

**WHY PRAY or WHY PREACH the GOSPEL if GOD is SOVEREIGN?****STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

People assume that if you believe that God sovereignly elects who He saves then praying for their salvation is meaningless. Why pray, when in ages past, God has already predetermined who will be saved? If some are already predestined to be saved, they will be saved whether we pray or not.

Although the relationship of the doctrine of election to prayer may seem like a problem, those who don't believe in election have a problem as well. If we believe that God cannot or does not persuade people to believe, but that people choose or reject God as an act of their own free will, then what are we praying for when we pray for their salvation?

In the words of Bruce Ware:

“. . . if we believe . . . that God loves all perfectly and so would already be working in every way he could for their good, then would we not wonder what is the point of prayer? What are we asking God for that he is not already doing? Do I care about this person more than God does? Of course the answer is no. So, is not God already working in ways far better than anything I can imagine in order to accomplish his purposes? And yet, if God ultimately cannot break through the stubbornness, apathy, and misconceptions of free moral creatures, then all this calls for the question, What really, then, is the point of prayer?" (Bruce Ware)

By way of example, let's suppose that we didn't believe in election but believed that people decide if they will believe in Christ or not. Let's also suppose that Jim is currently an unbeliever in rebellion against God; he is willfully choosing not to believe in Christ. So we pray for Jim's salvation. What are we asking God to do? We are asking for God to change Jim's heart and stop his rebellion against God. But if God stops Jim's rebellion, then Jim's choice in rebelling against God has been removed, and he is no longer the one who determines if he will believe in Christ or not. Choice is no longer in his power.

Therefore, if we insist that Jim has the ability to choose God or not, then we must also believe that God cannot stop his rebellion. But if God cannot stop his rebellion, it is futile to ask Him to. So why pray?

In other words, those who affirm that man has absolute freedom in his choices also believe that God cannot change a person's rebellion, overcome it, and draw that person to faith and salvation. "Instead they believe that man himself has the sole right of final determination in the choices and affections of his heart toward God." (Piper) What I am saying is, it is not the belief in the sovereignty of God that thwarts us from praying for the lost; rather, it is the unbiblical notion of "free will" that stops us from praying for them. "Prayer is a request that God do something. But the only thing God can do to save a lost sinner is to overcome his resistance to God." (Piper) If you insist that God cannot do this lest He destroy man's self-determination, then you are insisting that the person remain without Christ; for "no one can come to Christ unless it is given him from the Father" (John 6: 44, 65)."

**PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

Remember that a person in need of salvation is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1); he is "enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:17; John 8:34); "the god of this world has blinded his mind that he might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Corinthians. 4:4); his heart is hardened against God (Ephesians 4:18) so that he is hostile to God and in rebellion against God's will (Romans 8:7).

The Bible clearly teaches that God elects and calls people for salvation. This means that no one can be persuaded to come to Christ, or that anyone will seek salvation apart from God drawing them (Ro. 3:11; Jn. 3:19-20). Yet God's election never functions to foster complacency toward the lost, or to stifle evangelistic zeal. On the contrary, the sovereign work of God in salvation causes us to marvel at His grace (Ro. 9), gives us confidence that some will be saved (Acts 18:9-10), and promotes endurance in sharing the gospel based on God's promise that we will bear fruit (Jn. 15:16).

In like manner, the sovereignty of God never promotes moral indifference on the ground that we are helpless to do any better. Rather, it is *because* God is sovereignly working in our lives we can have confidence that change will take place and our efforts to please God will not be in vain (Phil. 2:12-13).

Packer says,

"So far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility – indeed, the certainty – that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful." (Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, 106).

Understood properly, the sovereignty of God is an incentive to pray. Evangelism is successful because God does what we cannot do; He calls people to Himself insuring the success of he gospel.

Again Piper comments:

If someone now says, "O.K., granted that a person's conversion is ultimately determined by God' I still don't see the point of prayer. If God chose before the foundation of the world who would be converted, what function does prayer have?"

My answer is that it has a function like that of preaching: How shall the lost believe in whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall they preach unless they are sent (Romans 10:14f.)? Belief in Christ is a gift of God (John 6:65; II Timothy 2:25; Ephesians 2:8), but God has ordained that the means by which men believe on Jesus is through the preaching of men. It is simply naive to say that if no one spread the gospel all those predestined to be sons of God (Ephesians 1:5) would be converted anyway. The reason this is naive is because it overlooks the fact that the preaching of the gospel is just as predestined as is the believing of the gospel: Paul was set apart for his preaching ministry before he was born (Galatians 1:15), as was Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5). Therefore, to ask, "If we don't evangelize, will the elect be saved?" is like asking, "If there is no predestination, will the predestined be saved?"

