom to discern this principle, but only God can give it. Do you see what I am saying here? Praying according to the will of God is praying for that which God has commanded us to have, but which only God can give.

Let me run by a few other common misconceptions about prayer and the will of God. First—quote—“God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” Well, that sounds so sweet and sentimental. I saw it on a sign outside of a church. Well, is it true: God does nothing but in answer to prayer? No, that is not true. In fact, God does almost everything he does irrespective of prayer. Just take it back logically. Did God create the universe because we asked him to create the universe? No, of course not. There was no one to do the praying. Most things he does is out of sheer grace, irrespective of our prayer. And yet there are some things he does through prayer as a means.

Second misunderstanding that we should pray that God saves a person but does not intrude upon his free will. But that is ludicrous. None of us would rightly ever pray like that. Could you imagine saying, “Lord, save my father, but don’t intrude upon his free will.” No. It is a contradiction in terms. The very fact that we are praying assumes that God is able to intrude.

Augustus Toplady said the most ludicrous thing in the world is an Arminian on his knees praying. It is a contradiction in terms. He is Arminian when he stands, but when he kneels he presumes that God can, in fact, work in the human heart.”

Third misconception. Maybe you will hear this one from some well meaning Calvinist friends. “We should believe like Calvinists, but we should pray like Arminians.” Have you ever heard that one? That’s rank nonsense. That is similar to the suggestion that says we should believe like Calvinists, but we should preach and evangelize like Arminians.

Brethren, why not preach, pray and believe like Calvinists. The person that uses that excuse doesn’t really understand what true biblical, reformed prayer is.

Fourth misconception. Maybe you have heard this one, too. Quote—"I am praying for God's will." Well, what does that mean? Well, true. We should pray for God's help in discerning what his will is, but this statement is usually an excuse, even though it sounds so sugary and so spiritual on the surface. Let's dig beneath the surface.

The person that usually says, "I am praying for God's will," doesn't understand the relationship of Scripture and prayer in God's will. That person usually thinks that God's guidance, God's will is given mystically through prayer. That God somehow speaks to us in prayer. But that is wrong. Prayer is a device whereby we speak to God. How does God speak to us? In Scripture. So if we say, "I am praying to see what God's will is," that easily becomes a pretext for saying, "God is going to speak to my mystically, feelings, impressions, dreams, visions, omens." And what that is simply is a pretext so we can say, "I've got peace about this. I am going to go ahead and do something. God is leading me to do this."

Well, how do you know God is leading you?

"Because he led me. He gave me feelings."

How do you know that?

"Well, I prayed about it."

But how do you know that you prayed according to the will of God? By Scripture and Scripture alone. This is how God guides us. This is how we know the revealed will of God. We speak in prayer. God speaks in Scripture.

Now, of course, when we pray we can quote Scripture and God can remind us of certain Scriptures, but he does not speak extra Scripture. So if we try saying, "I am going to pray for God's will," what you should be doing is this. You should pray that God opens up Scripture, gives you the principles, the examples, the commands, the prohibitions so you will now know what God's will is. So you should pray for God to speak to you through Scripture. Actually the person that says, "I am praying for God's will," without going to the Bible could actually be praying against the will of God. He may already know what the will of God is in Scripture, but he says, "I am going to pray about it."

Whereas, R.C. Sproul says, "It's time to stop praying and start reading."

If the person already knows what the Bible says and says, "Well, I am going to pray if God wants me to do this."

Say, for instance, the person says, "Well, I am going to pray whether it is God's will for me to marry this unbeliever."

The Bible has already said that is not the revealed will of God. So it is not time to start

praying about that. In fact, that prayer would be an offense to God if you know he has already said, “No.”

So you see the relationship of prayer, the revealed will of God and Scripture.

But there is an even greater misconception about prayer in the will of God and that is this one here. There is a popular formula that says, “Prayer changes things.” Maybe you have it on a little wooden plaque in your kitchen, on a little bookmark in your Bible. It just sounds so nice, “Prayer changes things.”

