

The Sovereignty of God (Part 8)

Prayer

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II Peter 3:17-18 You therefore, beloved, seeing you know these things before, [before hand. It's like we are being fore-armed, because we've been forewarned.] beware lest you also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

In the previous sermon *The Sovereignty of God (Part 7)*, remember that we clearly saw that God is not calling everybody at this time. At this time there is a small remnant (mentioned in the book of Romans), a little flock that He has ordained to eternal life. The rest of the people He has ordained to stumble.

Sometimes that's a little bit shocking to people. Now for us—those who are warned beforehand—this brings the responsibility of applying ourselves to this cause to which we have been involved, because now *for us*, this is it. There is one chance, you might say, to grab the brass ring. One to a customer, and we are having our shot at it right now.

We've been called. God has opened our mind. He has opened up access to Him. He has forgiven our sins. He has given us His spirit and we have the opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We are to take the warnings, the admonitions, the instruction and the teaching of God's word very seriously. We cannot afford to let this thing lapse away from us.

Undoubtedly there are times when we are higher, more up, more with it, more enthusiastic and more zealous than we are at other times. But always there is the opportunity to recover ourselves and get going once again. We don't have to remain in some kind of a spiritual funk just because things happen to be going badly.

On the other hand, this does not mean that these people, that God has ordained to stumble, are consigned to the lake of fire and lost forever, because He "is not willing that any should perish" (II Peter 3:9). That clearly expresses His desire.

I think that you understand that from your knowledge of Him that what He desires, He is going to work very hard toward accomplishing, as no other being can. Brethren, it is from this that we derive our hope of salvation. Because God desires something (our salvation), and nobody can stay His hand, then our salvation ought to be something that comes to us as a result of the working of God in our lives.

Psalm 68:19-20 O Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah.

Think about this. Think about the benefits He loads us with daily. Think about why He is giving us these benefits that He loads us with daily. Think about this in terms of the salvation that He desires for each and every one of us.

Psalm 68:20 He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto GOD the Lord belong the issues of life.

"Issues" is pointing to escape. It's talking about salvation. These two verses, in a greatly simplified sense, focus on the issue of the entire Bible. Everything in it is intended to lead us finally to this point—to this issue. That issue is—God is able to save. Now hang on to that. *That's* what's He attempting to focus our attention on, from the beginning to the end. God can deliver the goods.

Now when Adam and Eve sinned, they introduced mankind's ultimate enemy to earth, and that is death. Now since Adam and Eve sinned, everyone of us has done what Adam and Eve did—sinned. The central issue to us then is how can we be delivered from sin and death?

God shows equally clearly the solution to this issue depends upon whom we choose to be our God. This is why idolatry is such a big issue in the Bible. We are either going to choose the God who is able to save—the one that we are going to submit to—or we are going to choose gods that we make in our own image. We are going to choose things, other than the creator God, to be that to which we devote our life. Some people make money their god. They devote their life to it. Some people...power. Some people...social prestige. So they devote their time and their energy to it. And what we devote ourselves to becomes, or is, our god.

Are those things able to save us from death? That's the issue. All too frequently, the god that we serve is, in reality, *our self*. We are serving our own whims, our own desires, our own dreams, and our own lusts. Can these things save? Can these things spare us from death? See, God is the God of salvation, and He is trying to get across to us that He can save us from the central issue of life. He can make a way for us to escape death—to escape the grave.

Now, He confidently claims to do this, and He presents to us the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ as His primary evidence. The life of Jesus Christ—in the sense that it is possible for a person with the spirit of God to keep the commands of Gods. It can be done. Jesus did it without flaw. We can't possibly do it that way, because we're already ruined; but we can certainly do far better than we're doing now.

We can certainly make the God of the Bible OUR God, once that God reveals Himself to us. To greatly bolster the manifestation of Jesus Christ, He shows us over and over that He is sovereign over His creation. There *isnobody*, there is *no thing* that can stand in the way and overcome Him and keep Him from accomplishing what He wants to do—what He wills to do. The issue, therefore is not really whether God can do as He says, but whether we will choose to allow Him to lead us.