Prayer is like preaching in that it is a human act also. It is a human act that God has ordained and which he delights in because it reflects the dependence of his creatures upon Him. He has promised to respond to prayer, and his response is just as contingent upon our prayer as our prayer is in accordance with his will. "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (I John 5:14). When we don't know how to pray according to God's will but desire it earnestly, "the Spirit of God intercedes for us according to the will of God" (Romans 8:27).

So, let's return to the original question: "Why pray when the only people who will come to Christ are those who God has already predetermined to save?" This sort of inquiry prompted A. A. Hodge to ask another series of questions:

'If God has eternally decreed that you should live, what is the use of your breathing? If God has eternally decreed that you should talk, what is the use of your opening your mouth? If God has eternally decreed that you should reap a crop, what is the use of your sowing the seed? If God has eternally decreed that your stomach should contain food, what is the use of your eating" (Evangelical Theology, 92-93).

Hodge answers his own questions by saying that there is no one absurd enough to make the sovereign will of God "an excuse for not chewing his food or for not voluntarily inflating his lungs" (93). God "demands that we should use the means, or go without the ends which depend upon them." (ibid, 93)

Let me provide some more illustrations.

In 605 BC God predetermined that Israel would be taken into Babylonian captivity. Would anyone argue that because God is sovereign He could have Israel swept away into Babylonia captivity whether Babylon existed or not! No! If Babylonian captivity was the sovereign plan of God then accomplishing His plan is contingent upon the existence of Babylon and its will to conquer Israel! In a sense, you could say that God is dependent upon the actions of Babylon to fulfill His purposes; however, the existence and actions of Babylon are also under God's sovereign control!

Likewise, if I said that God had predetermined that Christ die on the cross by the hands of sinful men (Acts 2:23), could I also argue that Jesus would have died on the cross anyway, whether anyone killed Him or not?

In the same way, if God has graciously decreed that someone should be saved, "we may be assured that he has also decreed that the gospel shall be presented to that person, either through preaching or in print or by some other medium. One must **not** assume that the ordained end (the salvation of the soul) will occur apart from the prescribed means (the preaching of the good news)." (Sam Storms)

**EXAMPLES OF PRAYER:**

If we are not sure how or why we should pray to a sovereign God, we can find direction by observing how others who believe in a sovereign God prayed.

***Jesus' prayers:***

The Bible teaches that Christ's death was foreordained by God (Acts 2:23) and that Jesus was conscious of that fact (Jn. 2:19-23; 3:14; 12:31-33; Matt 12:21-23, etc.).

In John 17:1 Jesus prays, "Father, the hour has come." In the gospel of John "the hour" is a technical expression referring to the time when Jesus would be glorified through the cross and would return to the glory He enjoyed with the Father before the world began (Jn. 12:23-24; 17:5). By Jesus acknowledging that His hour had come He is recognizing that the divinely appointed time of His suffering and death is about to begin.

Later, in Matthew 26:38-39, when His hour drew even closer, Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." All things are possible with God, yet in another sense all things are not possible. Here Jesus is asking that if allowing this "cup" (i.e. His suffering) to pass were consistent with the Father's redeeming purposes, that is what He deeply desires.

From these two prayers we see that knowing what God has foreordained did not breed the attitude, "Well, the hour is here and there is not much anyone can do about it since it has been pre-ordained to happen." Nor did it result in silence. Jesus prayed believing that God hears and answers prayer, yet did so with submissiveness to the Father's will.

***Daniel's prayer:***

In the same way Daniel did not wait passively for God's will to be done. Daniel was aware that the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years and that that time was coming to an end (9:2). Since it was prophecy some would assume that the proper response would be just to sit back and wait for its fulfillment. But Daniel didn't see it like that. He recognized that God was more than an automated being who ran the world like a computer program. He didn't assume that the sovereignty of God meant "what will happen, will happen", but was fearful that the sin of the people might cause God to postpone their return. Therefore, he felt the need to confess his own sins and the sins of the people "by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes." (9:3).

Because Daniel saw God as personal, He appeals to Him in terms of what He has said about Himself and what He would do. He reminds God that He keeps His covenant with those who love Him (9:4) and that He is merciful (9:9). He asks God to hear his prayer, and for His sake, he asks that He would restore the sanctuary and city which have been desolate (9:17, 19). And the exile ends.