Well, what does that mean? Generally when it is amplified it means something like, “Prayer changes God and God changes things.” Well, what does that mean? Does prayer change God’s mind? Well, let’s address that to the secret will and then the revealed will.

Obviously it cannot change the secret will of God. It can not change the decrees, God’s ultimate foreordination. They are unchangeable. They are unconditional. They are immutable. The decrees cannot be changed and for us to try to pray that God changes his mind on his foreordination is impertinent. It is blasphemy. It is not allowed. It is out of line in prayer.

But why won’t God change his decrees even if we asked? Because it says in the book of Numbers 23:19, “God is not a man that he should change his mind.”²² So when we come in prayer we should not conceive of God as a man that can somehow erase the blackboard of his decrees and say, “Ok, you have asked me, ok, I’ll make an exception for you.”

God makes no exceptions with his decrees.

Futhermorme prayer cannot change God’s essence, because God is immutable. “I am the Lord. I change not.”²³

But what about prayer in changing the revealed will? Can it change it? Well, let’s look at this other principle. Robert Lewis Dabney commented, “Prayer is not intended to produce a change in God, but in us.” John Calvin remarked, “It was not so much for his sake as for ours that prayer has been given.”

You see, we can pray before God, but we can’t somehow bend God’s arm and we can’t convince him to do something that he doesn’t want to do. And we can’t force his promises. We can’t get him to do something that is sinful. In fact, when we start moving along those lines we are like the Israelites trying to get quails rather than the manna God has already supplied.

The truth of the matter is that in praying we are the ones that are changing, not God. That is what the essence of prayer is. In fact, to be more precise in prayer God is changing us. We are not changing God. And if we come to God with the idea that we are going to

²² See Numbers 23:19

²³ See Malachi 3:6

change his mind, that we are going to thwart, we are going to get him to do something, give me, give me, give me, we have got a total misconception of what prayer is. That is the idea that gets back to name it, claim it, that God is somehow our servant, he is obligated to us, but God is not obligated because he is not our servant. He is our sovereign.

And yet there is still an apparent dilemma. For example, there are at least two common examples in Scripture that people appeal to and say, “Well, here you have it.” People [?] changing God’s mind. The first one is when Abraham bargained with God in Genesis 18. In other words we heard this recently from the pulpit that God said, “Get out because I am going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrha.”²⁴

And so Abraham said, “Well wait a second. If there is only fifty people are you going to destroy it?”

God said, “Not for 50 people.”

“What about 45?”

“Not for 45.”

“40?”²⁵

It was like an auction or something. He was auctioning off Sodom and Gomorrhah. And Abraham even says, “I have taken it upon myself to speak to the most high.”²⁶ So he gets it down to just a handful and he leaves it at that.

Did he change God’s mind? Look at the text very closely. God never said, “If there is less than 50, no, sorry, Abe.”

And Abe said, “Well, wait a second. You make an exception...”

“Ok, Abraham, I’ll make an exception.”

That is not how the text reads. In fact, what is the bottom line in the whole thing? God still destroyed Sodom and Gomorrha. God knew how many people there were originally that were righteous. So we don’t find Abraham bargaining with God to talk him out of what he had planned to do anyway. What we find is the example of God and Abraham conversing as friends.

James 2:23 says that the “Friend of God.”²⁷ Abraham was realizing this, that God was simply condescending to speak to Abraham and not saying, “Abe, stop it.” God said,

²⁴ See Genesis 18:20

²⁵ See Genesis 18:26-33

²⁶ See Genesis 18:31

²⁷ James 2:23

“Ok, Abraham, approach me again. Ok. Ok.” But God knew all along there weren’t even 10 people. And if Abraham would have kept bargaining God would have said, “Abraham, you don’t know what you are asking for because there are not five people righteous in the city.”