It's very obvious, I think, to those of us who have been called into His service, to see that the vast majority of mankind is floundering in abysmal ignorance of Him, and in the meantime

afflicting this earth with massive moral degeneration as a result. Now this is what we must be led out of, because this world is a powerful attraction, and it influences us from every direction.

In the meanwhile we can also see from His word that He is not done with these people that He has right now ordained to stumble. Yet, *now* is our day of salvation—our one opportunity for salvation, and we had better take advantage of it.

Paul says:

Romans 11:11-13 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? [They in this case is Israel, after the flesh.] God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness? For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify my office.

That first, or second phrase—"Have they stumbled that they should fall?"—I think we could paraphrase as, "Have they stumbled so badly that they have fallen completely? Have they fallen from God's program?" Now the rest of chapter 11 shows that they have not fallen from God's program. Though Israel has stumbled, their salvation yet lies in the future, and so He has ordained them to stumble at this time.

The intention of that is to work in our behalf—those who are called now. Paul uses two different words here that are translated "fall," and the word "stumbled" that appears here is a word that you may be familiar with, because it's very frequently translated as "sin." It's the Greek word "*paratoma*" and I would say that it is most frequently translated "trespass." It means more literally "to slip" or "to turn aside," "to go off the path." So, have they stumbled that they should fall? Have they turned aside, have they slipped, have they gone off the path, so that they should fall completely out of God's program?

"God forbid." *No*. Even though He hasn't opened up their minds, Paul is beginning to show, beginning to establish, that their salvation lies yet in the future. So although God has ordained them to stumble at this time, He has also ordained their salvation in the future. That begins to become very clear.

Romans 11:14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.

Now here the reference is to those Israelites who were living at the time that Paul was living and preaching.

Romans 11:15 For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?

In verse 15, Paul is actually beginning to turn the attention toward Israel's salvation—to the future—something that is going to occur at a time not specified in this particular congregation. So he's just laying the groundwork for when Israel will be reconciled to God. They're cast away now, but they will be drawn later on.

Romans 11:16 For if the first fruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.

Remember the "first fruit" is us and we are holy. I want you to recall in my last sermon that Paul earlier said that we are taken from the same lump as those who are stumbling. So, because we have what we have is no reason for us to feel puffed up, because we are of the same makeup, as it were, as the people that He has ordained to stumble at this time.

We have nothing to brag about, not even the slightest room for any kind of pride. Of course he hammers that into us in I Corinthians 1: 26-29. God wants for us to be humbled, to understand how privileged we are to have this gift at this time. It's something that has fallen into our laps. It's not something that we have earned. It's something that He wants us to be motivated by to choose to be humble. Humility is a choice. That's very clear in both I Peter and also in James as well.

Now because of this, He intends that we respond to Him, be motivated to submission, and show the same kind of kindness, tenderness and mercy to others regarding that which we have received, because it's going to come to them sooner or later.

Romans 11:18-20 Boast not against the branches. But if you boast, you bear not the root, but the root you. You will say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well, [look at this warning] because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith.

You remember in the sermon two weeks ago I showed you the only reason we believe is because God gave us the gift. So we have faith because He gave it to us. If He hasn't given it to them, they can't respond to Him. So everywhere we look, we are boxed in. No reason to brag, no reason to boast. Their salvation is coming, and we'd better get serious because ours is on the lineright now. I don't mean to say that every little thing we do is going to qualify, or disqualify us—I don't mean that at all. I'm talking about in an overall sense. We need to be encouraged that God is going to work toward that end as hard as He possible can, because He loves us and He wants to give us salvation. That's His will. So he tells us then:

Romans 11:20-22 Be not high minded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not you. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness:

otherwise you also shall be cut off.

So that's pretty strong warning to you and me. I've kind of come full circle. I began with Peter's warning—"*Now is our time of salvation. We've been warned beforehand. We'd better take advantage of it.*" And here's Paul showing that the salvation of Israel is yet ahead. We have been grafted in, because God has chosen to give us faith. He has not chosen to give them faith.

So Paul is saying that now is our time, just like Peter said, and we had better take advantage of it. We had better not boast against the natural branches, because otherwise we can be cut off even as they were, at this time. So, if I can do anything to exhort those of you within the hearing of my voice, please do not let this gift slip from your grasp through neglect.

