

The Sovereignty of God in Prayer

John Reisinger

Chapter One Sovereignty and Prayer Defined

"Mr. Reisinger, if God has ordained all things that come to pass, then why should we bother to pray?"

This is invariably the first response from someone who either flat out rejects the truth of God's sovereignty or honestly sees it in Scripture but is having difficulty relating sovereignty to prayer. I suspect that every sincere Christian has, at one time or another, struggled with the relationship between the sovereignty of God and prayer. I am also quite positive that every person who has been confronted with the biblical fact of God's absolute sovereignty has wrestled with this question.

First of all, we must see that the apparent contradiction usually arises from one of the following sources:

(1) *The person has a bad theology of either sovereignty or prayer.* It is impossible to reconcile a biblical view of sovereignty to an unbiblical view of prayer, or vice versa. The doctrines of the Bible will dovetail together in harmony only when they are *all* truly biblical. Unfortunately, our generation has a very bad understanding of the theology of *both* sovereignty and prayer. This means that we are often trying to reconcile the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty to a man-centered doctrine of prayer. In reality, we are attempting to reconcile truth and error, which is impossible. No one will ever grasp the true relationship between God's sovereign decrees and the absolute necessity of prayer until they see that the popular view of prayer preached today is totally unscriptural.

Actually, we are dealing with the same problem here that we face when trying to reconcile the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. No one will ever see the truth of God's absolute sovereignty until he sees that the mighty "free will of man" is a myth. It is easy to see why Christians in this generation have such a problem with reconciling sovereignty to prayer. They do not really understand either truth when they are stated in biblical terms. The modern-day Christian begins all of his doctrines with an unquestioning confidence in the free will of man. The Bible always begins everything with God and His sovereign purposes.

(2) The second problem is often that *the person who rejects God's sovereignty on the grounds that it contradicts the need to pray has never heard "the whole counsel of God."* He invariably has a theology built on cute little clichés like "Prayer Changes Things" or "It is no longer the sin question but the Son question." Trying to discuss the Word of God with people like that is an exercise in futility. In my last pastorate one of the most "spiritual" men was also one of the most dogmatic. Of course, he believed and boasted that his only authority was the Word of God, even though he

would not sit down and discuss the Scriptures themselves. No matter what the Holy Ghost wrote in the Book, this man would respond with a cliché. He knew a lot *about* the Bible but very little of the true *message* of the Bible. Although he boasted that he had no "system of theology," he was unbelievably consistent, predictable, and inflexible in his beliefs. His clichés dictated his response to every question and subject. The man's clichés and system were more authoritative than verses of Scripture.

The real question that we must answer is this: "Is prayer a necessary means of reaching a God-ordained end; or is man, by using believing prayer, the shaper and planner of our world and its events?" At first sight that may sound like an oversimplification, but it is not. That is really the bottom line.

First of all, let us be certain that we know what we *are* saying, and what we are *not* saying, when we talk about the sovereignty of God and prayer. Are we suggesting that the wall plaque saying "Prayer Changes Things" is totally wrong? Not at all. We are saying that the plaque does not tell the whole story. The plaque is a cliché that contains a half-truth. However, we must remember that a half-truth that stands for a *whole* truth is a *no*-truth that soon becomes *anti*-truth. That little plaque sets forth one-half of a very precious truth, but when it is allowed to stand for the whole truth it creates some very bad theology, and bad theology will always be followed by bad experience.

Does that plaque mean that a six-foot-tall girl can change her height to five feet, four inches, by sincere prayer? Does the word "things" in "Prayer Changes Things" include my height or the color of my eyes? Does the theology of "Prayer Changes Things," when combined with the power of my "free will," enable me to prove Jesus was wrong in Matthew 6:27 about "adding an inch" to our height? Can a black man change his skin to yellow or a white man change his skin to red by fervent, believing prayer? Such a view of prayer is nonsense and contrary to the Word of God, and yet thousands of sincere Christians not only believe it but they also send millions of dollars to the money mongers who build their whole ministry (dare we use the word?) on that very doctrine of prayer.

We must also emphasize that "Prayer Changes Things" does not mean that prayer changes either *God or His plans and purposes!* Unfortunately, that is what many people unconsciously (and some very consciously) think the plaque is saying. Any concept of prayer that allows me to persuade God to change His mind is a most unbiblical and extremely dangerous doctrine of prayer. Who in his right mind would even want God Almighty to change His mind, let alone actually try to get Him to do so by his "believing prayer?"

If God changes his mind in any sense whatsoever, it must be either a change for the better or a change for the worse. If He could change for the better, then He was not perfect before He changed. If He could change for the worse, then He would be less than perfect after He changed. God alone can say, "I, the Lord, change not." The hymn writers have said it well:

*There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not:
As Thou hast been - Thou forever will be.*

Before the hills in order stood, Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God, To endless years the same.

We could make another plaque that says "Prayer Changes People" that would be just as half-correct as the first plaque. Sometimes prayer changes us and makes us willing to accept the very things that we have been asking God to change! Isn't that exactly what happened to Paul on one occasion (II Cor 12: 7-10)? However, that is only half of the story. We will go into this aspect of prayer more fully a little later.

John Calvin said that prayer is digging up the treasures that God has already prepared for us. Prayer, as we shall see, really does not originate in us or in our so-called free will. Effectual prayer is the ordained means that God uses to accomplish His ordained purposes. The true motivation for prayer comes from the Holy Spirit of God.

Let me lay down several clear biblical truths that we dare not question or violate in any discussion about prayer and the sovereignty of God. One: We are positive that God has commanded us to pray, and, Two: He has promised to hear and answer our prayers.

If we do not pray, then we are in deliberate disobedience to God. We are told that "*men ought always to pray*" (Luke 18: 1), and that we are to "*pray without ceasing*" (I Thes. 5: 16). Paul's epistles are filled with his fervent petitions to God on behalf of the people to whom he is writing. If we have a doctrine of sovereignty that allows us to either deny or neglect the duty of consistent prayer, then our doctrine of sovereignty is wrong. If our prayer life does not see specific answers, then we ought to seriously question our relationship with God. James says, "*The prayer of a righteous man availeth much,*" and no doctrine of prayer is biblical that contradicts that truth either theologically or experimentally. The truth that God commands, hears, and answers prayer is stamped on nearly every page of the Bible, and any doctrine of sovereignty that denies this truth is denying the clear teaching of Scripture.

However, many of the texts of Scripture used by modern-day teachers of prayer are taken far out of context. Let me mention two such texts:

This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us -whatever we ask- we know that we have what we have asked of him (I John 5: 14,15).

Is that promise for us today? Absolutely. Does it mean exactly what it says? Absolutely. Does that mean that I can get *anything I want* from God if I ask in faith? Is John saying that I can "Name It and Claim It"? If you believe that, I am sure that you will soon either deny your faith or refuse to face the real world in which you live.

If you wholeheartedly believe that doctrine and sincerely and consistently put it into practice, you will probably wind up in a mental institution.

This text does not say that I can ask anything that I *want* and believe it is covered in the blanket promise of verse 15. True, the verse says, "whatever we ask," but the previous verse says, "anything *according to his will*." I must see that the promise concerns everything, without a single exception, that is asked "*according to HIS will*." The promise does not begin with my wants or my will but with God's sovereign purpose and glory. It presupposes that my mind and heart are so filled with God's thoughts and a desire to obey His will, that my first concern in praying is asking for grace to do His will. It means I am studying God's Word and praying for Him to show me *His will*, instead of trying to impose my will on Him regardless of whether it fits into His plans or not. The text is clear-clear, that is, to everyone except a cliché artist and others.

Compare this text in I John with another text in the Book of James and the truth becomes even more pronounced. How do the following verses from James fit into your theology of prayer?

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God (James 4:1,2).

These verses state two things that concern our subject. First, the source of most of the frustration and many of the broken relationships in our lives is the desire of our flesh to use other people to get what we want. Secondly, such trouble is a direct result of our NOT praying- "*ye have not BECAUSE ye ask not*." We will push, pull, connive, cajole, threaten, pout, shout, and do a hundred other things to get our own way for the simple reason that we will not trust God in believing prayer for what He sees we need. We will kill relationships, betray confidences, and destroy anything or anybody that hinders us from getting our own way. Wrong desires and expectations warring inside of us are the exact opposite of confident prayer that is seeking to know and to do God's will. "*Ye have not because ye ask not*" can be written across every futile day of frustration or depression that we experience in life. "*You are frustrated and immersed in wars because you do not pray*" should be put on a plaque and hung on the wall of our minds. It would remind us that we are trying to put ourselves in the place of God. Such an attitude is at the bottom of every single one of our problems.

The next verse in James 4 is really devastating. When all of the efforts of our flesh fail to get us what we want, then we turn to God in what we wrongly call "prayer" and literally try to *use Him* to get what we could not get with our pushing, pulling, pouting, etc. Notice how clearly James sets this forth:

When you do ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:3).

Wow, what a blow that is to the modern doctrine of prayer! Do you realize what James is saying? He is saying that we often hide a selfish, greedy motive under the pretense of prayer. He is accusing us of trying to use God for our own ends, and then daring to call it prayer. I have seen church leaders destroy whole congregations just to hold onto their position of authority, all the while claiming that they were "led by the Holy Spirit after much earnest prayer." Pure rubbish! Isn't it amazing that the Holy Spirit of truth and peace gets blamed for so much of the bitterness and division that was done in the name of love "after much prayer"?

It is obvious that God does not view prayer the same way that many people do today. I wonder if the religious hucksters who are getting rich by peddling a doctrine of prayer that tries to use God to make us healthy and wealthy realize how neatly they fit it into a warning given by the prophet Hosea:

And they have not cried unto me with their heart, when they howled on their beds (Hosea 7:14).

The prophet is mocking Israel's supposed prayer. What they called prayer, God called "howling on your beds." They were pretending to be crying out to God, but in reality they were whimpering like whipped puppies. How often are our prayers nothing but whimpering against God's sovereign providence? We are demanding from God what *we want*, instead of submitting to Him and earnestly seeking His grace to trust Him even when we do not understand.

