

# The Sovereignty of God

## Part 3: God's Purposes

### Divine Sovereignty and Prayer

Many object to the idea of foreordination, arguing that if all things are decreed or ordained from the beginning there is ***no reason to pray***, since God's decree cannot be changed. This objection cannot stand, however, because it misunderstands the fundamental purpose of prayer. When God commands us to pray, He is not giving us veto power over His decree. Rather, prayer is a divinely-ordained means of communicating with Him and bringing His sovereign will to pass. In this section, we will study God's purpose for prayer as it relates to His sovereignty by considering the following points:

- Prayer is fundamentally an acknowledgment of God's Sovereignty.
- Prayer is a humble expression of our dependence.
- Prayer changes the way we see things in time and space.

**Prayer is fundamentally an acknowledgment of God's Sovereignty:** Prayer's primary purpose is to honor and glorify God. Prayer fundamentally recognizes God's sovereignty, acknowledges His power, and submits to His will. Prayer, as it is defined and illustrated in the Bible: (1) seeks to align human thought and will to God's divine purposes; and (2) appeals to His power and ability to meet legitimate needs and desires. Consider, for example, the pattern of prayer given by Jesus to His disciples:

**Matthew 6:8-13:** <sup>8</sup>Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. <sup>9</sup>Pray, then, in this way: (1) **"Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name.** <sup>10</sup>Thy kingdom come. **Thy will be done,** On earth as it is in heaven. (2) <sup>11</sup>**Give us this day our daily bread.** <sup>12</sup>**And forgive us our debts,** as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup>And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. **For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."**

**Question #95:** List words and phrases in Jesus' pattern of prayer that reflect desire to align human thought and will to God's divine purposes: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Question #96:** List words and phrases in Jesus' pattern of prayer that reflect appeals to God's power and ability to meet legitimate needs and desires: \_\_\_\_\_

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When we pray according to Jesus' instructions, we do not tell God how to run His world. Rather, we humbly acknowledge His Sovereignty, and appeal to His Fatherly willingness to care for us. ***When we pray for our needs to be met***, it is not for the purpose of informing God of our needs, because Scripture says He already knows them (Matthew 6:8). All we need to do is acknowledge God's ability to meet those needs. God does instruct us to bring our needs and requests to Him in prayer (Philippians 4:6) ***for our benefit***. When we identify our needs and

seek His specific provision for them, we entrust ourselves to His perfect care and are blessed with peace beyond all comprehension (v. 7) Furthermore, ***when we pray for someone to be saved***, we acknowledge God's sovereign authority to save by granting repentance and regeneration (spiritual life) to a sinner who is dead in transgressions and sins. If we do not believe this but rather believe that God has already done everything needed for people to be saved and is simply waiting for them to respond, praying for God to save people is pointless.

**Question #97:** How does praying for God to meet our needs affirm His sovereignty? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Prayer is a humble expression of our dependence on God:** In prayer we humble ourselves before God, acknowledging our complete dependence upon Him. We do not dictate to God what His Divine will ought to be. Rather, we seek to align our thinking with His all-wise and powerful, loving and good will. Shall we instruct God about what is lacking in His wise plan? Shall a worm crawling through the earth tell the Almighty God how to govern His world? Silliness!

***Romans 11:34-36:*** <sup>34</sup>For who has known the mind of the Lord, **or who has become His counselor?** <sup>35</sup>**Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?** <sup>36</sup>For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen

Prayer is rather a confession of our weakness, even our inability to help ourselves. In prayer we appeal to the Almighty for His gracious enablement. We acknowledge that there is nothing in us to merit God's favor, but only sin and rebellion that offends His holiness and merits our utter destruction. ***Humble prayer expresses submission to His Holy will and utter dependence on His gracious provision*** of our needs. The Scripture plainly declares that He supplies our need.

***Acts 17:24-25:*** <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; <sup>25</sup>neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, **since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things;**

***Philippians 4:19:*** **And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus**

Consider the prayers of tax gatherer and the Pharisee in Luke 18. Which was heard?

***Luke 18:9-14:*** <sup>9</sup>And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup>**But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'** <sup>14</sup>**I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other;** for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

***James 4:10:*** **Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord,** and He will exalt you.

**Scripture plainly declares** that God hears and answers the prayers of those who bow before the sovereign authority of God seeking His loving and gracious provision.

**Question #98:** In your own words, explain how each of the following passages present prayer as a humble expression of our dependence upon God.