So we find that simply God condescending to his friend Abraham. But remember the conditions for the preservation of Sodom and Gomorrha were not met even by Abraham’s persuasion. So God destroyed the city and God was under no compulsion to give repentance, to give that condition to the Sodomites. Therefore he destroyed them.

So we can’t use that as an example of changing God’s mind.

But then there is another example that is generally more popular and that is with Jonah and Nineveh. The argument runs like this. God sent Jonah and said, “I am going to destroy the city. Forty days. You better get out. You better get ready it is coming. Nothing can stop it.”

Is that the way that is framed? Not necessarily, but the argument says God says I am going to unconditionally do it. And the Ninevites talked him out of it by repentance and prayer. Now that is how the argument goes and it sounds very persuasive, but it is wrong.

First, if God had prophesied that he would unconditionally destroy Nineveh, they he would have done so whether they repented or so because was repentance a condition? If it is done in conditions it didn’t matter if they repented or not he would have destroyed them.

The fact that he did not destroy them when they repented can be worked back logically to show that his threat was a conditional threat. It is as if the prophecy would run, “I will destroy if you do not repent.”

So as the book unfolds we see that the did, in fact, repent, so God did not destroy them. If they had not repented then he would not have destroyed them. So their prayer did not thwart God’s sovereign will, but it rather showed that they were submitting to the revealed will of God, to God’s conditions, therefore God did not destroy them.

By the way, one commentator says actually what you find here is where God simply postponed his destruction because later he did destroy Nineveh.

But we need to go even deeper than that. And the question that I offer to the person that uses this argument as an illustration of somehow changing God’s mind is this. Why do you think they repented in the first place? Where do you think their repentance came from? God gave them repentance. The fact that God gave them repentance and the fact that God knew he would give them repentance, proved that God’s ultimate plan was carried out anyway. So does that come up with the idea that God...that man...that Jonah

and Nineveh changed God's mind? This was in God's mind all along. Man cannot change God's secret will. It cannot be thwarted.

We will say some more about the secret will of God in relationship to prayer. When we see that God's sovereign will and his secret will must always come to pass, we must adjust our prayers accordingly. Now here is where the Arminian has difficulty. Instead of adjusting his prayers to God's sovereignty, he adjusts God's sovereignty to match his prayer. He says God can somehow change his mind about prayer long enough, hard enough, loud enough...no, that is not so.

First off, we should never think that God ordains something because we pray. God foreordained everything, but when he did that he did not consult our prayers, nor did he even consult the foreknowledge of our prayers. [?] went into the study which logically preceded which? Foreknowledge or foreordination? God foreknew because he foreordained. Whereas it says over in Romans 11:33-36, "Of him are all things." But who is the counsel of the Lord? To whom did he go for advice? He doesn't seek our advice in prayers for foreordination. So that should be settled in our minds when we come to him in prayer.

However, we also need to adjust our prayers when we come to him and not try to get him to change his foreordination, his decrees. Now an Arminian might try that, but [?] Calvinists would say, "I would never try that."

Be careful. There are several subtle ways that we sometimes pray that imply we are trying to get him to change his sovereign decrees. Let me give you the examples.

Oh, by the way, even if we did pray for him to change his decrees, it ain't going to work for the Arminian or for the misguided Calvinist. He is not going to overrule him anyway and it is impertinent to ask.

So let's give you some of these examples. First off, we are not to pray that everybody be saved.

You say, "Well, wait a second. But we are to pray for people to be saved."

Yes, we are, for individuals. But not for everybody? What's the difference? It is simply this. We can pray for anybody, but not for everybody.

I was at a prayer meeting once where someone...it almost had like one of these contests. One person saying, "I am praying for my family." Another person said, "Well, I am praying for my whole school." Another person said, "Well, I am praying for the whole city." And lastly one girl said, "Lord, we lift up the whole world to you."

And I was thinking, we've got Atlas over here lifting up the whole world. We are never commanded to pray for everybody as a group.