***Moses' prayer:***

Perhaps the most startling passages that confront us in the Bible are those that speak of God relenting. When Moses returned from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, he found that the Israelites had begun to worship a golden calf they had made. God was furious: "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." (Exo. 32:9-10).

But Moses would not "leave God alone." He recognized that God is sovereign and if He decided to destroy the nation, no one could stop Him. But He pleaded with God, reminding Him of the covenant He had made with the people and that if He destroyed the nation He would be breaking His promises to His people and be mocked by the nations..

Moses did not look at the situation from the eyes of a fatalist: "Wow, He's angry. I guess it's over for the nation." Rather he interceded for the people. And verse 14 says, "So [i.e. because Moses had prayed] the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people."

A casual reader may conclude that God's purposes are not steadfast and that our prayers really will change the decrees of God. But such a conclusion is premature. If God had destroyed the nation, then, paradoxically He would have broken His promises to Abraham. He therefore had to turn from the judgment He had pronounced on Israel, and this is what Moses was banking on.

The importance of this passage and others cannot be overlooked. We must conclude that God expects to be pleaded with; He expects Godly people to intercede for others. Their intercession is His appointed means of bringing about His change of mind; and if they fail His wrath will be poured out. By looking at the situation with Moses we should not conclude that God had forgotten His promises to Israel and that He needed to be brought back to His senses by Moses. Rather, in God's mercy Moses proved to be the appointed means to turn His wrath. God's relenting was nothing other than a gracious confirmation of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

For a similar illustration see Isaiah 38 where God told King Hezekiah, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live." When Hezekiah heard this he didn't just hang around and wait for the fatal day to arrive. Instead he repented, God changed His mind, and 15 years was added to his life. This would never have happened if the king had not prayed (Isa. 38:5; II Ki. 20:5-6).

**CONCLUSION:**

Though the sovereignty of God and our responsibility may be somewhat mysterious, we will do well to look at God's servants and pray as they did. We will find that both God's sovereignty and His personal nature, if viewed correctly, will function as powerful incentives to pray.

In spite of the fact that God has decreed everything that will happen, the men of the Bible realized that God is free and that He responds to prayer. The wonderful truth is that you and I, like Moses, can be God's appointed means to bring the purposes of God to pass. In that limited sense prayer does change things, though it cannot be thought to change things in some absolute way that leaves God out.

God is no less sovereign because we can pray, argue, and reason with Him. Rather, our prayers in accordance with His will reveal His sovereign working in our lives. He prompts our prayers, and then turns around and responds in a way that He would not have, had we not prayed. When God wants to pour out his blessings he often begins by awakening in his people an awareness of their great need, thereby provoking them to ask him for what he longs to give.

If I pray, God graciously works out His purposes through me. The praying, though mine, is also the work of the Spirit within me. By this appointed means I become an instrument to bring about God's appointed end. If I do not pray, it doesn't mean that God's appointed-end has failed, leaving God frustrated. Instead the entire situation has now changed, and my prayerlessness, for which I am entirely responsible, forces me to think that God has other appointed ends in view, possibly including judgment for me and for those for whom I have not been interceding. (D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 165).

**APPLICATION:**

- Those who recognize the sovereignty of God will pray as others in the Bible did. They will line their prayers up with what they will see God doing. They will pray in accordance with what God has revealed He will do in Scripture.
- It is worth praying to a sovereign God because He is free and can take action as He wills
- It is worth praying to a personal God because He hears, responds, and acts on our behalf.
- It must also be remembered that the prayer I offer cannot be exempted from the sovereignty of God. If I pray, it is because God is graciously working in me and through me.
- We will not go off track if we let the sweet aspects of God's sovereignty and personal nature function in our lives.

J. I. Packer in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* explains how we should pray,

'You pray for the conversion of others. In what terms, now, do you intercede for them? Do you limit yourself to asking that God will bring them to a point where they can save themselves, independently of Him? I do not think you do. I think that what you do is to pray in categorical terms that God will, quite simply and decisively, save them: that He will open the eyes of their understanding, soften their hard hearts, renew their natures, and move their wills to receive the Saviour. You ask God to work in them everything necessary for their salvation. . . . When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith. You entreat Him to do that very thing, and your confidence in asking rests upon the certainty that He is able to do what you ask. And so indeed He is: this conviction, which animates your intercessions, is God's own truth, written on your heart by the Holy Spirit. In prayer, then, you know that it is God who saves men; you know that what makes men turn to God is God's own gracious work of drawing them to Himself; and the content of your prayers is determined by this knowledge. Thus by your practice of intercession, no less than by giving thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge and confess the sovereignty of God's grace. And so do all Christian people everywhere.'