*Romans 11:34-36:* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Acts 17:24-25:* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Philippians 4:19:* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Luke 8:9-14:* \_\_\_\_\_

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*James 4:10:* \_\_\_\_\_

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**Prayer changes the way we see things in time and space:** The **Scripture plainly declares** that God responds to prayer and acts either to grant or deny our requests.

***James 4:2b:*** You do not have **because you do not ask.**

***John 14:13-14:*** <sup>13</sup>**And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do,** that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>**If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.**

***Psalms 91:15:*** **He will call upon Me, and I will answer him;** I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him, and honor him.

***Jeremiah 29:12:*** **Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.**

***Jeremiah 33:3:*** **Call to Me, and I will answer you,** and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.

***2 Corinthians 12:8-9:*** <sup>8</sup>Concerning this **I entreated the Lord three times** that it might depart from me. <sup>9</sup>**And He has said to me,** "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

***1 John 5:14-15:*** <sup>14</sup>**And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.** <sup>15</sup>**And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.**

**Question #99:** According to the above Scripture passages, in what ways does God respond to our prayers? \_\_\_\_\_

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Scripture also reveals that God makes conditional promises based on the prayerful obedience of His people to His commands and or warnings.

**2 Chronicles 7:13-14:** <sup>13</sup>If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or **if** I command the locust to devour the land, or **if** I send pestilence among My people, <sup>14</sup>and My people who are called by My name **humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then** I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

This kind of interaction between God and mankind occurs often in Scripture and has generated many questions about how all things can be foreordained. Since both are expressly taught in Scripture, there must be a way to reconcile them. The best solution is to understand that prayer and free moral choices are a means by which God brings to pass His sovereign will. God has ordained that our prayers and choices in time and space actually bring to pass elements of His plan for the ages. Divine sovereignty and free moral agency work harmoniously on the pages of Scripture. One clear example is the story of Jonah. Consider how God providentially directed the sea and the weather in the context of Jonah's disobedience. The other men in the ship realized this, prayed to God for deliverance, and are saved by throwing Jonah into the sea. Jonah was, by God's design, swallowed by a fish and prayed to God for deliverance. God responded to Jonah's prayer by causing the fish to spit him up onto dry land.

**Jonah 1:4, 14-2:1, 10:** <sup>4</sup>And **the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea** and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. . . . <sup>14</sup>Then they called on the LORD and said, "**We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish** on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; **for Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased.**" <sup>15</sup>So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, **and the sea stopped its raging.** <sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. <sup>17</sup>And **the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah**, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. <sup>2:1</sup>Then **Jonah prayed to the LORD** his God from the stomach of the fish, . . . <sup>10</sup>Then **the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up** onto the dry land.

Scripture reveals to us what Jonah himself knew – that God was accomplishing His eternal plan through the willing choices of people who were morally accountable for their actions. In ways unexplained to us, most likely because they are incomprehensible to us, God *caused* them to make *willing choices* that accomplished God's purposes. The following passages also illustrate this truth.

**Genesis 25:21-34:** <sup>21</sup>And Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. <sup>22</sup>But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. <sup>23</sup>And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; **And the older shall serve the younger.**" <sup>24</sup>When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. <sup>25</sup>Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. <sup>26</sup>**And afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel**, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. <sup>27</sup>When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. <sup>28</sup>Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebecca loved Jacob. <sup>29</sup>And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; <sup>30</sup>and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. <sup>31</sup>**But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."** <sup>32</sup>And Esau said, Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" <sup>33</sup>And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; **so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.** <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

**2 Chronicles 33:10-13:** The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. **Therefore the LORD brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them**, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon. When he was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. **When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom.** Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

**Acts 2:22-23:** <sup>22</sup>Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup>this Man, **delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.**

**Acts 4:27-28:** <sup>27</sup>For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, **whom Thou didst anoint**, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup>**to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.**

**Question #100:** How do these examples from Jonah, Genesis, and Acts help you understand how God can make conditional promises even though He has foreordained everything that comes to pass?

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**Scripture plainly declares** that God's sovereign purposes are accomplished as He interacts with the prayers and legitimate choices of moral agents. Divine sovereignty and human moral agency exist side by side on the pages of Scripture. Oh the wonderful mystery of God's providential outworking of His eternal purposes through the choices of millions of people everyday! How evident it is that we should live our lives in humble acknowledgement of God's sovereign lordship by continually seeking understanding of His will as we lay our requests before Him. How our prayers should reflect our humble dependence on His gracious love and our deep gratitude for His desire to be our God and meet our needs. May our whole lives glorify Him in thankfulness for His goodness and mercy!

**Deuteronomy 4:39:** Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, **that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.**

**Question #101:** Write a prayer thanking our sovereign God for the great privilege of prayer. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Notes:**