My whole point is this: It is impossible to reconcile the truth of God's absolute sovereignty to a doctrine of prayer that is in reality nothing but "howling on your beds." Actually, the false doctrine of prayer so prevalent today is nothing less than an attempt to dethrone God and His decrees. This makes Him to be man's servant, thereby allowing man's own fleshly desires to use the mechanics of prayer to shape and control all of his own destiny. With such a view so widespread, it is little wonder there is such confusion in both theology and personal experience in twentieth century Christendom. The worst part of this tragic situation is that the Bible gets blamed for the problem because of the gross misinterpretation of texts like I John 5:14,15.

We must ask three questions of our hearts before we use this text as a "blanket promise."

1. *Is it my earnest desire to do the will of God (John 17:7)?* To pray for anything without this desire in our hearts is a waste of time.
2. *Am I seeking God's wisdom in His Word in order to discover His will for me in all of my life?* Again, prayer for "what *I want*" with willful ignorance of what God wants cannot be called prayer.
3. *Can I honestly pray in the same attitude as my blessed Lord when He said, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Thy will be done?"* Am I greater than my Master when I pray?

If we are either unwilling or unable to answer these questions correctly, then we are probably trying to use God just to help us get our own way. We are so determined to force our will upon other people that we will even try to employ God's power to do it. Our selfish nature wants our personal needs satisfied at any cost, whether it fits into God's purposes and plans or not. When our personal "happiness" is our only goal, then our concept of both God and prayer becomes terribly distorted. We simply must understand that "whatsoever we ask" must be circumscribed with "according to His will" in our doctrine of prayer. I John 5:14,15 and James 4:3 are two sides of the same coin and neither of them can be ignored or denied.

I am sure I need not remind you that our prayer life is one of the clearest barometers of our present spiritual state. It is much easier to preach and write books about prayer than it is to actually pray. There is no discipline in the Christian life over which I have lamented in tears of repentance as much as a cold heart in prayer. Sam Storms, in the introduction to his excellent book on prayer, describes my own "raincoat" experience. I cannot recommend this book too highly:

My reason for writing this book differs considerably from what one might expect. I was motivated largely by guilt. My prayer life simply was not what it should have been. I knew that as far as Scripture is concerned, prayer is a non-negotiable. Yet I had come to treat prayer like a raincoat, hanging in the closet ready for use if the weather demanded, but hardly something to wear every day. Like my raincoat, prayer seemed unnecessary as long as the sun was shining. I had fallen into the snare of complacency, thinking that since my life was relatively free from discomfort and tragedy prayer could take a back seat . . .

Reaching God's Ear, by Dr. Samuel Storms, Tyndale House Publishers, p 7.

The second text we want to look at that is probably the most badly misused of all texts. Every book or sermon about prayer will use, or misuse, this text. Notice carefully exactly what it says:

. . . Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you
(John 16:23).

This text is used to prove that Christ has given us a book of blank checks that are already signed by Him. We need only fill in the blank check with whatever we want. We are guaranteed anything we want if we only have enough faith. We immediately see that the emphasis is not on God's will but on our wants. All that is necessary for us to get whatever we desire is to believe that we have it, and it is ours. All we need to do is pray in the "name of Jesus." In such a view the name of Jesus becomes a magic word that opens heaven in the same way as the famous words "Open, Sesame" opened the mountain in *Arabian Nights*. Praying in Jesus' name involves a lot more than just tacking His name onto the end of our prayers. Why do we not pray in our own name or in the name of the church where we have our membership? We pray in

Jesus' name alone to acknowledge that we have no claim or merit before God, but we still dare to ask because we are trusting the merits and promises of Christ.

I remember attending the funeral of a member of the Masonic lodge. The Masons had a part in the service. It was very serious and solemn and, at least to me a bit amusing at times. A friend of mine who had some understanding the gospel was standing in front of me at the grave. He and I had discussed the fact that many, not all, Masons believe that they are going to heaven because of their Lodge membership. When the Masonic official commended "our dear brother into Thy hands in the name of the Masonic Lodge," I whispered to my friend, "But they do not have an account in heaven."

The only name that can be used on a check is the name authorized by the person that made the deposits and owns the account. Our blessed Lord alone has earned the merits and grace upon which we can draw. It is true that He has given us permission to use His name, but not for the purpose of satisfying our own pleasure, irrespective of His glory and purpose.

Let me illustrate what I think it means to pray "in Jesus' name" and meet the conditions of John 16:23. Suppose I went down to a local bar in your town and asked for a bottle of whiskey. I then said, "I have no money to pay for this, but a friend of mine said I could charge it in his name and he would pay the tab the next time he came in." When the bartender asked for my friend's name, I would give him your name. Assuming the bartender knew you and knew that you were a Christian, he would say, "Mister, you are a liar. That person would not be caught dead in this place. He never sent you in here and he surely never told you to use his name."

I wonder how many times God could say exactly the same thing to us. How often have we grossly misused the name of Christ and dared to ask for something we wanted without any thought of Christ and His glory? You cannot pray "in Jesus' name" unless you earnestly believe that Christ Himself would ask for that very same thing. John 16:23 is not a blank check that enables me to get anything my selfish heart desires, irrespective of how it affects the cause of Christ and God's purposes for me, just because I add the words "in Jesus' name" to the end of my prayer.

Let me lay down a few things that we have learned so far about the Biblical doctrine of prayer.

1. *Prayer never makes God my servant to give me everything I think I must have in order to make me happy.* God is not a "heavenly bellhop" who carries my suitcase of selfish desires any place I command.
2. *Prayer never allows me to either dictate my will to God or to make God in any way change His mind.*
3. *God has a fixed plan and His plan is the best plan.* God is determined to carry out His plan, and neither our sin nor our "believing" prayers are going to derail or in any way change God's ultimate decrees (Job 23:13).

It is, when properly understood, a matter of unspeakable consolation that God has a plan--for who could honor a God Who had no plan, but who did everything by haphazard? It is a matter of rejoicing that He has one great purpose that extends through all ages, and embraces all things; for then everything falls into its proper place, and has its appropriate bearing on other events. It is a matter of rejoicing that God does execute all His purposes; for as they are all good and wise; is it not desirable that they should be executed. It would be a calamity if a good plan were not executed. Why, then, should men murmur at the purposes or decrees of God. From a sermon on Job 23: 13 by C.H. Spurgeon. A wrong view of prayer will quickly lead to despair and unbelief. This is one of the primary reasons for much of the depression and disappointment in the lives of many sincere believers today. This is especially true among those who listen to the so called divine healers on radio and TV. A lady attending a weekly Bible class that I taught was always in a state of depression when she came, but she usually left rejoicing in God's grace. She finally confessed to me that she listened to one healer after another every Sunday. She even admitted that her depression got worse by listening to the TV preachers. She would always wind up doubting her faith in Christ because she did not get healed. She sincerely believed that God *wanted* her healed and that Christ had *provided* for her healing. All that was lacking was *her faith*. I kept urging her to quit listening to the lies that the healers were telling her, but she would not. Both her physical condition and her spiritual condition continued to get worse.

The doctrine of prayer and healing that is preached by healers sounds so loving. The healer seems to be a sympathetic person genuinely interested in our well-being. His God appears to be a most kind and generous God, but in reality the healer, his doctrine, and his god are all very cruel. Healers are not interested in us, they are interested only in our pocketbooks. Many one of them are religious hucksters getting rich off of the pain and misery of other people's sicknesses. I am aware that these are strong statements, but there is no language strong enough to condemn those who knowingly peddle a false hope in the name of Christ as a means of getting rich.

"But John, does not the Bible clearly teach that `the prayer of faith shall heal the sick'?" Let us examine the exact words in James used by every healer, and see how closely these "great men with the gift of healing" follow the truth in the text:

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well..... (James : 14,15).

Exactly what is a sick person to do according to these verses? First, he is to "call the elders of the church." "Elders" is plural and the sick person calls them. The elders (plural) are to come to the sick person and "pray over him." This is a bit different from a man setting up a tent and calling the sick person to come to him. Suppose a sick person was unable to come to the meeting. Suppose he was unconscious and friends appealed on his behalf? Have you ever seen an unconscious man brought into a healing service? Have you ever heard of a healer answering an appeal for help and going to the hospital to heal the sick?

Secondly, the elders are "to pray over him" and anoint him with oil. Now, it is imperative that we notice who is doing the praying. The text says that it is the elders. There is not a single word in this text about the sick person praying and turning his faith loose.

Thirdly, the "prayer of faith" offered by the elders "will make the sick person well." Now, it is crystal clear that the necessary faith to see the healing take place has to be the *faith of the people doing the praying*, and the text says very explicitly that it is the *elders alone who are doing the praying*. The hucksters on the TV totally distort this passage and put the entire responsibility for healing on the sick person! According to James, if the sick person is not healed it is because the people praying the "prayer of faith" did not have enough faith. Why do TV healers put all of the blame on the poor sick person? Just watch at the close of any of these TV productions and you will always see and hear the following "heads I win, tails you lose" routine.

First, the miracle man declares how God has called him and given him the gift of healing and this great ministry of healing. He then explains how the power of this gift flows through the him. You must either touch his hand or lay your hand on the TV f or a "point of contact." After assuring the audience of his gift and power from God, the man will pray up an emotional storm and, with great gusto, demand and command that the "devil set this person free from sickness." The following is commanded in a loud voice, "In the mighty name of Jesus I rebuke you, Satan." As hands are waved and shouts are uttered, the man with the great gift of healing who has just "busted Satan on the snout" with the mighty "prayer of faith," turns to the sick person and says, "Now YOU turn YOUR faith loose and claim your healing."

Now that is really neat. The miracle worker has been boasting about his gift of healing and he has just prayed his mighty prayer of faith, but nothing can happen *until the sick man furnishes the faith to make it all work*. If everything totally depends on the sick person's faith, why does he need the healer in the first place? The healer has rigged the situation so that it is impossible for him to lose. If a healing takes place, then praise the healer (and the Lord a little bit, too). If the sick person is not healed, then who is to blame? Not the healer, but the poor sick person who was *unwilling to believe*. What has really happened in this charade? The healer probably has \$100 of the sick person's money given during the offering, and the sick person still has his sickness. The healer is off the hook because the sick person would not do his part and believe hard enough. The poor sick person has now added a load of guilt to his physical sickness. He not only still has his sickness, but he now doubts his faith in God. Under such a teaching, you cannot help being 100% convinced that it is *all your fault that you are not healed*. The man responsible for loading that guilt on your conscience is the charlatan who twisted the Word of God concerning the "prayer of faith."