Do you know the Lord Jesus didn't even do that? In fact, in John 17:9 he explicitly said, "I pray not for the world, but for those whom you have given to me."²⁸ So we cannot pray for everybody as everybody, but we can pray for anybody in particular.

But what has this got to do with the secret will? Simply this. We know from Scripture that God wills everybody in the revealed will to be saved, therefore we can pray for anybody, but we also know from Scripture that in his secret will, his counsels of eternity he has not willed for everybody, he has chosen only some. So if we pray for God to save everybody, that is impertinent because we know from the will of God, God will not save everybody. We have got to be careful. That sort of prayer implicitly if not explicitly denies election and reprobation.

Similarly, we should never pray that God reverses the decree of reprobation. Reprobation is simply non election. God has not chosen everybody. Some will never be saved. However much we pray for them, preach to them, warn them, plead with them, they will never be saved because God has not chosen them.

Well, we are going to look at that subject in a matter of months. But how can we pray to reverse the decree of reprobation? Well, some young Christian might say, "Well, Lord, I know this, but can't you make an exception?"

You see, this is where I feel very uncomfortable with the alleged words of C.H. Spurgeon. By the way, I say alleged because I have never seen it documented. You know, "Lord, save your elect and then elect some more." No, we don't have that in Scripture. God is not going to elect anymore. He has already elected as many as he is going to. The idea of electing more is like saying, "God, transfer some from reprobation to election." No. That is impertinent. And I would be very surprised if Mr. Spurgeon said such a thing. We do not pray God elects some more, but simply call in your elect.

But how can we also pray in a way that is actually calling for a reversal of the decree of reprobation? Well, I'll give you a very subtle example of this. We should never pray for those that are in hell. We don't pray for those to have a second chance.

Now, you say, "Well, I am not a Roman Catholic. I am not praying for people in purgatory."

Well, I know you are not. At least I hope you are not. But I was with a young man once and we were going to pray and he says, "Would you pray for my mother?"

And I said, "Well, is she sick?"

"No, she is dead."

"Was she a Christian?"

²⁸ See John 17:9

“No, she wasn’t.”

“Then you are asking for us to pray her out of hell.”

“Well, you know, God can do anything. With God all things are possible.”

I said, “Well, where has God ever said in the Scripture that he is going to transfer someone from hell to heaven?”

“Well, I don’t know, but, you know, God is still sovereign. He is still very loving.”

You can see what was really behind all this. He is grieving for his lost mother, but he didn’t realize that he was praying in an impertinent way. What was he doing? In essence what he was saying is, “Lord, take someone out of reprobation and put them into election.”

What has that got to do with hell? The death of an unrepentant sinner confirms that he was reprobate. So if a person has died and gone to hell that has confirmed he is one of the reprobate. You ought to be able to deduce that from Scripture. However, if you pray for someone in hell, what you are praying for is a confirmed reprobate to be taken from the realm of reprobation into election and that is impertinent and is not allowed. It is praying against the secret will of God.

Ok, there is even a much more common way that people pray against the secret will without realizing it. And I’ll give you this example. It is when we claim a certain person for Christ. Am I the only one that has made that mistake? “Lord, I claim a certain person for you and I have the assurance you will save them.” Can we do that?

Now our paedobaptist friends are more likely to do that than us. That is generally what they do in infant baptism. We baptize the person and we claim this child and we can sort of have faith by proxy for the person and know this person will grow up. And that leads very easily into presumptive regeneration, baptismal regeneration and a slew of other heresies. It breeds false assurance for one thing.

But we have no mandate from the Word of God to claim a child for Christ or to claim a spouse. 1 Corinthians 7:16—quote—“How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”²⁹ You can claim all you want to, but the idea of claiming gets back to the very idea of trying to take a person out of reprobation and transfer him into election. No. That is impertinent to do that.

So when we claim a certain person it is saying, “I know that such and such will be saved.”