I say neglect because that's kind of what the book of Hebrews points to..."Should we neglect so great salvation?" Laodiceanism is a form of neglect, because those people are paying attention to things that they should not be paying attention to—giving their life, their devotion over to those things, rather than God. Neglect probably comes in as a result of attitudes that we permit ourselves to get into.

Now brethren, this life is sometimes weary, and sometimes it's quite stressful (like a time that we are going through now, where things have occurred that I don't think one in a thousand of us ever expected—that the Worldwide Church of God would be blown apart like it is). We might have expected it to have been blown apart because of pressure from the outside, and the sheep would be scattered; but not many of us looked for the evidence that was right in the Bible—that the first century church blew apart from the inside. In a sense the history had already been written.

So history has repeated itself, and now we find ourselves scattered all over the place, and to those of us who thought maybe we were going to escape right into the kingdom within the Worldwide Church of God, now find ourselves scrambling around trying to find a place where we can be taught, where we can fellowship with people of the same mind. That can be a very stressful proposition because so many ideas and concepts are going forth as a result of the scattering, that it has become a very difficult situation for us.

God is still able to save us. He is still able to bring us together, and I think He will, in the future. But I think right now one of the things He's testing us on is whether we're going to stand, essentially alone—Him and us. He wants to see where our faith is, and whether we're going to be faithful in the face of the scattering that has taken place.

So God is not asking us to do something that is impossible. What He wants us to do might be difficult, but He wants us (I think above all things) just to keep trusting Him and plodding along—inch by inch, step by step toward His kingdom—and to let Him take care of some of the other things that are beyond us.

I think that the most difficult thing for us is to stay on track. I think that God's experience with Israel clearly reveals this, because there was a whole generation that died in the wilderness. All they had to do was to follow Moses. They didn't, because other concerns distracted them and so their desires led to their destruction and to their death in the wilderness. I'll tell you,

brethren—that is a stunning witness. I mean it is stunning!

If you read Hebrews 4:1-2, Paul used a Greek phrase there that indicates that their bodies were strewn from one end of the wilderness to the other—just like you see in pictures of the Old West. You come across a cow's carcass somewhere, or bleached-out bones with nothing left but maybe a scull, and that's kind of the picture that Paul used of men's bones, bleached by the sun, out in the wilderness—all the way from Egypt to Canaan.

These were the Israelites who fell by the wayside, who didn't keep plodding along, who lost their faith in God, lost their faith in God's servant Moses, and the result was rebellion, sin. They didn't remain faithful to the purpose and reason why they were brought out—so they died. That's a powerful witness. It ought to be a powerful warning to those of us that God has called out, to take God's word seriously.

There's another thought to think about. I don't think we necessarily have to pursue it in study, but a strong case can be made from New Testament scriptures that indicate that perhaps that not many of us will make it, because we too may fritter it away. For example, didn't Jesus himself say, "Those who endure to the end will be saved"? That's kind of enough to make a guy cringe, if he's thinking, because He is indicating that the way is going to be difficult.

Endured certainly gives you that idea that it's not going to be easy. Didn't Peter say, in I Peter 4:17 that "*the righteous are scarcely saved? So where will the sinner and un-Godly appear?*" Didn't Jesus warn that "the broad way leads to destruction, and *many* go in thereat"? Not the few. *MANY* go in by it. Now I don't intend for this to frighten us. I do intend it to sober us.

Remember how I began this? The central issue in the Bible is—God is able to do what He confidently says He will do. He will save us. He hasn't left us alone, because He also clearly shows that He, who releases us from our bondage and sets us on the path to His kingdom, also empowers us to make it by giving us gifts, by giving us access to Him so that we might receive help in time of need.

One of the helps is Prayer. So today, for the remainder of this sermon, we're going to look at God's sovereignty and its relationship to prayer, because prayer, brethren, is (maybe I could so far as to say) the single most important thing we do in terms of assuring our salvation.

I John 5:14 And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us.

Now there is a very common concept concerning prayer—the purpose of prayer is to get things from God and to change His mind regarding the course of events. That concept is only partly correct. This verse states that if we ask according to His will, He hears. Hang on to that thought.