I am sorry if someone feels that I am being unkind or unloving, but the most cruel and hateful thing you can do to people in pain is to offer them something that God does not offer, and then *blame them for not having enough faith to receive it!* It is even worse when you are claiming that the power comes through you and then you

dump all of the responsibility of experiencing that power onto the sick person. That is both deceitful and cruel.

If you want to see how cruel the TV hucksters are, on a Monday morning just visit an institution that cares for people with cerebral palsy or a similar disease. Try to talk to a person who has spent the entire night searching back through his life to find "that one sin that has not been confessed" which is "blocking his healing." Feel some of the pain as a helpless victim of an incurable infirmity asks, "How can I get the faith I need to be healed?" or "I don't believe God loves me because He will not heal me." All of a sudden you will have a desire to see the "loving" money mongers on TV horsewhipped and put in prison for inhuman cruelty.

I remember reading a booklet by a noted healer in which he describes praying for a lady in a wheelchair. She heard him on TV and traveled many miles to attend his meeting. She had been "given hope in God's power and willingness to heal" through his many messages. Here is the man's account of what happened:

I put my hand on the lady's head and prayed the prayer of faith. I could feel the power of God flowing through me and fully expected another genuine miracle to take place. When I opened my eyes, I could see the hope written across this dear lady's face and in her eyes. I took her by the hand and ever so gently began to pull her to her feet. She started to move forward and then suddenly stopped. A look of fear came into her eyes and she sank back in her chair in despair and unbelief.

I trust that you who are reading this feel as angry as I did when I first read those words. The worst is yet to come. As I read the next few sentences, I was angry at that man's cruelty:

I slowly let go of her hand. I had done all for her that I possibly could do. I had delivered God's message of healing, I had earnestly prayed the prayer of faith, and I had pleaded with her to only believe, but she would not exercise the necessary faith to be healed. I left very sad even though I knew I had done my best to help.

Can you imagine anyone being so callous and cruel as that? That man pumped up a false hope in the woman, put on his theatrical display of "shackling the power of Satan," dramatically pretending to be "praying in faith," took the woman by the hand and then *totally blamed her* for not standing up! He then had the gall to say, "I did all that I could to help her." You and I both know exactly what he did for her. I believe that he also knows down in his heart, but unfortunately he does not care, as long as the money keeps coming in. If you can call that "loving and kind," then you are the one with a heart of stone.

Unfortunately, most Christians are not interested in theology and therefore rarely see the root causes of many problems. Few people understand the basic theology of the healers. It is the "Oh, but he is sincere" attitude that makes it almost impossible to criticize false preachers of any kind. You cannot expose the healing racket without

seeing its bad theological foundation. The healers have a wrong view of the atonement of Christ. They believe that Christ suffered the penal consequences for our bodily sicknesses in the same sense that He suffered the penalty for our sins. We may claim physical healing by faith in the same way we claim forgiveness of sins by faith.

Of course, if this theology of the atonement is true, then it would also mean that it is a sin to be sick. Just as it is a heinous sin to reject forgiveness of sins, so it would be a heinous sin to reject healing for your sicknesses. If the awful sin of unbelief is the only thing that keeps lost people from being saved, then the same awful sin of unbelief is the only reason sick people are not healed. The sick are just as "guilty" for being sick and remaining sick, as anyone is guilty for being a sinner and remaining in sin. You are doubly guilty for remaining in either state after you hear the message that there has been a "full payment made by Christ" for your deliverance. If the basic doctrine of the healer is correct, then his conclusions are also correct. However, if his theology is wrong it will play havoc in the lives of many suffering saints. Who said that doctrine, especially the true nature and purpose of the atonement, is not important?

Before we finish with the Book of James, we should also look at what he said about Elijah shutting up heaven and causing a drought. The following verses are most instructive:

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced crops (James 5:17,18).

Are we to understand that God abdicated all control of the weather and turned it over to Elijah to decide when it should or should not rain? Is God telling you and me that since Elijah was a man like us, we too can control the weather by fervent prayer? What if a Christian farmer is pleading with God for rain to help his crops and, at the same time, a godly evangelist is praying for good weather for a two-week tent meeting? Which would determine God's action?

How would you like to be an Elijah? Imagine that you have shut up heaven and it has not rained for nearly three years. The cattle are nearly all dead for lack of pasture. The chickens are dead because there is no corn. Children are bloated and dying because of malnutrition. And *it is all your fault*. People would curse you and plead with you to pray for rain. You would be looked upon as a cruel monster who has no feelings. Why would you not pray for rain? Why did Elijah not pray? Did he have a "mean streak" that enjoyed seeing people suffer? The answer is simple. God was the One who instructed Elijah not only *what* to pray but also *when* to pray. Read again the story in I Kings 17-18 and you will see that Elijah does indeed command the rain to both stop and start, but he does so only when God specifically instructs him *to do it*. We must understand that God was teaching a nation a much-needed lesson in repentance, and nobody, including Elijah, was going to make it rain before God had finished giving the lesson.

Imagine a group of sincere sentimentalists calling an all-night prayer meeting to pray for rain. Maybe a guy from Oklahoma told them that a 900-foot Jesus had told him to organize this "army of faith to batter the walls of heaven for rain." You could get as many people to pray as you wanted, and you could plead as long and as hard as was possible, but you would be wasting your breath. *Nothing* could make it rain until God's purpose in sending the drought in the first place was realized. Elijah is in deed the ordained means that God used, but God was the Master of Ceremonies. The cruelest man in the country would be the tear-jerking TV huckster crying, "God is a good God! He wants to send us rain, but we must have the faith to let Him do it." That man would be literally fighting the very purposes of a sovereign God and actually be *hindering the rain from coming*.

I had better take time to clearly state that I firmly believe in divine healing. In fact, I believe that *all healing* is divine. Unless God blesses the medicine or the hands of the surgeon, even an unbelieving surgeon, there is no benefit. I also believe in *miraculous* healing, which is God directly intervening and healing without the use of any physical means at all. What I do not believe is that I can claim by faith a miraculous healing because Christ has supposedly already purchased and paid for the healing of every disease.

If you ask me, "What must I do to be saved?" I will point you to Acts 16:31 where Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." If you say, "What must I do be healed?" I must respond, "Ask God for His perfect will to be done, and to give you courage and unwavering faith to trust Him regardless of what He does." I cannot find a text in the Bible that guarantees that you can be healed in the same manner you can be saved from sin.

I repeat, I do indeed believe in divine healing, but I do not believe in divine healers. God performing a miracle by His grace and power, and God giving a man the ability to bestow grace and power on others, are two entirely different things. I deplore the total abuse of Scripture that is necessary for the self appointed healer to practice his deceit. I also lament the misery and despair that he leaves behind.

Ask a "healer" if it is right to add "Nevertheless not my will, but Thy will be done" to the end of a prayer for healing. He believes that is a sinful cop-out simply because he believes it is always God's will for you to be healed of every sickness. All you need is the necessary faith. The healer's whole money-making scheme is based on this bad theology. I have buried at least five people who had been "gloriously healed" by big name healers. These people "lost their healing because they did not hold onto it by faith." Show me where that happened to anybody whom Jesus healed!

The health and wealth gospel of the healers is an insult to every hungry or sick believer in Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world. It forces us to believe that people like Fanny Crosby and Joni Erickson were wicked unbelievers who did not have enough faith to receive the healing that Christ had purchased for them. This would mean that these Christians spent their entire lives in unbelief. What nonsense!

If someone reading this is saying, "This guy is really worked up about this," you are right. However, I think every person who loves people and believes the Bible's message of sovereign grace should be just as worked up. Jimmy Baker's sexual sins will not hurt the true gospel nearly as much as the false doctrine that he preached. His sins of the flesh hurt his income and ultimately led to his imprisonment, but his distorted false gospel will destroy the soul of those who believe it. It is time somebody started to emphasize that the immorality of the Bakers and Swaggarts is not nearly as dangerous as the unscriptural message they declare.

Before we continue, let's briefly review the major points we have covered. (1) It is impossible to reconcile two doctrines if one of them is not truly Biblical. Most Christians today have a wrong view of both the sovereignty of God and prayer. It would be most foolish to try to relate the truth of God's sovereignty to the man-centered view of prayer so widely accepted today. (2) Christians are *commanded to pray* and God has promised to *hear and answer our prayers*. Any view of the sovereignty of God that does away with the need of prayer or the joy of experiencing real answers to prayer must be biblically wrong (James 4: 1-3). (3) That John 16:23 is not a "blank check" that enables us to fill in whatever we want. The promise is governed by the phrase, "in My name." Likewise, the "whatsoever we ask" in I John 5:14,15 is controlled by "according to His will." (4) The divine healers of our day twist James 5:14,15 and blame the sick person if he is not healed.

We will now demonstrate from Scripture some basic principles about prayer as it relates to the sovereignty of God.

Chapter Two Basic Facts about Prayer and Sovereignty

BASIC FACT NUMBER ONE: Believers in both the OT Scriptures and the NT Scriptures had no problem believing in both the absolute sovereignty of God and the necessity of prayer.

In Daniel, Chapter 9, the prophet fervently prays for the very thing that he is positive the sovereign God is going to accomplish. Daniel is told the exact time that God is going to fulfill a prior prophecy made through Jeremiah. Notice that Daniel's knowing exactly what God was going to do and the precise time that He was going to do it, in no way kept him from pleading with God to actually accomplish what had been promised. In fact, the exact opposite is always true! The more certain we are about God's sovereign promises and providence, the more we will plead for the very things we know belong to us in His covenant.

The first recorded prayer meeting in the early church after the day of Pentecost is a classic illustration of the biblical relationship of the sovereignty of God and prayer. Let us read the text in Acts 4:

*23 And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. 24 And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, **Lord, thou art God**, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: 25 Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? 26 The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. 27 For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, 28 For TO DO WHATSOEVER THY HAND AND THY COUNSEL DETERMINED BEFORE TO BE DONE. 29. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, 30 By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." 31 And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:23-31).*

This special prayer meeting was in response to the first great persecution of the church. The apostles were beaten and told to never again preach in the name of Christ. Verse 23 tells us "they went to **their own company**" and reported all that had happened. They did not set up a committee nor did they gather the clergy together. The whole church discussed the matter and the whole church acted together.