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:16

I'll give you an example. A few years ago when I was back home in New Orleans I visited a friend that I hadn't seen in about 10 years. And I said, "What ever happened to such and such."

"Well, I haven't seen her, but I have claimed her for Christ."

And I said, "Well, what do you mean?"

"Well, she will become a Christian one day."

I said, "Well, you are praying that she might."

"No. I know she will."

"Has she yet?"

"No, but I know."

And I said, "How do you know that she is?"

"Well, I have prayed and I have claimed her for Christ."

And I said, "I'm sorry, but that is an impertinent prayer. You do not know whether you can claim her. You don't know if she is one of the elect. What if she were to die in her sins? Your faith would be greatly shaken because it is based on your internal impressions rather than the Word of God."

So we should not claim certain people like that. That doesn't mean we should not pray for them, but we cannot pray with that absolute assurance that anyone in particular will be saved. We should still pray for them.

One other thing where it is a little difficult on prayer, the secret will of God and that is this example. This one was thrown my way very recently. Someone says, "Well, Curt, what about the end of Revelation, 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus'?"³⁰ Can we pray for Christ to come sooner or later? Can we pray that Christ comes in our lifetime or very soon?"

Is the date of the return of Christ a matter for our prayers? I mean, we have been told that he is coming. Can we pray, "Lord, come quicker." I mean it says, "Come quickly," but can we pray, "Lord, come quicker in our lifetime"? It would be so nice. Is it possible?

Well, we all hope that he would return in our lives, but we simply cannot know whether it will be in our lifetime or not. For thousands of years people have been setting dates, taking verses out of context and say, "Ah, we know it, you know. It is going to be such and such a year."

³⁰ Revelation 22:20

William Miller said 1841. Hal Lindsey said 1988 and so forth and so on. No man knows the day or the hour or even the century, ok? It has been set. It has been foreordained. So the idea of trying to hasten the date is, again, an impertinent prayer.

However, we can preach, as it says in 2 Peter, we can preach so that all of God's elect are brought in and when the last of the elect are brought in, Christ will return. It is the analogy of when all the animals were on the ark, then the rains came.

What we are saying is, we don't know when all the elect will come in. We don't know who the elect are. They are not walking around with "elect" emblazoned on their forehead. I'm sorry, that is not the mark of the lamb.

Ok. We don't know who they are. We don't know when, but we can pray, we can preach. But we have got to be very careful of attempting to manipulate Christ and to moving forward the date of his return. He can't do that. He won't do it. It has already been predetermined.

Generally those people who are praying that he would come sooner are praying because they are in difficulties they want to get out of. Well, they should pray for God to bring them through that. Or that they are slack in their evangelism or in their prayer. I would refer you to Acts chapter one, the disciples saying, "Is it at this time?"³¹

"No, it is not. It doesn't concern you. Get out there and witness."³²

Ok. At this point someone may say, "This is pretty rough stuff. It sounds like Calvinism kills prayer. All the talk about the sovereignty of God and the secret will of God, isn't that a hindrance to our prayers?"

No. It is the exact opposite. There is no greater incentive to prayer than the awesome doctrine of the sovereignty of God. It is the exact opposite of the little phrase, "Calvinism kills prayer." Arminianism kills prayer. Calvinism revitalizes prayer.

Let me explain. We could not pray unless God were sovereign. So it is not the sovereignty of God killing prayer. The fact that we pray assumes that God is sovereign.

Alva McClain explained it like this. "The doctrine of divine sovereignty should be an incentive to pray for the only God who can answer prayer is a sovereign God."

Let me give you the biblical example. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 we are commanded to pray for our governors, rulers, kings and so forth.³³ Now, how about presidents? Ok, we can't claim them for Christ. We can't be assured that God will do something, however, Proverbs 21:1 we looked at last week says, "The heart of the king is in the hand of

³¹ See Acts 1:6

³² See Acts 1:7

³³ See 1 Timothy 2:1-2

God.”³⁴ So when we pray for that king we know his heart is in God’s hand. God can hear our prayers and can touch that person’s heart to go this way or that way by intervening in his heart. But that is only because of the sovereignty of God. So we can ask and God might be pleased to touch that King’s heart.

