

If God Is Sovereign, Why Pray? (Part 1)

by Matt Waymeyer

The story is told about a small town in the South. For many years, this town had been "dry" in that no alcohol was ever sold or served there. But one day a businessman in the area decided to build a tavern. In response to this new tavern, a group of Christians from a local Church became concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. Shortly after the prayer meeting that night, lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground.



In the aftermath of the fire, the owner of the tavern sued the Church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible for his loss. But the Church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible. After his initial review of the case the presiding judge began the trial with an official statement. He said: "*No matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear: the tavern owner believes in prayer, and the Christians do not.*"

It is very easy to dismiss the power of prayer, isn't it? It is very easy to drift into thinking that prayer is a nice sentiment, but in the end, a waste of time because it doesn't really make any difference anyway.

For some people, this kind of dismissal arises from unbelief and doubt that God really can answer prayer. For others, however, the question that paralyzes their prayer life is this:

If God is Absolutely Sovereign, why pray?

In other words, if God will simply do what He wants to anyway, why offer prayers of petition and intercession? Why bother requesting that God do such and such when everything has been ordained by Him beforehand? If prayer consists of pleading with God to change His eternal Purposes, isn't such an undertaking feeble at best and arrogant at worst?

Although there are no easy answers to these questions, Scripture is not silent on this issue. My purpose here is to examine the Bible's teaching on the Sovereignty of God and the prayers of Man with the goal of answering the question,

If God is Absolutely Sovereign, why pray?

This will be done by briefly defining what it means that God is Sovereign and then by offering five answers to the question of why people should pray.

God *Is* Sovereign

First of all- the way the Question is worded, "*If* God is Absolutely Sovereign- why pray?" seems to suggest that God may not be Absolutely Sovereign- as though that issue is up for debate. It isn't. The Bible is crystal clear about this issue- God is Absolutely Sovereign. So a better way to ask the Question might be, "*Since* God is Absolutely Sovereign- what would be the reasons why we should pray?"

When people make plans, it is not uncommon for those plans to fail or to be thwarted in one way or another. In contrast to His creatures, however, Almighty God *always* brings about that which He has purposed. In a word, *God is Sovereign*.

This Truth is perhaps most clearly seen in the words of **Isaiah 46:9-11**, where God demonstrated His superiority over the Babylonian idols by declaring:

9 Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,

10 Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:

11 Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.

In this passage, God indicates that He both purposes what He desires to happen and then actually brings those Purposes to pass. In other words- God Providentially brings about in time and history what He has Sovereignly Ordained in eternity past. As the Apostle Paul writes, God

“works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).

The Truth of God's Sovereignty over His Creation is taught throughout Scripture. The psalmist declares,

Psalms 115:3

But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.

Psalms 135:6

Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.

Daniel 4:35

And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

Proverbs 19:21 says,

There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.

And **Proverbs 21:1** states,

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.

As W. Bingham Hunter (the former dean of Talbot School of Theology) writes,

“From a Biblical perspective, your world-history book should be prefaced with **2 Kings 19:25**: ‘**Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In the days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass**’” (*The God Who Hears*, 49).

So Why Pray?

In this series, we will consider five reasons why believers should pray in light of the Absolute Sovereignty of God:

1. God Has Commanded Us to Pray
2. Jesus Modeled A Life of Prayer
3. God is Able to Respond to Our Prayers
4. God Actually Does Respond to Prayer
5. God Has Ordained Prayer as a Means by Which He Accomplishes His Eternal Purposes

Let's examine each one.

1. God Has Commanded us to Pray.

The most obvious reason to pray is that God has *commanded* us to pray. This is evident throughout the teachings of both Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray in **Matthew 6:9-13**, introducing the prayer with the words,

After this manner therefore pray ye...

Afterward, He instructed His disciples to be persistent in their prayers:

Luke 11:5-13

5 And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves;

6 For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?

7 And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.

8 I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.

9 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

10 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

11 If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?

12 Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

13 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

In Luke 18:2-8- Jesus told them a parable “to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint”. And upon arriving at the Garden of Gethsemane- Jesus instructed them,

Luke 22:40b

... Pray that ye enter not into temptation.

The Apostle Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to:

“pray without ceasing” (1Thessalonians 5:17)

... Paul instructed the Philippians,

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6)

... he charged the Colossians,

“Devote yourselves to prayer” (Colossians 4:2)

... he wrote to the Ephesians,

“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf...” (Ephesians 6:18-19a)

... and he urged Timothy

“that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men” (1Timothy 2:1).

The point is clear and unmistakable: God has *commanded* His people to pray. And our response to this Command must first and foremost be one of humble and joyful obedience. Even if we never reach a clear understanding of the relationship between the Absolute Sovereignty of God and the prayers of Man- the fact that God has commanded prayer should be enough to move us to pray. So the first answer to the Question, *"If God is Absolutely Sovereign- why should we pray?"* Is:

Because God has Commanded it

And even though there *are* other answers to that Question- we really don't need another answer. God's people are to do what God has commanded for no other reason other than God has said to do it. And that should be enough. Saved people delight to obey their Savior. But in His great Mercy- God *has* given other reasons that we will explore in this Study. But before we move on- we should not leave this first answer too quickly.

When God promised Abraham a son through whom he would become a great nation (**Genesis 21:12b**) and then commanded him to sacrifice that very son (**Genesis 22:2**), Abraham bowed the knee of submission before His Creator and simply obeyed what was commanded of Him (**Genesis 22:3-10**). The believer who asks the question *"Why pray?"* must first follow Abraham's example (the father of faith) and do the same.

If God Is Sovereign, Why Pray? (Part 2)

By Matt Waymeyer

So Why Pray?