Verse 24 gives us the response of the church to the horrible situation they were facing. Is it not amazing that they did **not** begin their prayers the way we would probably have done? They started by **worshipping God** and reminding Him of His **greatness and sovereignty**. When our personal world is about to collapse, we usually do not begin our prayers by calmly saying, "Lord, You alone are God. You created all things and right now You are in perfect control of all things and every person." No, we rush into God's presence, blurt out our problem, and tell God to do something quick or the whole cause will be lost. Why is it so important that we begin our prayers with true worship and praise?

First of all, God is worthy of our worship regardless of what our problems are. Secondly, it is only fitting that we always remember that entering God's presence is an amazing privilege. Remembering these truths will put both God and our problems into the right perspective; forgetting them will make us so self-centered we will insult God with our prayers.

Suppose you had received a bad deal from the local authorities in your community and you kept appealing for redress to higher authorities, all the way up to the President of the United States. Suppose the president himself agreed to see you. When the door to his office opened, would you rush in and say, "Do you know what those crooks in my town did to me? You are the President. What are you going to do about it?" No one would dare act like that. We would, first of all, sincerely thank him for taking the time to see us because we realize who he is. We would say, "Mr.

President, I am amazed that you, the President of the United States, would condescend to hear my personal complaint. I sincerely and deeply appreciate this honor and privilege." When we started to think about the problems that he must deal with daily, we might even begin to feel ashamed that we were so distressed about such a minor problem. Actually, we might be so filled with awe that we would forget what our problem was! My point is that we often treat God with far less respect than we would a human authority. The early church knew better.

The third reason that it is good to begin our prayers with worship of God and praising Him for His greatness and sovereignty is that it will bring our blood pressure down twenty-five points. If all we see is the problem, we are sure to lose sight of God's power and control. Who are these insignificant human authorities in comparison to the God who made heaven and earth? I am sure you can begin to see that the early Christians consciously prayed from a **carefully laid foundation of faith in God's absolute sovereignty!** They first reminded themselves and God that they were confident of His power and decrees. Dr. Lloyd-Jones suggests that this is why God shook the building (vs 31). It was as if God said, "I like the way you pray. I like your confidence in my power and I will give you a little sample of it to reaffirm your faith," so He shook the building, literally! Yes, He can shake anything and anybody; He can shake a whole empire and cause it to crumble.

Verses 25 through 27 are very instructive. Why did the church remind God of how David's prophecy concerning the world's hatred of Christ was so clearly fulfilled in the crucifixion? Everybody was against Christ. Every source of human authority purposed to destroy Him forever. The Christians were reminding themselves and God that they were at that moment in the very same situation that their Elder Brother had been in before them. He was hated and in trouble; they were hated and in trouble. However, just as Christ was safe in the hands of His Father, so were they. The cause was God's, not their own. They realized that they were only pawns and God Himself was the Master of the game.

Acts 4:28 is one of those verses that makes you want to shout. Exactly what did all the enemies of Christ do to Him? Why were they all brought together into one solid power block? Those early, persecuted believers reminded themselves and their God that at those wicked enemies did only **"whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done."** The NIV says, "They did **what your power and will had decided before should happen.**" That, my friend, is confidence in the absolute sovereignty of God. You may talk about your "free will of man" or blame all the bad things on the devil, but in times of real trial you will lose your confidence without a grip on a sovereign God. Those besieged Christians saw no conflict between fervent prayer and God's sovereign decrees. They knew that nothing could have happened to them that had not been decreed by God, any more than it could have happened to Christ.

I just recently went through the worst experience of my Christian life. I was lied to and lied about. I watched people that I loved and trusted stick a knife in my back. I saw wrong prevail and the truth dragged through the mud. The philosophy of "the end justifies the means" was used by professing Christians to lie and distort facts in

order to get what they wanted regardless of the cost. Where was God while all of this injustice was taking place? **He was the Master of Ceremonies and in control of the whole thing, just as He was at Calvary and just as He was in Acts 4 when the disciples were beaten.** Nothing happened to me that my heavenly Father had not ordained. If I did not believe that, I could not help but be bitter and desire revenge. If I said I was not deeply hurt, I would be lying. However, I can honestly pity some of the people who were the most dishonest and malicious. I can face both God and those who tried to do me in and know that I did the right thing and acted in the right way. The results always belong to God. His will shall be accomplished regardless of who appears to win today. My only responsibility is a conscience void of offense before God and men.

Do you think the believers in Acts, Chapter 4, believed they had done something wrong and felt guilty because of the bad results, or were they sure that they were in the will of God despite the attitude and persecution by the leaders? Can you imagine one of those nice, sweet, "peace at any price" people standing up and saying, "Well, you know, we really asked for a lot of this trouble by the way we went about our preaching. We should not preach those offensive doctrines that the Jews hate, and we surely should not have been so dogmatic." That may pass as "Christian love and godly wisdom" in this wishy-washy generation, but we all know it is an insult to the zeal and courage of those early believers who established truth on the earth with their very blood.

No, my friend, there is no contradiction between the sovereign decrees of God and fervent, believing prayer. Read the words in Acts 4 again and see that it was their confidence in the fact that God decrees all things that come to pass which gave those Christians the courage and faith to pray in time of affliction. It is in the text. Only a deliberate twisting of the words necessitated by a man-centered theology can get anything else out of this passage.

In verse 29, the people finally get around to **asking for something**. Isn't it amazing that they have been worshipping and praising God without asking Him to stop the persecution or kill the persecutors? It is even more amazing that when they do finally ask for specific help from God that they ask for **grace to boldly keep on preaching the very same message that got them into trouble in the first place**. They leave the persecution with God and pray for boldness to declare what they know is the truth of God, regardless of the results. My friend, that is real prayer. As you can see, real prayer is a joyful submission to a sovereign God to be used for His purposes. Little wonder that we are all half-scared to really cry to God to be used by Him, in His way, and for His glory. It is much safer to listen to someone like Jimmy Baker and pray for a new camper to use at the lake (be sure to tell God what color you want).

We could outline Acts 4:23-31 this way:

- I. vss. 23-28 Confidence in God's sovereignty - *The true foundation for prayer.*
- II. vss. 29-30 Asking for the right things - *The true test of prayer.*

III. v. 31 The felt realization of God's presence and power - *The true answer to prayer.*

BASIC FACT NUMBER TWO: Prayer can be used as a means of refusing to submit to what we know is the will of God!

Brethren, I suspect we have come to one of the real problems in true prayer. We often try to use prayer to get around God's providence. We are unwilling to bow to God's sovereignty and dare to use prayer as a means of trying to get God to change His mind. True prayer is nothing less than a **joyful submission to the will of our sovereign God!** Have we not all been guilty of trying to get God to change His mind in a situation that goes against our flesh? What is even worse, we dare to call our whimpering to God to get Him to do what we want "prayer"! We actually try to use prayer as a means of refusing to submit to the clear, revealed will of God. Even the best of God's children are guilty of this awful sin. Let us look at a classic case in the life of Abraham:

And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do.....
(Gen 18:17).

In this verse and the context, we see that God informs Abraham that He is going to destroy Sodom. Abraham is told exactly what God is about to do. However, Abraham is not in agreement with God's purposes and decides to "pray" to God in the hopes of changing His mind. The dialogue is a beautiful illustration of the point I am trying to establish. Notice the exchange between Abraham and God:

23 And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? 24 Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? 25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? 26 And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. 27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes: 28 Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. 29 And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for forty's sake. 30 And he said unto him, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. 31 And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. 32 And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. 33 And the LORD went his

way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place. Gen 18:23-31

Now remember that this dialogue took place as a direct result of God revealing to Abraham His purpose to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is not in agreement with what God is about to do. Verses 23 and 24 make it appear that Abraham's only concern is for the reputation of God. Did Abraham have the faintest notion that there were fifty righteous people in Sodom, or do you think that his only concern is his nephew Lot? It is interesting to note that neither God nor Abraham ever mention Lot by name even though both knew that he was the real concern in Abraham's heart. Notice that God revealed that He was going to destroy both Sodom and Gomorrah, but He only mentions Sodom in His response to Abraham. Why mention Gomorrah when Abraham's only interest is in Sodom?

God graciously condescends to Abraham's terms and agrees to spare the city if there are fifty righteous people found. That should end the matter, but Abraham decides to "pray" some more. He first of all acknowledges how humble he is and then proceeds to show how deceitful he is. Verse 28 is a classic example of twisting the facts and loading the dice. The first request is to spare the whole city for the sake of fifty righteous people. If Abraham wants to drop off five, then he should have said, "Will you destroy the city if forty-five are found?" However, he frames the statement in such a way that the question is not forty-five but only a matter of five. It is like saying, "Lord, would you quibble over a mere *five* people?" Abraham sets up the equation backwards. At the end of verse 28 God corrects Abraham's math and promises not to destroy the city if "forty-five" righteous can be found.

We would surely expect Abraham to be satisfied and ready to be quiet. Not so! Abraham is determined to impose his will on God and correct God's purposes. As you read verses 29 through 32 while Abraham goes from 45 to 40, to 30, to 20, and finally down to 10, you wait for the hammer of Almighty God to fall on this insignificant gnat for his impudence! However, that never happens, not even when Abraham piously says, "I will speak yet but this once." He has already done that five times. Why doesn't the hammer fall? Simply because God is Abraham's friend and God dearly loves him. God is longsuffering with His children. He knows that Abraham's nose is out of joint, and He surely sees through the whole facade of Abraham's prayers. However, God is concerned with changing Abraham's heart and attitude. Notice that in the KJV, verse 33, God calls this exchange "communings." I would call it "badgering," but then, I am not as powerful or as gracious as God.

This illustration teaches us that **one** (but not the **only** one) function of prayer is to **change us**. God did not change His purpose but He did use Abraham's prayer to change Abraham's attitude. Prayer changed Abraham. We all sometimes try to use prayer to get God to change His mind, instead of gladly submitting to His sovereign purposes. On the other hand, God often, instead of clobbering us with His absolute sovereignty, which He has every right to do, will allow us to vent our fears and disagreements to show us how unreasonable we are acting. Did you ever blow something out of proportion that had been done to you? You kept nursing it inside of you and it kept getting bigger and bigger in your mind. You had, in your mind, an

ironclad case against the person for what he had done. Finally you told someone how terribly you had been treated, but the more you tried to explain why it was so bad, the more your ironclad case fell apart. You began to realize it was really a small thing that should have been dropped. You knew that you were making a fool of yourself by trying to justify your feelings, and you wished you could shut up because of how ridiculous you appeared for feeling as you did. It took the "verbalizing" of the event to make you objective.