But the Arminian would say, “No. The heart is off limits to God. God cannot intrude upon man’s free will.” That kills prayer.

What are we asking God to do if not intrude upon the heart of the king?

Well, the same is true with everyone else for whom we pray. When we pray for such and such to be saved, what we are actually praying is that God implants faith in that person’s heart, that God not only brings the gospel to him, but brings him, irresistibly to the Lord Jesus Christ. He can change a person’s heart. In fact, he does. And he sometimes does so in answer to prayer.

Here is where one of the great keys to effective prayer and that is this. Not just in submission to his revealed will, but to the sovereignty of his providence. Namely this. Have you ever prayed for God to do what only God can do? In other words, don’t pray for things that we can do and that other people can do, but pray for that which only God can do and then lay it up before him and if he is pleased, request that he do that, such as intrude upon the will of a person to save him or to restrain persecution. We should pray that God does what only God can do. So the idea of the free will Arminian that says that the will is off limits to God is inconsistent. Only a Calvinist can consistently pray.

Well, there is more to it than this about the sovereignty of God being an incentive to prayer. And this is a secret that some of the great Calvinists of the past—and I wish of the present—have discovered. And that is this. That the idea that God is sovereign means not only God can answer, but if he can answer, he can also stir up prayers. And that is a sign of his providence.

Let me explain it like this. Jonathan Edwards explained, “When the people of God are stirred up to prayer it is the effect of his intention to show mercy.”

A.W. Pink put it like this. “The God who is determined to grant a blessing also gives the spirit of supplication which first seeks the blessing.”

There is an old formula as the Puritans would say and it is this that prayer is the forerunner of blessing. If God stirs up his people to pray it is an indication that he is about to answer those prayers. So if we can read providence, so we have been stirred up to pray, we can be encouraged that God has stirred us up and that he is more likely to answer that if we are praying according to his will.

Well, we can step back even further in his providence. If we pray we cannot only see God as providentially stirred us up to pray, but he has even predestined us to pray. See,

³⁴ See Proverbs 21:1

there is no coincidence. Is it a coincidence that we are praying? No. God has even foreordained our prayers.

This gets us into another clue and that is this. Prayer is a means of God's providence. A few weeks ago we talked about providence, you know, remember the illustration of the pool ball. God uses various second causes? Ok. One of those second causes, one of those means is what? Human responsibility. And another one is prayer. You see, we are responsible to pray. Therefore God will use our prayers to carry out what he has foreordained and what he is carrying out in providence. So simply put prayer is a second cause which God, the first cause, uses to carry out his ultimate purpose.

In that sense prayer is a means of providence. God answers some prayers as a means to carry out those purposes. And other ones he does without prayer. He is not obligated one way or the other.

He doesn't do something merely because we have prayed, but because he moved us to pray knowing that he was going to answer that prayer anyway.

Let me give you a practical illustration of this that we can put into practice. Have you heard of what is called "importunate prayer?" That means persistent prayer. Jesus said, "Men ought always to pray and keep on praying."³⁵ Ok, keep on praying. Right, how does that illustrate the sovereignty of God?

I like the way that Lloyd-Jones put it. He says it is like this. God sits up there with the blessing and he drops down a rope. And he says to us, "Start pulling on the rope." That is prayer. We start pulling on it. "God, bring me the blessing." If and when God is pleased he kicks off the blessing and we pull it down by prayer.

I like that illustration. But, you see, when we pull we are not demanding and God—if and when he is so pleased—will kick it down by means of our pulling it down with the prayers. But we can't pull it down unless he kicks it down, but in certain circumstances he is not going to kick it down without our pulling it down. So we see his sovereignty and our responsibility dovetailing in importunate prayer.