Notice also that it doesn't say we will receive it, though that is strongly implied. When I say "receive it," I am talking about receiving it in this life. That's what we are mostly concerned about here. For example, Paul petitioned God three times regarding His affliction, and he didn't receive it. Yet every one of us knows that it is God's will to heal; so Paul was as good as healed.

He's going to come up in that first resurrection, and he's going to have what he asked for; but

he didn't receive it in this life. What he did receive was the strength to carry on, in spite of the fact that he had this affliction. So God made him go through life with that thorn in his flesh. God answered it differently than the way that Paul would have liked. But, Paul still didn't receive exactly what he asked for, even though it's God's will to heal.

It's the other part of that concept that is expressed here where the misunderstanding lies.

Now answer this question. "Is your concept of God really nothing more than that of a greater human parent?" God undoubtedly relates Himself to us as a parent. We are instructed to think of Him as "Father" and we are to address Him as "Father." So far, so good. But what is your concept of what a father should be like? What was it formed in? Was it formed as a result of your father in your family? Some neighbor? A grandfather? A minister? How does your concept line up with the way the real Father, God, is?

It's here that we begin to run into trouble, because all human fathers have been deficient in many ways. What we are dealing with here is a Father without a flaw—absolutely perfect in every way. He is eternal. He is perfect in wisdom. He knows the end from the beginning. He has power that is unimaginable. He does everything—absolutely everything—out of love. Not once does He ever do anything out of spite, out of resentment, out of bitterness, out of sourness. No bad attitude ever creeps in to this Father that we are appealing to. Everything is done out of love. So everything is done for the well-being of His purpose, whether it's for us individually, or for the overall perfection and completion of the purpose that He is working out.

Romans 11: 34-36 For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been his counselor? Or who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again" For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Remember, especially a thought there in verse 34—"Who ever was God's counselor?"

Now add an Old Testament witness to this.

Isaiah 40: 13-14 Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counselor has taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and showed to him the way of understanding?

Let's think of what these concepts (these five verses here in relation to what it also says in Psalm 139.) David shows in Psalm 139 that God knowseverything about David. He said, "*Where can I go from your spirit? Whether from the bottom of the ocean [I'm paraphrasing] or way up in the heavens, God knows our thoughts.*" So He's aware, isn't He? He's aware of everything, and nobody can counsel Him.

Now, do you think there is anything that He doesn't already know about you? Is there anything that you can bring to Him in prayer and counsel Him about? Let's stretch it a little bit further. Since He knows what's going on in our life, and says He knows our thoughts from afar off, He

knows our "down sittings and our uprising"—He knows everything about us—is it possible then that He has already seen what has taken place in our life and has already decided before we even think about praying.

He has already decided what He wants to bring from that situation for your benefit. So what new thing can we introduce to Him in our prayers, when He has already thought it through and already knows what He wants to give to us for what His will is regarding this situation for us? I tell you, this begins to put a different light on prayer, and what our attitude needs to be when we come before Him.

Matthew 6:7 But when you pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

Notice the verse that follows right on the heels of this, because it is instruction that continues the thought that was begun in verse 7.

Matthew 6:8 Be not you therefore like unto them: for your Father knows what things you have need of, before you ask him.

And I can add this. He knows better what we need, than we know for ourselves. He is way ahead of us. I don't know whether you're aware of it, but this verse (verse 8) is the transition between the teaching in verses 5 through 7 about prayer, and the model prayer. We launch into the model prayer with the thought in our mind that God already knows.

That begins to put a different slant on things. So I think that we can begin right here to think, so positively, that when we pray to God, we are not bringing anything new to Him. He already knows, and I think that there are pretty strong indications, which I will continue to show you, that He's already decided what He wants to do, even before we pray; even before we think about praying. He's got it all figured up.

Remember, He knows the end from the beginning. He may not have purposed what got us into the situation that motivates us to pray, but the situation has occurred. He's seen it occur and He's already decided how He's going to use it. Therefore, when we go to Him in prayer, is what we are going to say going to line up with what He has already decided is His will? ...Something interesting to think about...