God often does the same thing with us. He patiently listens to us until we begin to see how ridiculous we are in trying to get Him to change His mind. As a result, our whole attitude and the content of our prayers are changed. We are humbled and brought to bow in worship to whatever His providence brings. We also praise Him anew and afresh for His sovereign patience with us.

This brings us to the next point in our discussion of prayer.

BASIC FACT NUMBER THREE: It is not wrong for us to pray what has been termed "selfish prayer."

Is it wrong to ask God to keep my children safe as they travel, or that He enable them to find good employment? If my wife goes to the hospital for surgery, is it wrong to ask God to make the operation a success? In all of these cases, I have no knowledge of what God has decreed. Abraham may have been less than honest in the way he prayed, but was it right for him to be concerned for Lot and entreat God for his safety? Is it right for us to be concerned for the safety of loved ones and pray for their well-being? Perhaps another biblical illustration will help us. Let us look at David and one of his prayers:

13 And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. 14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die. 15 And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. II Sam 12:13-15.

You will remember that David had committed both adultery and murder. God sent Nathan the prophet to David, and through his message God convicted David of his awful sin. In the above verses, God clearly reveals what is going to happen. The child is going to die. As in Abraham's case, David has a clear revelation of God's will or decree. David still feels constrained to plead with God to spare the sick child:

16 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. 17 And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them.

Was David wrong in praying as he did? Had not God said that the child would die and therefore it was a waste of time to pray, or does that conclusion not necessarily follow? We learn a great lesson about prayer from this incident in David's life. The child died in spite of David's plea. You will remember that the servants were afraid to inform David of the child's death. They thought his state of mind might make him do something foolish. When David perceived the truth he asked, "Is the child dead?" When the servants said, "Yes," the Scripture tells us what David did:

20 Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat.

The moment David realized that the child was dead, he totally accepted God's providence. He first worshipped God and then proceeded to get on with his life. David's servants were amazed. They expected David to weep and wail and carry on in an uncontrolled manner. They questioned David, and we see in David's answer the heart of this lesson in prayer that we are studying:

21 Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. 22 And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? 23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

What is David saying? What is the attitude of his heart as he pleads with God to spare his child? David is saying this: "As long as that child had breath, I prayed to God alone as the only One who could keep him alive. God was pleased to answer my prayers with a 'no.' I said, 'Blessed be the name of the Lord' and got on with my life. I will bow in humble faith to God's sovereign providence." David may not have said out loud, "nevertheless, not my will but Thy will be done," but that attitude was certainly in his heart as he prayed. You and I may pray for whatever our heart desires, as long as we can sincerely leave it up to God to decide if the answer should be yes or no. I am aware that this is contrary to the basic premise of the current, typical teaching on prayer, but it is biblical. Even our blessed Lord had to pray, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Are we greater than our Master?

Perhaps it would be well to give one more illustration of this clear, biblical principle. In my booklet on "*The Sovereignty of God In Providence*" I spent a good deal of time in the Book of Habakkuk. That whole book is a classic example of the principle of prayer that we are discussing. In the first few verses Habakkuk challenges God's apparent inactivity. When God informs the prophet that He is about to send the Chaldeans to invade and mop up the nation of Israel, Habakkuk does exactly what Abraham did. He tries to convince God that this would be inconsistent with His character of holiness. Of course we realize that Habakkuk also does not want to see Israel nearly destroyed.

After God reminds Habakkuk that "the Lord is in His holy temple," the prophet's whole attitude changes. Listen to a real prayer from a confident heart:

1 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth. 2 LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy . . . 13 You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot. Selah.....16 I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. 17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. 19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. Hab. 3: 1,2,13,16-19.

It is obvious that Habakkuk's confrontation with God in prayer radically changed the prophet's whole perspective and attitude. He learned that God was always in control and always working out His own purposes and in doing so He uses everybody, including the wicked Chaldeans, to accomplish His purposes. Verse 2 is real prayer. Verse 13 shows a true understanding and application of God's purposes in history. Ultimately, everything that happens involves the people of God. Verses 6-19 shows a man worshipping in wonder and awe. Habakkuk knows his nation is about to be judged, but he has faith and hope that God will bring good out of it all, as well as glory to Himself. That is the right way to pray, and such prayer is sometimes possible only after God has used our wrong prayers to change us and our attitude.

BASIC FACT NUMBER FOUR: Prayer is ASKING, not TELLING God what to do.

Real prayer must be seen as asking, but we cannot see it in this light until we realize that God has every right to say no. When prayer is understood biblically, it is seen to be an attitude as well as an act. It involves the response of the heart to revealed truth as well as words of petition. Let me mention a few things that prayer *is not*.

1. Prayer is **not** giving God advice and telling Him what to do, when to do it, and who to use to accomplish it. All of this is to treat God as if He had no plan of His own to resolve the problem.

2. Prayer is **not** giving God information that He did not have before we prayed and gave it to Him. Have you ever "prayed" and carefully explained to God exactly what was happening, and when you were finished you felt, "Now God really understands what is going on and will be in a position to see the wisdom of my advice!" How conceited can we be?

I'm sure you heard of the man who felt led to pray for the families of the people killed in a plane crash. He stood up in a prayer meeting and said, "Lord, I ask you to bless the families of the people who died in that plane crash over in . . . (and the man forgot where the crash had occurred) . . . in, ah, ah . . . Lord I forget where it happened, but I'm sure You know. It was in all the papers this morning." I wonder if anyone felt like saying, "I hope God got the right edition of the paper." We may smile at that story, but do we not betray the same attitude when we feel "now God has the *real story*" after we have prayed?

By the way, nothing proves our faith as much as how we feel and act *after* we have prayed. We say that we "give up" and cast our burden on God. We confess to Him that the matter is in His hands. So we say! However, in reality that is often not the case. We "give up to God" and then proceed to manipulate every situation we can. We "let go" and then scheme for all we are worth. We "roll it on God," and then push and pull with every means that our flesh can conceive. You cannot pray in faith and scheme in the flesh at the same time.

Jay Adams has an excellent illustration showing this truth. A certain man was always depressed and complaining about everything. His friends learned never to ask him, "How are you?" unless they had a free hour to hear his many problems. One day a friend met the man and he was smiling and rejoicing. When asked why he was so happy, the man replied, "I do not have a single worry in the world." "Well," said his friend, "that is something new for you. Whatever happened that enabled you to get rid of all your worry?" The man replied, "I found a fellow that could worry better than I could, and I pay him to do all my worrying." His friend said, "Well it sure seems to work. How much do you pay for this service?" The former worrier said, "I pay the man \$500.00 a week." His friend exclaimed, "How in the world can you ever raise that kind of money each week?" "Oh," said the man, "that is his worry, not mine." I am sure you see the point. If we give God the problem, we must give Him *all* the problem.

How often do we lay something before God and pick it up again when we leave His presence? How often do we give it to God and then worry about how He can possibly find a way to do anything about it? Our problem is that we can't see how God can possibly do what *we want Him to do* in the situation.

Let me make three clear statements that define biblical prayer. They will show us why real prayer is so difficult for us. We often try to get God to agree with what we want instead of honestly seeking to know and bow to His sovereign will.

1. True prayer is a *frank admission that God is sovereign*. When we really pray we admit that the thing is in God's hands alone. We are saying that tomorrow, and all it brings, is not under our control but under His control. It is in His hands and not ours.
2. Prayer is a *joyful surrender to God's sovereign purposes*. We are acknowledging that God has the right and power to do whatever seems good to Him. We are saying that regardless of what God does tomorrow, we know it is part of the "all things" in Romans 8:28.

3. Prayer is *earnestly pleading with God for grace to glorify Him regardless of what He does*. We are really saying, "Father, give me grace to trust you and act like your child whether you say yes or no."

I remember using the above definitions for a message in Montreal. A lady got angry and did not come back to the meetings for three nights. When she came back, she said to me, "Mr Reisinger, last night was the first time I have gotten a good night's sleep for over two years." She proceeded to tell me what had happened. Her son had gotten involved in drugs. She had covered and lied for him. She had wept over him and gotten angry with him. She had threatened and pleaded and promised. She had come to her wits' end. She said, "Last night I got down beside my bed and put my son in God's hands. I told Him that He had every right to destroy my son and use him as an example of the folly of drugs. I pleaded with God to save my son and felt assurance that regardless of what happens, I was going to trust God. I went to bed and slept for the first night in two years."

In this lady's case, God was pleased to save her son about three months later. It does not always happen that way. However we must learn to put our lives, our jobs, and our children in God's hands. They are there, whether we like it or not. Our commitment of them to God in heartfelt prayer is merely learning to rest in faith in God's sovereign providence.

I repeat, isn't that one of the primary reasons that real prayer is so hard? Is it not a fact that we find it impossible to fervently pray about something that we are pretty sure is not going to come out the way that we want it to come out? Isn't that part of James' accusation to us concerning our attitude toward tomorrow? We know what we want to happen in our business and in our life we already have it planned out. It is difficult to get into that "nevertheless, not my will but your will" attitude of heart. It is far easier to just say, "Lord, bless the plans that *I already have figured out*." Real prayer is acknowledging that we realize our own insufficiency and need. We are confessing our total dependence upon God for each day and all it brings. We should always remember what James says, especially when we *don't* pray:

13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. James 4:13-16.

James is saying, "You either do not pray about your plans, or else you plan without considering my sovereignty." Earlier we saw that James accuses us of either not praying at all or praying amiss with a concern for only our own selfish desires. When all that we are concerned about is God blessing our plans and ideas, it is nigh onto impossible to really pray sincerely.

BASIC FACT NUMBER FIVE: A belief in the sovereignty of God will not hinder real prayer, but instead it will foster it.

It is a belief in free will that kills biblical prayer. Free will preaching may produce what Hosea called "howling on our beds," but even that will not last very long. I venture to say that you have never been in a prayer meeting where anyone believed in free will or denied God's sovereignty and prayed accordingly. I remember one deacon in my first pastorate who constantly tried to pray from the perspective of his free will theology, but could never do it consistently. Every week he would say, "Lord, I know you love everyone in the entire world exactly alike. You love every person in the USA. You are trying to save every soul in our state. I know you love everyone in the town of Lewisburg (by this time he was talking more slowly). Lord, I know you love everyone living on Third street. You love both of my neighbors." Now about this time, the man would begin to cry and say, "But Lord, they will not listen to the gospel. They will not come to church. Oh, Lord, send your Holy Spirit and convict them. Oh, God, begin to draw them to yourself." The next week it would be the same routine. That dear man never did see that he was constantly forced to acknowledge God's sovereignty before he could pray (the first part of his oration each week was really not prayer, but preaching to me).