He says, "Start pulling." But he doesn't tell us how long we will be pulling before he is pleased to kick down the blessing to us.

Well, unfortunately some Calvinists have a very fatalistic approach to prayer. Namely they will say, "Well, it is going to happen whether I pray about it or not."

That is like the hyper Calvinist that says, "Well, God's elect are going to be converted whether I preach to them or not."

Well, that's right in a sense. They will be...God's elect are going to be called in whether you witness to them or not. Certain things are going to happen whether you are pray

³⁵ See Luke 18:1

about them or not because of God's foreordination. However, fatalism has no place in prayer.

Charles Hodge commented, "Fatalists cannot consistently pray."

You see, even when we come to God and say, "Well, Lord, bring about that which you have foreordained," can easily become a fatalistic form of prayer.

A person says, "Well, God has foreordained everything."

Yes, that's right. And if you use that as an excuse not to pray, keep in mind that if he has foreordained that you are not going to pray, he has also foreordained that you have forfeited the blessings available through prayer and he is also going to be giving you—he has foreordained to give you chastening for failing to pray as you should. That should set us all in line.

So the excuse, "It is going to happen whether I pray or not," is simply a cheap excuse. It is a cheap jack excuse which covers up disobedience to the revealed will of God. We shouldn't be prying into the secret will of God. The revealed will says, "Pray."

One writer observed, "If any believer should say that it is futile to pray when all events are decreed, he is not only disobeying the revealed will of God, but he is probably trying to excuse his neglect of the privilege of prayer."

This person will say, "It is presumptuous of us to pray, to tell God what to do."

I have actually heard and read people say, "Oh, it is presumptuous. I would never take it upon myself to tell God what he should be doing."

That's phony spirituality. That misunderstands what prayer is. We should not dictate to God, but that means we can still come humbly and beseech God. So prayer is not presumption. The lack of prayer is presumption because God has commanded it to us.

By the same [?] the person who complains, "Well, such and such didn't happen as I prayed so it must not have been God's will that it happen."

Now, you have got to be careful with this excuse. On the one hand you might pull and pull on that rope and the blessing may never come because God may not have sovereignly chosen to give to you. Correct. But a lot of people go the rope that God said, "Start pulling." They give it one tug and say, "Well, it didn't come, so it must not have been God's will."

No, God said, "Start pulling on the rope. Don't give up too easily."

So the excuse was, "It happened because I prayed must not have been God's will therefore."

That is very often an excuse for the person that didn't pray in faith, obedience or according to the will of God or long enough.

Well, here we come to a very [?] phrase that is often used in prayer properly or improperly. "Thy will be done."

What does that mean and how does that apply to prayer? Well, it is found several times in the New Testament and I will point them out to you in relationship to the will of God. Matthew 6:10 in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done."³⁶ Well, although a few Calvinists say that this refers to the secret will of God—in other words, let your foreordination come to pass—more of them say that this refers to the revealed will of God. How should we paraphrase this? Well, William Hendrickson does. He says it like this. "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."

Notice it says, "Thy will be done, as in heaven so on earth."³⁷ Well, what does that mean? We should pray that we will obey as heartily and immediately on earth as the angels do in heaven. The idea that it is in heaven doesn't refer to the secret will. It refers to the holy angels that obey.

Someone may say, "Well, aren't the demons in the heavenly places?"

They are in the spiritual spheres, but they are not in heaven. Beside the demons even carry out the secret will, but never the revealed will of God.

I like how the Westminster Shorter Catechism explains what this petition in the Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done," means. Quote—"We pray that God, by his grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey and submit to his will in all things as the angels do in heaven."

You see, this is where submission, faith and obedience is an integral part of true, biblical prayer. So it is essential for answered prayer to say, "Thy will be done." Without it prayer is selfish. It is arrogant. It is presumptuous. Otherwise we are saying, "Let my will be done." We should say, "Let thy will be done."

