

How to Pray, How to Listen
God's Providence & Our Prayers¹



This series on prayer has taught us many things about praying. Jesus' prayer life was profoundly personal and intimate with the Father and the Apostle Paul's prayers focus upon God's inner workings among his people. Some of the principles we've learned are:

1. Prayer, at its most basic level, is an expression of our dependence upon God.
2. Our purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not us, must be the center focus of all our prayers and it is his will and not our own that we must pursue.
3. Submission and solitude are essential ingredients in Jesus' prayer life and should be in ours.
4. Thankfulness for God's movement in the lives of our brothers and sisters allows us the opportunity to see God's work in others.
5. Prayer for knowing God better, gaining special insight into our eternal hope, and for power to live for God's glory should govern all other requests.
6. When we pray, we must emphasize a growing love for one another, pure and blameless living, and all that accommodates our maturity in Christ.
7. Our intention in prayer should be that we recognize how God is working in and through circumstances, rather than merely change them.
8. A depth of insight into the limitless dimensions of Christ's love for us can only be gained by prayer.
9. God is more interested in us than in what we want and he occasionally denies our requests so that his glory and our good will be optimal.

In this final section, I want to address some theological issues that help us understand how God operates through prayer and draw some biblical boundaries around our prayers as they relate to God's sovereign control.

How do we define "providence?" How would you describe God's control in the world and exactly how do our prayers intersect with God's sovereignty?

Toward a definition: *Divine providence is like a fixed matrix or blueprint consisting of cause-and-effect relationships through which God brings about precisely what he intends for the universe and upon which he governs the world* (Psalm 115:3; 33:10-11; Proverbs 5:21; 16:1-4; 9; 33; Daniel 4:34-35; Isaiah 14:24; 26-27; 46:10-11; Acts 4:27-28).

Some questions that naturally arise when we think about God's providence and our prayers are:

- How can God respond to prayer when his purposes are changeless?
- Why, if God is all-wise and all-knowing, should he be prayed to?
- If God has already ordained the end from the beginning and the outcome of every event and the consequences of every human choice, why bother praying?
- Do our prayers influence God to act in ways that he otherwise would not?
- Do our prayers really *cause* things to happen?

Our assumption in prayer is that certain things happen *because* we pray and, reciprocally, won't happen if we do not pray. We suppose there is a kind of cause-and-effect relationship between our prayers and God's answers. Our prayers seem to *cause* certain *effects*.

Do we really have some kind of control over our circumstances by our prayers?

Exactly how do our prayers "influence" God to act if he is a God who never changes (Malachi 3:6)?

¹ Some of the observations here are gleaned from Terrance Tiessen's *Providence & Prayer* and Paul Helm's *The Providence of God*.
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- In no way do our prayers coerce/manipulate God into doing something he's not already determined to do.

We must couch our prayers in the context of a biblical relationship between Creator and created. Prayer is not an open dialogue among equals. For example, membership in a family is not symmetrical. Father and son are not equals — there is a hierarchy in human family relationships. Hierarchy, however, does not make the relationship any less personal. That our relationship with God is asymmetrical does nothing to depersonalize it. Nor does it indicate that He is manipulating us against our wills. Rather, prayer is a dynamic exchange between the Almighty God of the universe and you as a completely dependent creature that desperately needs his touch in your life. We simply don't have the power to alter God's plan or will for our lives.

Exactly how do our prayers, therefore, intersect with God's sovereignty?

- On the one hand, God seems to answer prayer *because* we pray (James 1:5). And, seemingly God changes his mind *when* we pray (Isaiah 38:1-5). But, does God always answer our prayers *because we pray* or for some other reason? Put differently, does God simply *react* to our requests?

If God is meticulously sovereign over every detail in the universe, then he ordains certain ends and also specific means to accomplish those ends. In some cases, prayer is the means that God has ordained to bring about circumstances that otherwise would not have occurred. "Prayers are useful in obtaining those favours which He foresaw He would bestow on those who should pray for them" (Augustine, City of God).

Prayer is not a means of helping God decide between different courses of action, but a means in which God's already settled decree affects our world. Some things God has purposed to accomplish despite human involvement while other things he has chosen to accomplish through human involvement, such as prayer.

Simply put, God has determined to accomplish some things in response to our prayers. Just as God has ordained labor as a means of supplying our physical needs, so too God has ordained prayer as a means of supplying our spiritual needs (John Calvin). Consequently, God's providence does not relieve us of the responsibility to pray. In fact, if prayer is a link in the sequence of events that God has ordained to bring about his specified intentions, then we're not merely responsible to pray but highly privileged!

- Prayer, therefore, is God actively involving his followers in the process of advancing his kingdom in the hearts of men and women around the globe. *Prayer is God's invitation to us to join him in changing the world!* It is the divine channel through which God's free, predetermined favor should descend.
- Prayer *does* change things in the world, but it does *not* change God and his purposes. God's will is never frustrated by our prayerlessness, yet our prayerlessness can be an instrument of discipline in God's hand (see Joshua 9:14).
- When we pray according to God's revealed will we can be sure God will answer positively (1 John 5:14-15).
- That God already knows what we need before we ask him is no hindrance to our prayers. God's foreknowledge makes it possible for him to answer our prayers even before we pray (Isaiah 65:24). The certainty of the future, though determined by God, comes about through the free agency of human choices, including our prayers. Some of what God has determined to do he has chosen to do in response to our prayers.
- In some sense, then, prayer is instrumental, not causal. For example, we are saved *by* faith, not *because of* faith. So too, God's will is accomplished *by* our prayers, not *because of* them.

Since God is absolutely sovereign and has ordained the means as well as the ends, we have every incentive to be on our knees to Almighty God and gladly join him in changing the world for his glory! Such privilege we have!!

***"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.
And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."
(Acts 4:31)***

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