Isn't it amazing that Christians forget all about man's so-called free will when they get on their knees? Don't we all love the absolute sovereignty of God when we are calling on His name in desperate need.

I will never forget a dear lady in a Bible class I taught in Rochester, NY. I believe she loved the Lord, but she had never been exposed to the truth of sovereign grace. She greatly enjoyed the class in Romans until we came to the doctrine of God's sovereignty. She said, "This class is ruining my prayer life and I am not coming back." I said, "I do not blame you. However, I would like to know what I said that would have a bad effect on your prayer life." She replied, "This business about free will and the sovereignty of God. If what you say is true, then why should I pray?" I asked her what she had prayed for that morning (always good to check up!) and she opened her purse and got out a worn prayer list. That morning she had pleaded with God on behalf of two nurses in an African country experiencing civil war. I said, "What did you ask God to do?" Without hesitation, the woman replied, "I asked God to keep my nurse friends safe. I prayed that neither army would hurt their ministry or the workers. I also prayed that none of the bombs or bullets would destroy any of the property." I looked at her in pretended amazement and said, "Did you really ask those things? How could you? All of those soldiers have free wills. Would it not be better to entreat an ambassador to try to intervene with the military in that country? Surely you do not expect God to control a whole war, every soldier, and every bomb and bullet, just to keep two people safe?" The lady was rather elderly and I do not think she followed me, but a lot of other people did. That dear saint of God had cried to a sovereign God that morning without questioning His power or thinking about the free will of sinful soldiers. She unconsciously knew God could control every soldier, from the general down to the private, and direct every bullet and piece of shrapnel in answering her prayer and keeping her nurse friends safe. In her heart that dear lady was talking to the *sovereign* God.

It is amazing to me that new converts, especially those converted under the preaching of sovereign grace, have no difficulty with the sovereignty of God and prayer. Shortly

after my daughter-in-law was converted, she attended a different church one Sun day when I was away preaching. I phoned that evening and asked her how she had enjoyed the service. Her answer was amusing. She said, "It was strange, Dad. The preacher sounded like he did not agree with you while he was preaching, but when he started to pray, he sounded like he agreed with you 100%." She was right. You may listen to many Arminian *sermons* (they come out of the preacher's *mind*), but you will never hear an Arminian *prayer* (real prayer comes out of the *heart*).

BASIC FACT NUMBER SIX: Prayer is essential because God has ordained it as one of the means to accomplish His decrees.

The question is not "*can* God do something without prayer?" but rather, "Has God Himself sovereignly decreed that He will use prayer as a means of accomplishing what He has ordained?" A real burden to pray does not begin with us, but with God. If you doubt this, all you need to do is make a decision to have a burden and see if it works. Pick a missionary or any other person, and decide you will have a burden for them and their ministry. Your burden will last about as long as the dew lasts after the sun comes up. Has it not been your experience that real burdens are often those that you would not particularly choose? Sometimes God lays an individual on your heart with whom you have little relationship. You may not even like the person or you may have just recently met them. However, the Holy Spirit keeps bringing that person to your mind and you feel compelled to pray for them.

I remember a girl getting upset with me the first time she heard the truth of God's sovereign election. She said, "If I believed that, I would quit praying for my mother to get saved." Her statement gave me a hint that I decided to pursue. "Do you faithfully pray for your mother's conversion?" I asked. She had tears in her eyes, and answered, "I pray for her almost constantly. Sometimes at work I silently raise my heart to God and I feel myself beginning to cry and I have to go to the washroom. I have a real burden for my mother's soul." I said, "You did not mention your father. Is he a Christian?" "No," she replied. "How often do you pray for him? Have you ever shed tears pleading with God to save him?" She got a strange look on her face and said, "Now that you mention it, I rarely ever pray for my Dad, but I never fail to pray for my Mom." I smiled and said, "I think your Dad is the one you better worry about. I believe God is getting ready to save your mother. As long as you can plead to God with tears, you have every reason to believe that God's Spirit is moving you to pray. The Holy Spirit does not move us to pray in vain!"

I do not believe that girl could have worked up a real burden for her father, no matter how hard she tried. Likewise, she could not have been truly burdened to pray for her mother if God was not purposing to work in saving grace. God never burdens our hearts to plead for things that are not His will, and we can't arbitrarily choose what we want and then force God to include that particular thing in His purposes. This would mean that we control the world and run it with our prayers.

I am sure that some hyper-Calvinists will read this and say a loud "Amen." The only problem is that what I have said in no way justifies a cold heart that never prays! Let

me make some very pointed remarks. I think they will help us to be sure that we have the theology of God's sovereignty straight.

One: Prayer begins with God and grows out of His decrees or purposes.

Two: The Holy Spirit burdens people to pray for those things that God has ordained and is about to do.

Now if these two facts are true, and they are, then you and I can tell whether we are in the will of God and under His blessing by *whether we have a burdened heart*. My friend, if you shed no tears at the throne of grace, it proves that God is not using you. You are on the shelf or maybe you are not even converted! God is not accomplishing any of His gracious purposes through you simply because your heart is cold as an iceberg. I did not say that *God was not accomplishing His purposes*, but I did say that *He was not using you to do it*.

Follow me carefully for a moment. If God is the One Who burdens our hearts, and if He must either give us the desire of our heart or break our hearts by saying no, then where does that leave us if we have neither a burdened heart nor a broken heart? My friend, burdens begin as we seek God's throne and ask Him to burden our hearts. We tell Him that we want to be used by Him. We plead with Him to interrupt our complacency and revive our hearts. We seek Him until we feel His Spirit moving in our hearts. We ought to pray the following chorus:

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart, and love that soul through me. And may I humbly do my part, to win that soul to Thee.

That chorus is acknowledging that the very desire and burden to faithfully witness must begin with God. It pleads with God to burden our hearts so that we will both want to-and be able to-love and pray and witness. Can any true Christian desire less?

No, my hyper Calvinist friend, you cannot get off the hook that easy. We will not let your cold heart hide behind a pile of theology books, even if the theology in the books is correct. Jesus told us to ask, seek, and knock. He promised that *we would receive, we would find, and it would be opened to us*. Are you receiving, and finding, and are opportunities being opened up to you? The single most important thing about us is, *"What are we asking for, what are we seeking, and what are we knocking for?"* The moment we agree that God has sovereignly ordained prayer as a means to accomplish His decrees, then we should see that we are not being used by God if we are not earnestly asking, seeking, and knocking as part of that process. Let me summarize and repeat this last point with some personal questions:

1. Are we burdened to pray for anything specific? If not, then God is not using us to accomplish any of His gracious purposes.
2. Who are the specific people for whose salvation we feel burdened to pray? If there are none, then God is not using us to gather His elect to Himself.

3. How many groanings for revival has God heard from our congregation? James says, "You have not because you ask not."

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that we will cry to God for the things that we really want. That being true, our prayer life is a good barometer of the spiritual condition of our Christian life. When we really want something and plead with God with a burdened heart, then, as I said before, God must either grant the request or break our hearts and say, "No." Again, how often have we *neither* a burdened *nor* a broken heart?

4. If God opened the windows of heaven this very moment and poured into our hearts every single spiritual blessing that we have been burdened to pray for in the last month, how many of us would be precisely as spiritually empty then as we are at this very moment? If such is our case, dare we blame that on God's sovereignty?

I hope I have convinced you that a firm belief in the sovereignty of God in no way conflicts with, or in any way hinders, true prayer. To the contrary, nothing is so contradictory as believing in the sovereignty of God and **not praying**. I wish I could write the following words in gold and put them over the pulpit of every Calvinistic or Reformed Church (and also tattoo them on my own brain):

A day without prayer is a day that totally denies the sovereignty of God and glorifies the free will and self sufficiency of man.

Let me summarize this chapter. We saw that (1) the believers in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures never had any problem "reconciling" God's absolute sovereignty with the need to pray. They simply *believed both truths*. We noted that (2) prayer is often used as a means of *trying to evade the clearly revealed will of God*. We emphasized that (3) true prayer is *asking* God, not *giving* God information He did not have or instructions in how He should go about answering our prayers. We finished by stating that a day without prayer is a denial of our boast that we believe in the sovereignty of God. Let us continue with some positive statements about prayer and sovereignty.

Chapter Three Why Is Prayer So Important?

Why is it so essential that we see the great importance of prayer? Prayer is commanded, and God has promised to answer prayer. The people who base everything on the myth of man's free will distort prayer in one direction, and hyper-Calvinists distort it in another direction. Let's look at some biblical facts that steer us clear of both these two errors.

ONE: Prayer is essential to the fulfillment of God's purposes. Some may wonder at the validity of such a statement, and standing alone with no reference to the rest of Scripture the statement would be very wrong. However, when stated in

conjunction with God's revealed purpose to use prayer as *an ordained means* to accomplish His purposes, the statement is very biblical, and only a hyper-Calvinist would object to it.

I trust that these truths on prayer and God's sovereignty are beginning to make the foregoing facts clear. I hope that we have started to grasp the reality of the absolute necessity of prayer. God is not helpless to accomplish His purposes without our prayers, but prayer is essential just because our sovereign God has decreed that He will work through our prayers. The God that ordained to spare Israel when they made the golden calf also ordained that Moses would stand and intercede lest they be consumed (Ex 32:1-11). True prayer always begins with "according to His will" simply because God is the first Mover in prayer, and not us. Since true prayer is always "according to His will," then it follows that it is impossible for us to be consciously walking in God's will and at the same time to be prayerless. To be prayerless is to prove that God is not working in and through us.

We can safely lay down two clear biblical facts: (1) Prayer is essential in accomplishing God's purposes because God Himself has decreed to accomplish His will (or purposes) through the prayers of His people. In fact, prayer itself is one of the things decreed by God. (2) Because prayer is so tied in with God's will for us, one of the best barometers of our spiritual condition is our daily prayer life. I am aware that stating this truth so bluntly will send most people (including me) on a guilt trip-*and it should!* There is no one thing for which I must ask forgiveness as much as a failure to pray consistently with a warm heart.