I think we can begin to see that the purpose of prayer is not to overcome God's reluctance. Rather it is to begin to lay hold on understanding what God's will is, because that's where the real help is going to come, so that we can conform to His will. Okay, the emphasis in prayer has to be then on His purpose. Remember, His purpose is to bring us into His kingdom, and it has to be on His will.

Now you may have heard the catchy statement used by those in religion that is intended to encourage people. It goes like this. "Prayer changes things." I can remember, when I was a boy, every once in a while I would go to my grandmother's house and sleep over night. She had

two, fluorescent, postcard-size little plaques that were on her wall. It was the kind of thing that if you held it up to the light before you turned out the light and hung it back up on the wall, it would glow for a long time. The one said, "Jesus saves," and the other said, "Prayer changes things."

So I'd lay in bed and look up at these things glowing. So that stuck in my mind that prayer changes things. Well, I think that our understanding of this has to be modified, because that statement is true only if our prayer is in agreement with God's will. I want you to listen to this quote on prayer from a publication called *The Christian Worker*, and the article was entitled *Prayer or Fate*.

"God in His sovereignty has ordained that human destinies can be changed by the will of man. This is at the heart of the truth that prayer changes things, meaning that God changes things when men pray. Someone has strikingly expressed it this way. There are certain things that will happen in a man's life whether he prays or not. There are other things that will happen if he prays, and will not happen if he does not pray."

Again that's another statement that needs to be modified. Mostly I was interested in this first sentence—"God in His sovereignty has ordained that human destinies can be changed by the will of man." That is partly true, but it is not completely true.

James 4:13-15 Go to now, you that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas you know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. For that you ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

This series of verses does not directly concern prayer, but it is directly concerning God's will, and that's far more important than any prayer that we might utter during our entire lifetime. I want you to notice this quote that comes from my *Study Bible*. It's the Bible that I'm using right now, and it's a comment on this series of verses.

"This one is a fool, for he thinks he knows something that he doesn't. He presumes that he has the resources to control his destiny."

Now somebody is wrong here. Here is a person who wrote this article in *The Christian Worker* who says that man can control his destiny. The people who wrote this *Study Bible* say that this person is a fool who thinks he can control his destiny. Somebody is wrong.

Proverbs 27:1 Boast not yourself of tomorrow; for you know not what a day may bring forth.

A bit of Old Testament wisdom there. Now back to the New Testament. We'll look at Jesus' teaching.

Luke 12:13-15 And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses.

Now here comes a parable right on the heels of this that has to do with a man controlling his destiny.

Luke 12:16-17 And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?

Now here comes the man's will.

Luke 12:18-21 And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have much goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, You fool, this night your soul shall be required of you: then whose shall those things be, which you have provided. So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

Okay now. How do these things fit prayer? Can a prayer literally change a person's destiny? The answer to this is "yes," but only if we understand what prayer is for. The basic concept in each of these verses, beginning with the one in James 4, and the one in Proverbs 27, and this teaching here by Jesus, is that a Christian is foolish to leave God out of his thinking. God's plan—His will, His desire—for us in any given situation, as well as the overall purpose of life, may be different from what we think it is.

Our thoughts are not God's thoughts. His thoughts are so much higher, Isaiah says, that they are higher than east is from the west, and we can't really counsel Him on anything. We can bring things to Him, but prayer is only going to change things if it is in agreement with what God has already willed. Sometimes we leave God out of our thinking, from ignorance...that is, we simply don't know any better. Sometimes it's out of neglect, because we're far enough from God that His reality in our lives is weak.

Unfortunately sometimes it's from presumption, which is far worse because it reveals our vanity

in thinking that we are so important, that we think that we already know what is best for us in any given situation. We might not like to admit it, when we actually become like teenagers who think that their parents are old fuddy-duddies whose minds stopped working in the past, and that they don't know what's going on. What I want us to understand here is that we must not go on living life simply knowing these things.

We can utter words like, "Yes, I want God's will done," but be unwilling to live God's will in faithfulness, not even exactly knowing what His will is in a given situation? This is where faith begins to come into it. All too often we take something to God in prayer with our mind already having conceived what it is that we want out of it, and that's the end toward which we work. It may not be God's will at all. God will allow us to do those things.