Ok. A second illustration. The Lord Jesus gave it in the garden of Gethsemane. "Not my will, but thy will be done."³⁸ Well, which will does this refer to? On the one hand there are some Calvinists that say this refers to the secret will as if Christ was submitting to the decree that he would be crucified. Well, he was submitting to that. But I am amongst the majority of Calvinists that would say, "No, it refers to Christ submitting to the revealed will of God for him in particular." Well, what was the will of God in particular for him?

³⁶ Matthew 6:10

³⁷ See Matthew 6:10

³⁸ See Luke 22:42

He received the commandment from his Father to come live a holy life and die for the sins of his people. And regularly in the book of John he said, “I have not come to do my will, but the will of him that sent me.”³⁹

Hebrews 10:7, “Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.”⁴⁰

So he had a very special revealed will to come and to die. And that is what he was wrestling with in the garden of Gethsemane. Am I going to obey and go to the cross or disobey? But think about it also like this. There were two things running through his mind because he did say if there was any other way, let it pass. But he knew there would be no other way. No other way for what? That he would die, but also he knew that there was no other way whereby the elect could be saved. So if he didn't go to the cross he knew all the elect would be damned.

But there would be something else. He had the command from his Father to obey and to die. And if he disobeyed that he, himself, would be damned because he would have sinned against his Father. And being a sinner he would have come under condemnation.

But, of course that is outrageous. But we see wrestling in Gethsemane, his will to his Father's revealed will, but again Christ also knew what the secret will was. And, of course, because the secret will was...had been foreordained that he would die, Christ did say, “Thy will be done and not mine.”⁴¹

However—there is always a however, a little clause—it is easy for us to misuse thy will be done when we come in prayer. It can easily become a copout for our lack of obedient faith. Christ gave us a perfect example of obedient submissive faith to his Father's will that he die. We can often say, “Thy will be done,” and it is a safety valve for us that if it doesn't come to pass we can say, “Well, I guess God didn't ordain it to happen.”

Be careful. Pray according to the revealed will and in submission to the secret will of God.

Well, let's wrap all this up. Why do we pray? Do we pray to tell God what to do by way of demanding? No. Do we pray and tell God by way of informing him? God already knows our needs before we pray.

Augustine put it like this. “God does not ask us to tell him our needs that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.” Only Augustine could put it like this.

³⁹ John 4:34, 6:38, 6:40, 6:44.

⁴⁰ Hebrews 10:7

⁴¹ See Luke 22:42

Prayer is a way by which we are prepared to receive what he is preparing to give us. So we should not pray in a way that implies that God doesn't already know and, of course, this avoids that old excuse: God knows anyway, so why pray.

Bottom line, why pray? Bottom line answer: Because God tells us to. We pray because God commands us to pray. There is still a lot of mystery in all this, how he uses our prayers to carry out his ultimate purposes. Ok, we should seek to understand some of that within appropriate limits. But we will never fully understand it. He uses our prayers and he commands us to pray. And it is also a high privilege.

If it is our duty to pray it is also our duty to pray rightly. And the right way to pray is in submission to his revealed will and his secret will.

Thomas Manton, the great puritan said, "It must be conformable to his revealed will and with submission to his secret will, not contrary to his Word, nor against his decrees."

But, again, when everything is said and done there is still much mystery in it.

Well, we leave the secret things to God. The revelation is that we should pray. And there is much blessing that we can receive in it and God can receive much glory when we pray correctly.

So I hope that I have encouraged you in this study on prayer and the sovereignty of God.

Well, let's be dismissed in prayer.

Father, we are moved to pray more and more and we trust, Lord, to pray better. Lord, give us the wherewithal to confess our sins and to submit our wills to your will so that your revealed will may be done in our lives so that we can be drawn close to you, that other people's needs can be met and that ultimately you may be glorified. In Jesus' name. Amen.