What we are saying is this: Prayer is one of the greatest means at our disposal to truly glorify God, and prove our love and faith. For instance, even if you are a millionaire and own the largest bakery in town, you are still commanded in Scripture to "pray for your daily bread." God knows our needs before we ask, and it would seem we could surely supply our own bread under such circumstances, but we are still told to pray for our daily supply. Of course we realize that "daily bread" means all of the things necessary to life, including life itself. Understood correctly, praying for our daily bread is just another way of acknowledging that every day, and all things in that day, are under the sovereign control of God. It is basically the same exhortation as James 4:13-15.

God desires that we commune daily with Him as our heavenly Father. He delights to commune with us, as well as shower us with good things from His storehouse. Daily prayer demonstrates that we are conscious that every present blessing is from God and our dependence is in Him alone for any future blessing. You cannot be *praying* and be *self-sufficient* at the same time; likewise, it is simply impossible to *neglect prayer* without being *self-reliant*. I will repeat what I said earlier: **the greatest denial of God's sovereignty is a day without prayer!**

I can illustrate this principle with a parent who has a son in college. A parent can pay his son's expenses at college in one of two ways. He can give him one check for the entire semester, or you can give him enough for one week. Both ways will supply his need, with the only difference being *how often you would like to have a letter or*

phone call from him. The "once a week" will get far more letters and phone calls. I heard of a boy who wrote home from college and said, "Dear Dad, No Mon. No Fun. Your Son." The father wrote back, "Dear Son, Too Bad. How Sad. Your Dad." I am sure you see the point. God delights in hearing from His children, and one of the ways He assures this will happen is to put things on a daily basis.

We must learn to see that prayer is absolutely essential for the simple reason that a sovereign God has purposed to use prayer as the means to reach an end. At the same time, we must never think of prayer as "giving God a chance" to exercise His power. God's absolute sovereignty and the necessity of prayer may appear to be in direct opposition, but they are both true. The Bible teaches that prayer is a **necessary means** appointed by a **sovereign God**, but in no sense does the Scripture teach that God's desires or purposes are crippled and unable to succeed because of a lack of prayer. We may, as individuals, fail to experience the joy of being used by God in a given instance, but not a single thing that God has decreed will ever be hindered by our failure or our lack of prayer. God's decrees do not change moment by moment according to the various options opened up to Him in a given situation by our prayers. God plans and carries out His purposes without any change. A.W. Pink said it well in the following quotation:

Such thoughts of 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 who was like the chameleon, which changes its color every day. What encouragement is there to lift up our hearts to One who was in one mind yesterday and in another today? What would be the use of petitioning an earthly king, if we knew he was so changeable 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*? Because He is "without variableness and 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." From: *The Sovereignty of God*, by A.W. Pink, Banner of Truth, p. 113.

I recently read where a basketball coach in a Christian college told the team that if they had enough faith and prevailed in prayer they could win every game and be the national champions. What horrible theology! Imagine team A praying for one hour and God saying, "Great, fellows, you are going to win." Team B, their opponents, pray for two hours and God says, "Sorry, team A, but team B out prayed you; they are going to win." Team A gathers the whole school together for an all-night prayer meeting and God is again forced to change His mind and says, "Sorry, team B, but team A has overcome your volume of prayer and they will win." Team B could then get the whole town involved in a prayer and fasting day, forcing God to again reverse His decree. I am sure we can see how wrong such a view of prayer is when we lay out its implications. This view makes prayer, or the amount of prayer, like either the volume of noise at a pep rally or the pressure exerted by a political group on Congress. Whoever exerts the most pressure gets what he wants. According to such an idea, we could buy what we wanted from God by employing enough people to

pray-meaning "pressure" God-for our wants (I deliberately did not use the word "need"). This is a denial of God's sovereignty and an insult to both His wisdom and His purposes.

Perhaps someone is thinking about the lesson Jesus taught in Luke 11:5-10. This is known as "The Parable of the Importunate Friend" and it certainly teaches us to persist in prayer. However, Jesus is encouraging us to pray by making a deliberate contrast. He is not telling us that God is like the man who was asleep and did not wish to be bothered. The God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. Jesus is telling us that our heavenly Father is *exactly opposite of that man*. The application is this: If a man that does not wish to be bothered can be forced into granting your request just to keep you from pestering him, **how much more** ready is your heavenly Father, who **delights to have you come any time of the day or night**, to hear and answer the prayers of His children. That passage does not contradict what I have been saying; it reinforces it.

As another illustration, suppose you were God and one of your earthly children was a farmer who desperately needed rain to save his crops. The farmer pleaded faithfully and fervently for rain and claimed the promise in James. At the very same time, the Bible conference on the adjoining property was pleading in prayer for sunny weather with no rain so that the "biggest mission conference in the history of the denomination" would be a success. How would you decide which one to answer? Do you see why it is essential that we understand that prayer does not begin with *our wants* but with *God's purposes*?

TWO: What About Unanswered Prayer? The above illustration brings us to our next point. How do we reconcile the fact of "unanswered prayer" with the "clear promises of Scripture"? Should the farmer believe that God did not answer his prayers if there was no rain? Would no rain prove that the Bible conference crowd was more spiritual or had more "prayer power" because of its size? To ask such questions is to demonstrate how terribly wrong we are in our concept of prayer. To even entertain such an idea of unanswered prayer is to be driven to believe that God is either less than sovereign or else our faith is not strong enough to force His hand to move.

Once we see the true nature of prayer, there is no problem. If we understand that prayer is *asking* God and not *telling* God, then "no" is just as much an answer as "yes." A child of God who understands the truths we have been stating will realize that there is *no such thing as unanswered prayer*. Actually, a heart of faith and confidence in God's wisdom and sovereignty will view an answer of "no" from God to be just as kind and gracious as a "yes." God's "no" answers are not based on either reluctance or a lack of power on His part, they are based just as much on His love and grace as when He says "yes." I am sure that all of us can look back and praise God for graciously saying no to some of the requests for which we desperately pleaded.

We must see that every prayer is answered with either a yes or no. Sometimes the no is a "wait, it is not yet the right time." I repeat, the believing heart is just as grateful for the answer "No, my child, that is not good for you" as he is for the positive answer. An indulgent parent may have difficulty saying no to a spoiled child, but God

loves His children too much to allow them to become undisciplined brats. He is too kind and gracious to allow us to destroy ourselves with our own unbridled selfishness. We ought to gratefully acknowledge God's "no" answers just as enthusiastically as His "yes" answers.

If we keep reminding ourselves of what we have been saying it will clear up a lot of confusion and apparent contradictions. Instead of thinking of prayer as the means of getting God to give us what *we want*, we will see that *true prayer is first concerned with honoring God Himself*. When we pray correctly, we gladly acknowledge His universal rule over all things. We confess that our God controls even the sun and the rain. Biblical prayer makes us realize that only God Himself can keep us from sin or deliver our loved ones out of ignorance and darkness. Proper prayer calls out and proves our faith and love. In showing God that we are truly dependent on Him, we please Him and glorify His very person. *Prayer is an act of worship*. We praise God for all that He is and has revealed Himself to be, and this gives us the confidence to ask even greater things. Our Lord Jesus called the temple the "House of Prayer" and not the "House of Sacrifice." Every approach to God, including our singing and giving, is a form of prayer.

Prayer is one of the appointed means of obtaining spiritual blessings, and as such it is one of the methods by which we grow in grace and the knowledge of God. Prayer humbles us and delivers us from self-sufficiency. It increases our faith and worship. It is one of the best barometers of our love and thankfulness to our God. If our prayers are correct, the following words of the Psalmist will aptly describe us: I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. Ps 116: 1,2

Chapter Four **God's "Repentance" and Prayer**

"Mr. Reisinger, what about the passages in the Bible where God is said to repent and change His mind?"

We will look at Exodus 32: 1-14 as a sample of the passages that seem to disprove nearly everything I have said so far concerning prayer. Exodus 32: 14 clearly states that God changed His mind. What does the verse really mean?

Chapters 32 through 34 of Exodus are a parenthesis. These chapters record an incident that happened while Moses was receiving the Tablets of Stone on Mt. Sinai. Let us first make sure we understand what happened before we look at it in detail. I would suggest the following outline for Exodus 32: 1-14:

I. vss. 1-6 **The Sin - A Study in Unbelief.**

v. 1. *"And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us*

gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him."

Unbelief is very impatient. It lives by sight and not by faith-better to have a golden calf that can be seen than an invisible God that is apprehended only by faith.

v. 2. *"And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me."*

Aaron knew better and was probably either trying to stall for time or hoping the Israelites would think twice before parting with their personal gold. His stall tactic did not work. He underestimated the Israelite's zeal for idolatry.

v. 3. *"And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron."*

Unbelief is persistent in its self-will. It does not consider the personal cost as long as it gets its own way.

v. 4. *"And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."*

Unbelief is forgetful of past blessings and only concerned with "now."

v. 5. *"And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."*

Unbelief can hide under the pious pretense of honoring God.

v. 6. *"And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play."*

Unbelief is deceitful and can actually treat licentious behavior as worship to God.

II. vss. 7-10 **God's Just Anger Against Their Sin.**

v. 7. *"And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves:"*

God appears to totally disown His covenant people.

v. 8. *"They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."*

The Lord expresses His amazement at the "quickness" of their rebellion. This is a good study that parallels your life and mine.

v. 9. *"And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people."*

They were "stiffnecked" from persistent rebellion. This expression shows the head held high in contempt and pride for such a long period that it becomes impossible to bow the head.

v. 10. "Now therefore **let me alone**, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will **make of thee a great nation.**"

God appears ready to destroy the whole nation for their sin and start a new nation with Moses.

The above verses must be read in conjunction with Ex 24:6-8 where both the people and the Book of the Covenant were sprinkled in blood. Israel has just become God's special covenant nation. God had no choice but to be angry since He cannot excuse sin without atonement. God could, and should, justly punish us every single time we sin. The only reason He doesn't is because we have a mediator who stands in God's presence for us. However, He must actually mediate or we would perish. Even God's sovereign purposes and plans must be literally carried out in a way consistent with His own holy character. We must always remember that we are not forgiven by an act of love or even by an act of sovereign power. God's amazing love does not have the ability or authority to forgive any sin unless the penalty of that sin has been paid in strict justice by a true atonement. Likewise, the almighty sovereign power of God cannot forgive a single sin unless there is an acceptable Intercessor pleading the case. We are forgiven, and kept forgiven, only because One stands between us and God's wrath and continually intercedes for us on the grounds of the new covenant established in His atoning work. The sovereign electing purposes of God could not be fulfilled without both the death of Christ and His constant intercession. In the same manner, God's purpose to bring the Israelites safely into the land of Canaan cannot excuse their sin of idolatry. God must deal with that sin righteously. Moses must intercede or Israel will perish. It is that simple.