Now God is not like a parent who is indulgent. He's not like a parent who allows his children to grow up in His house, or a better word would be, "to age" while they are living at home. An indulgent parent is lenient. They are tolerant. They are pampering of their children. An indulgent parent is one who is easily moved to gratify the whims and desires of the children, and many times all the children have to do is whine and nag and mom or dad will give in. There might be a number of reasons why a parent will do these things, and maybe one of the strongest might be (or most prevalent) is that they're simply ignorant of their responsibility, but it goes down hill from there.

They may be unconcerned about the well-being of the child, or worse still, have no purpose in mind for that child's life. I'll tell you, such a parent is foolishly shortsighted and self-centered and uncaring. I'll tell you something. God, as a Father, has not let His children—not even one of them—get away with anything. He does not let us get away with anything, because brethren, He is consumed by the desire to save us—to save us from ourselves. Now if we brought a request to Him that He can already see is not going to be good for, do you think that He's going to grant that request? That would not be an act of love, but we can still act on our own to achieve what we want—circumvent Him through the exercise of our will.

So, we can bring something to Him that is really and truly in accordance with His will, and He will begin to act, and that might change things dramatically; but it will only change things because He already agrees with it. It might be a mark of our distance from God if we are not aware of what God's will is in a given situation. There are going to be many occasions. I don't think that this is a situation that would be at all unusual, but those kind of situations give God the opportunity to teach us very valuable things and to exercise the testing of our faith during those periods of time.

Just because you pray to God and you hear a deafening silence, it does not mean that He has not heard. Let's use our faith and know that He is involved. But know also though that He has purposely and specifically summoned us to be conformed to His image, and that is at the forefront of His mind—that is driving His every decision regarding us. That is His will for us. He has predestined us to this end, and He is sovereign, having all power, all wisdom and love—who can resist His will? Now we can, but brethren, who in his right mind wants to? We shouldn't. If we somehow have it in our mind to resist His will, it makes me wonder about that person's conversion.

Now here's another quote from this same article. The author says,

"The prayers of God's saints are the capital stock in heaven by which Christ carries on His great work on earth. The great throes and mighty convulsions on earth are the result of these prayers. Earth is changed, revolutionized. Angels move more powerfully on more rapid wings, and God's policy is shaped as the prayers are more numerous and more efficient."

Well. Let me give you a Biblical answer to that.

Ephesians 3:11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That first phrase, "According to the eternal purpose,"—how can we think that God's policy is shaped by our prayers in the face of this scripture which says that God's purpose is eternal? If it's eternal, that purpose has existed from the beginning, when He formulated it, and His policies have been shaped by that purpose. Now if prayers shape God's policy today, then the scripture is not correct. I think I'll believe the scripture instead.

Ephesians 1:11 In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of His own will.

See that. He works all things. That includes my prayers and your prayers—the things that we pray about. God works all things according to the counsel of His own will—not somebody else's. This is why I can confidently say that He will never grant a prayer that is contrary to His will. So, does prayer change things? Only if God's will is that they be changed. It wasn't our prayer. It's just that our prayer had to be in agreement with God's will. So the two meshed perfectly.

Now, I'm beginning to lead to something here. Don't you think that our prayers will be a lot more effective if we prayed according to God's will? I'll tell you, things will really begin to happen if our will matches His will. That's the key to all of these things. So the purpose of prayer is not to get things from God, but rather the purpose of prayer is to give us access to Him in order that we might be in His presence, and be moved to be conformed to His will.

Isn't His will that we be conformed to His image? So He invites us into His presence in order to give us access to Him so that being conformed to His will, being conformed to His image, is exceedingly easier than it would be if we were distant from Him. He invites us right into His presence.

So, if our will matches His will, we will receive what we ask for. But if they do not match, our request doesn't have a chance of a proverbial snowfall of you know where. Granting such a request would be outside the parameters of God's love and outside the parameters of His

wisdom, and He will never grant something that He has determined is outside His purpose, and is outside of that for which He is preparing you and me.

You know why? First of all, it wouldn't be an act of love toward us, and it would also be an admission that His original intention for calling us was ill conceived and a repudiation of His own will and purpose. So, for men to say that human destiny is to be changed and molded by the will of man, and that prayer changes things, is only to give the vaguest scrap of truth.

How many people addressing God as Father, in this world, really know what His will is? They laugh at you, call you blasphemous if you tell them that you are called to be in His image and to be called God. Okay now. Here is what determines the destiny of man. Let's go to that very famous scripture in John 3: 3 — "You must be born again."

John 3: 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

This marks the beginning of the new creation. Have you ever heard of a baby anywhere who willed his own begetting? You know, that is so obvious it's stupid. Who willed your begetting? Who willed that you repent? Who willed that you be enabled to come before Him with a prayer of repentance? Who willed that you have His spirit? Who willed that you be in His church, in the body of Jesus Christ? Who willed that you be in His kingdom?

Man's destiny is in HIS hands, and we share that, only in that we have the opportunity—we individually have the opportunity—to refuse to accept Him as God over our life.

John 1: 12 But as many as received him, to them He gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.

As we showed in the last sermon, He is the one who gave us the power to believe.

I John 1: 13 Which were born [begotten], not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

There it is. That's what determines man's destiny. We can add to these things, like Romans 8: 29 — "It is God who foreknew us," and it is God right in that context, who said that He is going to take us right on to glorification.

There's an interesting prayer made by a lady back in the Old Testament. I think we need to look at this back in I Samuel 2. Hannah prayed for a son. Look at this lady's understanding:

I Samuel 2: 6 The LORD kills, and makes alive. [Think of this in terms of who determines man's destiny.] he brings down to the grave, and brings up.

Do you see that? She's talking about the resurrection of the dead in the Old Testament, all the way back in the book of Samuel, before David was even born. She knew that the resurrection was coming. *'He sends down to the grave. He raises people out of the grave.'*

I Samuel 2:7-8 The LORD makes poor, and makes rich: he brings low, and lifts up. He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, [and who rules the nations?] and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he has set the world upon them.

What Hannah is expressing in poetic language is that God is the sovereign controller of history, and therefore of man's destiny. Brethren, there is absolutely no need whatever for God to change His design, or to alter His purpose for us, because they were framed under the influence of perfect goodness and perfect unerring wisdom. Now men have occasion to change their plans and their designs and purposes, because we're shortsighted.

We don't know the end from the beginning. We don't know all the facts, so we start off from something, and any course of anything that we accomplish zigzags all over the place, because we're always trying to make corrections. See, God knows the end from the beginning, and to say that God changes His purpose is to impugn His goodness and deny His wisdom. Some may say, "Doesn't God change His mind when we repent?" No.

What does it say in Romans 2 and verse 4? It's the goodness of God who leads you to repentance. From the time that Adam and Eve sinned, He had it in mind to save us, and for us to be in His kingdom. He has been working toward that end ever since. I might ask you a question here. In fact I will, based on James 1:16:

James 1:16-18 Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

We don't change God's mind with our prayers. He sees the situation. He already has it figured out to what end He is going to take it. Now, how would you like to pray to a god who is like a chameleon? In one day he grants things. The next day he doesn't grant them. In Malachi 3, He says, "I am God. I change not." His purpose is eternal. Do you understand that it is His unchangeableness that enables us to have faith? Salvation is by grace through faith?

So why pray? Since He knows the end from the beginning, and since He knows our need even before we pray. What is its purpose? It ought to begin to become very clear that the purpose of prayer is not to inform God of anything. It's not for God's good at all. Prayer is for our good. It's something that we need for salvation. It's something that we need for growth. It's something that we need to be motivated to yield ourselves to Him. It's something that we need for something else that is kind of interesting.

Prayer ranks right up there along side of obedience and study, as a means of our participation in fulfilling our part in God's purpose for us. Now prayer's part is to give us the opportunity to express ourselves in communication in His presence. Did not Jesus die so that we would have direct access to God? Not that we would be speaking to God from afar-r-r-r-r-r-r-...but so we would be drawn near to Him. There is here a mystical quality that does play a fairly important role in this relationship.