III. vss. 11-14 **Moses' Intercession and God's Repentance.**

*(11) And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth **thy** wrath wax hot against **thy** people, which **thou** hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? (12) Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. (13) Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swearest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever. (14) And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. Ex 32:11-14.*

How are we to understand these words? What options do we have as we seek to honestly interpret the statement that "the Lord *repented of the evil* which he thought to do . . ." Is God actually capable of committing evil? Is Moses telling us that God is capricious and changes His mind? Does He harbor sinful thoughts? Are we to believe that Moses proved, in this particular instance, that he was more powerful, gracious and righteous than God Himself? If we take these words at their face value, apart from their context and the rest of Scripture, then that is all it can mean. We must then believe that if Moses had not been there to persuade God to "repent," then God

would have destroyed Israel and made a fool of Himself. He would have frustrated His own purposes and broken the covenant that He made with Abraham. If such is really the case, we ought to worship Moses instead of God.

It is clear that the "obvious surface" meaning of these words cannot be true. God would then be a sinner like us and Moses would be greater than God because he could keep his cool and control his anger better than God. There has to be a better way to approach these verses than that.

The Bible often uses human expressions and applies human descriptions to God as a means of helping us as creatures to understand His dealings with us. The writers of Scripture will often write their observations of things as they appear to be. We do the same thing. Each day the radio announcer gives the time when the sun will set and the time the sun will rise the next day. He knows, and so do his listeners, that the sun neither rises nor sets as it appears to move across the sky. The earth is doing the moving and it, not the sun, is going down and coming back up.

Before God's chosen sheep are brought safely into the fold, they, like all other men, are under God's wrath and subject to condemnation. That is what Paul meant in Eph 2:3 when he said, ". . . [we] were by *nature* the children of wrath, *even as others*." God's electing grace neither removed God's wrath from us nor did it save us from sin. It is true that election **made certain** that *we would be saved and delivered from wrath*, but purposing to make certain that will happen does not eliminate the necessity of it actually happening at a given point in time. God planned and purposed that Christ would die on the cross for our sins, but that fact in no way made it unnecessary for Christ to actually experience the real pains of death on the cross. When Christ died He was forsaken by the Father, and yet His Father never loved Him more than at that very moment. The same thing is true of God's sheep. Even when we were literally under wrath, because we were outside of Christ, we were also assured of salvation because we were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world. Both of these things are true at the same time.

It appeared that God radically changed His mind and attitude toward us when we were forgiven, but in reality it was we who changed and not God. The actual change that took place enabled us to receive and appreciate what had been true all along. We were like a man walking into the face of a strong wind. He pulls his coat over his face and bows his head as far as he can to protect himself from the biting wind. Without realizing it, he walks in a circle and soon feels the wind at his back. He says, " My, I'm glad the wind changed direction."

We looked into heaven and all we could see was the wrath of God. When we were brought to bow in repentance and faith before our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw and felt the love and grace of God. It appeared that God had changed His personality or attitude, when in reality we had been changed and had come under a different attribute in God's dealing with us. God was just as loving before we were saved as He is now, and He hates sin now just as much as before we were saved. Under His forgiveness, we look through different eyes and see a different aspect of God's character and purpose.

In Exodus 32, it surely appears that God changed His mind. In reality, He neither changed His covenant promises nor His immediate purposes. What He did was accomplish His sovereign purpose toward Israel by using Moses and his prayers as the necessary means to that end. It is foolish to ask, "But what if Moses had been unwilling to pray?" We are tempted to respond, "Then Israel would have indeed perished and God's purpose would have failed." That would indeed be the case if the "if" could ever be a possibility, but that "if" cannot be considered as a possibility. Our only reply to such a "what if" question must be, "That is a nonsense question because it *supposes* something that is *absolutely impossible*." When asked what would have happened if something that *did happen* had not in fact *actually happened*, we must reply, "But it *did really happen!*" A lady who was fighting against the truth of God's sovereign election once asked me, "What would have happened to you if you had not received Christ the night that you did?" I replied, "But *I did!*" I refused to speculate about the impossible. She got rather upset, but then most people who want to philosophize instead of deal with clear facts usually get upset when you refuse to go outside of Scripture and discuss a theology that is based only on human wisdom.

What I am saying is this: Before we were converted, we were guilty sinners under God's wrath while at the very same time we were the elect of God and included in His purposes of grace. When we came to a living faith in Christ, we *experimentally* came under grace and it seemed like God Himself had changed in His attitude toward us. In reality, we were the ones who changed. We came under a different apprehension of God's character.

Let us now try to unravel the text. First of all, let us get straight in our mind what happened in the incident in Exodus 32.

1. God had just given Israel the Tablets of Stone upon which He had written with His finger the terms of the old covenant, the Ten Commandments (Ex 34:27,28).
2. Israel had solemnly bound itself by oath and pain of death to keep that covenant (Ex 24:4-6).
3. While Moses was on the mount receiving the written copy of the covenant, the Israelites had openly and brazenly rejected God and were breaking the first commandment on the Tablets by making a golden calf to worship.
4. Under the clear terms of the covenant, God had no choice but to destroy them for their disobedience. Elect nation or not, grace cannot be given at the expense of justice (Psalm 85). Probably one of the worst parts of the whole sordid affair is the irpretense of worship and prayer while practicing idolatry.

It is interesting to note that man is the only creature made with the capacity to apprehend and intelligently worship God. It is this ability that raises man, as created in the image of God, above the whole animal kingdom. When Adam fell that capacity was ruined, but not eliminated. Man still has all of his faculties, and he is still a religious creature. It is strange but true that man's basic God-given religious nature is the root of all of his idolatry. Notice how easy it is for the Israelites to transfer their

religious fervor to a new object, and in doing so, in their stupidity, they sink lower than the animals. A.W. Pink has stated this well:

The religious element in man's nature was not eradicated by sin, but while every faculty of his mind and every instinct of his nature is debased and perverted, man's complete ruin and his greatest guilt are seen in the degradation of those same faculties, originally given as the means of worshiping God. The endowments which placed him above all other creatures, now sinks him beneath them. From *Gleaning From Exodus*, A.W. Pink, p 321

The second thing to note is found in Verse 7. In my mind, this is the key to the whole passage. Why does God say, "Let me alone" when Moses has not yet uttered a word? How can God say, "I will start all over and make you a great nation" when He has just delivered this people from Egypt because of an unconditional covenant He made with Abraham? When we look at the whole picture, we can see that God is actually telling Moses to act as an intercessor. God is literally saying, "Moses, if you let Me al one and do not intercede for these people, I have no choice but to destroy them." Sometimes we say, "Do not interfere with me in what I must do," when what we really mean is, "Please help me figure out a way to avoid this situation." Moses surely realized that he was all that stood between God and the Israelite's just destruction. However, God chose to speak to Moses in such a way that it also became a real test for Moses. Will Moses jump at the chance to become the "father of a new nation"? Will h is ego swell at the thought of actually taking the place of the great Abraham himself? Or will Moses prove the grace of God is in his heart and plead with God to forgive the people? Of course, we know that God knew exactly what Moses would do. After a ll, it was God who put the grace in the heart of Moses in the first place. However, Moses *must still intercede* and he *must do so willingly*. And, by God's grace and sovereign power, Moses did both-and he did so only because God has so ordained it as the necessary means of fulfilling His purpose for Israel.

Moses is a picture of our blessed Lord. Here Moses is a type of the truth of John 17:2,9. Moses, like our Lord, made himself one with his people, and this was by His own choice. Moses, like our faithful Saviour, loved his people in spite of their sin . Of course, we know that Moses was not consistent in his love for Israel. He got disgusted with them and wanted to turn his back on them on another occasion (Num 11:10-15). But our Lord is always consistent in His love. He loves His own "unto the end."

In his prayer, Moses (1) appealed to God's grace (v. 11). It was God's sovereign grace and power that brought Israel out of Egypt. Is that not our appeal when we sin today (I John 1:9)? He (2) appealed to God's glory (v. 12). Where would God's honor be in the sight of the heathen? Our Lord desired to be glorified so that He could glorify the Father (John 17:1). Moses (3) pleaded God's covenant made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our Saviour pleads the grounds of the "blood of the everlasting covenant" in the same manner. God's wrath against Israel was averted by that intercession. That prayer was essential and God ordained that prayer. He never intended to kill the Israelites. How do I know that? Look at another text:

I lay prostrate before the LORD those forty days and forty nights because the LORD had said he would destroy you. I prayed to the LORD and said, "O Sovereign LORD, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Overlook the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin. Otherwise, the country from which you brought us will say, 'Because the LORD was not able to take them into the land he had promised them, and because he hated them, he brought them out to put them to death in the desert.' But they are your people, your inheritance that you brought out by your great power and your outstretched arm. Dt 9:25-29.

*Now I had stayed on the mountain forty days and nights, as I did the first time, and the LORD listened to me at this time also. It was **not his will to destroy you.** Dt 10:10*

It is interesting to note the exact dialogue between Moses and God in Ex 32. In verse 7, God refers to Israel as "thy [Moses'] people," but in verse 11 Moses says, "They are Your [God's] people." They were God's people all along. God purposed to keep them and bring them into the promised land. For that to happen, Moses must pray in order to avert God's just judgment. God purposed to save and keep us, but for that to happen, Christ must come and die and make intercession for us. You and I are kept saved in answer to the prayer of Christ in exactly the same way Israel was kept from perishing by the intercession of Moses.

This explanation may not satisfy some people. I make no claim that this is the only possible way to understand the passage. However, one thing I know for sure: the verse cannot mean that God is a sinner who needs to repent, and therefore it cannot be teaching that God literally changed His mind. It appeared that God was ready to destroy His covenant people, but that would clearly contradict God's own oath and promise, and therefore such a view must be wrong. In this case, I can be positive concerning what the passage *cannot possibly mean* without being certain about what it *does actually mean*.