It's good to remember that in light of Jesus' death, access to God was an aim that was accomplished. This was not done, as is clearly stated in God's word, for no reason at all. We are instructed by Jesus to call Him "Father." But in one sense, God is the Father of all of mankind, by creation — Genesis 1: 26. In fact Paul confirms this in Acts 17: 28. Remember when he was on Mars Hill, he said that we are "His offspring." He was talking to unconverted people. He didn't mean just Israel was offspring of God. He didn't mean just himself—the converted people.

He meant everybody—the unconverted Gentiles to whom he was speaking, were also the offspring of God. Are you aware that in Isaiah 49 God called Himself "Mother" to Israel? He's not just Father; He is Mother as well. So there's very definitely a family relationship. But what He is talking about here, in this sense, of having access to Him as a child of God, is to intimate a very intimate personal relationship that enables us to know God.

Those who are far from God are able to know about God, but they don't know God. They are not intimate with Him. They have not yet been drawn into the family. It's the same principle at work that we may know about some famous personality—let's say the Kennedys. We know about them because there are things written about them in the newspapers and magazines and so forth.

But we don't know them as a family member. Okay, that same principle is at work here. God draws us into His bosom, as it were, so that we are near to Him. Let me give you a principle that is at work in regard to this. Go back to the book of Psalms, in Psalm 16, and let's see what is at work here in verse 11.

Psalm 16: 11 You will show me the path of life: in your presence is fullness of joy: at your right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

Okay now. You can build on this principle. Close up to God there is joy evermore. Pleasure. In Psalm 17: 2 there is vindication—fair judgment from His presence. We might say a gracious judgment in His presence. In Psalm 68: 2, 8 — in His presence there is justice; in His presence there is power. Here is the principle. The point is that in God's presence—nearness in a relationship—is the sort of every righteous and positive attitude and act. What prayer does, it brings us near to them. It gives us access to them so that God can give them, and we can receive them.

Let me illustrate this in a greatly simplified way. Have you ever been around a person of positive, uplifting attitudes—someone bubbling with enthusiasm, with zeal, confidence, humor, and determination? These are all qualities that we find to be quite good. On the other hand, have you ever been in the presence of one of sour countenance, fear of failure, anger, lethargy?

Okay now. What happens to your attitude when you are around either of these people? Unless you are resisting, you are going to be pulled up to the level of the person in whom there is joy, kindness, tenderness, goodness, enthusiasm, zeal, warmth, humor.

You're going to begin to accept it and begin to be like they are. Now what happens if you are in the presence of somebody who is of the opposite demeanor? Your attitude, again, unless you are resisting it, will go plummeting down hill, and it's not going to be very long before you are likethem. Okay. This is at work here. Do you know what works in these people? It's their spirit, and that spirit is emanating out from them, and it is making contact with your spirit.

It is this principle that makes us like Satan, because his spirit is radiating out from him. We are tuned in to it. We pick up the anger, the bitterness, the resentment, the enmity against God and against God's law. Now, who would you rather be around? This access to Him, as I said, has a mystical quality to it, and it is being in His presence which enables us to (again here comes a dumb analogy, but I'll use it)—it's almost like osmosis, and we begin to absorb what He is, in His presence.

Can you think of a Bible example where this took place? How about Moses when he came down the mount? He radiated the glory of God because he was in His presence. That's what's at work here. This is why we need prayer, because it is so important that we get close. Now, what if these people that I described before...—what if these people are in one building, and you're in another? You're not even aware. Okay. Here comes the distance thing. If you're far from God and you can't get close to Him, then the picture is there, that you can't become like He is. Sin separates. Righteousness gets us in close.

Now there are many other reasons for prayer, and this sermon has not exhausted them in any way, shape, or form. There are many other things that we could go into here, but I wanted to make sure that we understood that the relationship between prayer and the will of God, and our relationship with God, would be understood.

Prayer is not for the purpose of changing God's will. It's not for changing His mind. Prayer is given to us as a great blessing, in order that we might be conformed to God's will. Then, when we come to Him in prayer and ask according to His will, we know that He's going to give, because we know that what He has willed, He will do, because we'll know it's good, it's loving, it's kind, and it is the right thing.

I think that we will stop right there, and maybe the next time we will go into a couple more things that I think may need to be answered.