In this series, we are examining five reasons why believers should pray in light of the Absolute Sovereignty of God:

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In **Part 1**- we looked at the first Reason and now let's examine the Second Reason:

2. Jesus Modeled a Life of Prayer.

A second reason believers should offer prayers of petition and intercession to God is that such prayer was modeled by Jesus Himself Who

Luke 5:16

... withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed.

Jesus' consistent Example of fervent prayer to the Father is evident throughout the Gospel accounts. During His Ministry in Galilee, Mark records that

Mark 1:35b

... in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.

After feeding the five thousand in Bethsaida, Jesus sent the multitudes away and

Matthew 14:23b

... went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

On the night before He chose the twelve disciples, Jesus

Luke 6:12b

... went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

Later Dr. Luke refers to a time **“while Jesus was praying alone” (Luke 9:18)**, and eight days later Jesus **“took along Peter and John and James, and went up to the mountain to pray” (Luke 9:28)**. And who could forget His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (**Matthew 26:39-44; Mark 14:35-39; Luke 22:41-45**) or Jesus’ “High Priestly prayer” of **John 17**? And what believer fails to cherish the fact that the Bible teaches that Jesus now lives in Heaven to intercede even now on our behalf (**Hebrews 7:25**)?

In offering prayers of petition and intercession, Jesus was not ignoring or denying the sovereignty of His Father. This is obvious from several of Jesus’ prayers, not the least of which includes His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (**Matthew 26:39-44; Mark 14:35-39; Luke 22:41-45**). As Hunter writes,

“He (Jesus) knew that by God’s set Purpose and Foreknowledge He would be put to death by being nailed to the Cross (**The Acts 2:23**). He told the incredulous disciples this at least three times.... Yet in Gethsemane, as John Mark tells it, Jesus **‘fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him’ (Mark 14:35)**” (*The God Who Hears*, 51).

In other words, even though Jesus was well aware that His Death at Calvary had been preordained by God, He still saw fit to petition His Father that this Cup might pass from Him.

If the followers of Christ are to be imitators of Him and **“walk in the same manner as He walked” (1John 2:6)**, they too must be characterized by fervent prayer for themselves and for those around them.

Knowing that Jesus prayed as a way of life may not clear up the tension that exists in believers’ minds between the Absolute Sovereignty of God and the prayers of Man- but it *should* motivate them to imitate the One who Himself saw no disparity between His Own Prayers and the Sovereignty of His Father.

If God Is Sovereign, Why Pray? (Part 3)

by Matt Waymeyer



So far, we have considered two reasons to pray in light of God's Sovereignty. Today we will consider two more.

3. God is Able to Respond to our Prayers.

Rather than hindering the prayers of believers, the Sovereignty of God ought to *motivate* them to pray, because

“Prayer grows from the *certainty* of God’s Omnipotence and Sovereignty” (*The God Who Hears*, 47).

Put another way, if God does *not* rule in absolute Sovereignty over His Creation and is *not* able to accomplish whatever He Desires in and through it, why bother requesting anything of Him- since He is unable to deliver? In other words- the Questions should *not* be, “*If God is Sovereign, why pray?*” The Question *should* be, “*If God is not Absolutely Sovereign, Why pray?*”

To illustrate, if a five-year-old boy repeatedly asks his mother to make it stop raining on a Saturday morning, this may create a precious memory, but in the final analysis the boy's request is misguided. As much as his mother might *like* to alter the weather, she simply lacks the ability to do so, and therefore to request this of her makes little sense. But when the children of God come before the Throne of Grace, they come with the full assurance that their Heavenly Father *is* able to accomplish whatever He is pleased to do- because *nothing* is too difficult for Him. That Truth is a powerful motivation to pray.

“*To be worth praying to,*” Hunter writes, “*God has first of all got to have the Power to do what we ask. Second, He must have Sovereignty over Creation to do what He wants to do*” (*The God Who Hears*, 48). Believers must come to their God presenting to Him their requests because He has both the Authority and the Ability to grant what they have requested in their petitions and intercessory prayers.

4. God Actually Does Respond to Prayer.

The fourth reason that believers should pray is that God not only *can*, but actually *does* change the course of history in response to prayer. Jesus said, “**Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened.**” As Wayne Grudem points out, Jesus “*makes a clear connection between*

seeking things from God and receiving them. When we ask, God responds” (Systematic Theology, 377).

Scripture is filled with examples of God granting to His people what they have requested in their prayers of petition and intercession. 1Chronicles 4:10a records the prayer of Jabez in which he said, **“Oh that Thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that Thy hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldst keep me from harm, that it may not pain me!”** In response to Jabez’s prayer, **“God granted him what he requested” (v. 10b)**. In **Exodus 32:10**, God told Moses of His intentions to destroy the people of Israel because of their idolatry. But Moses interceded on behalf of Israel (vv. 11-13), and in response to his prayer God relented and did not destroy them (v. 14). And as James records, God responded to the earnest prayers of Elijah in both initiating and ending a three-and-a-half-year drought (**James 5:17-18; cf. Genesis 18:22-33; 32:26; Daniel 10:12; Amos 7:1-6; The Acts 4:29-31; 10:31; and 12:5-11**).

At the same time that it is acknowledged that God is Sovereign, then, it must also be acknowledged that **“the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16b; cf. 4:2)**. In fact, immediately after answering the question of *how* to pray in **Luke 11:2-4**, Jesus goes on to answer the question of *why* to pray by giving two reasons—because God rewards diligence in prayer by granting requests (**Luke 11:5-10**), and because God delights in giving good gifts to His children (**Luke 11:11-13**).

In the words of Richard Pratt, then,

“Prayer is a powerful human effort that can significantly affect not only the lives of individuals but the very course of world history” (*Pray with Your Eyes Open*, 112).

This truth, no doubt, should be a powerful motive for the children of God to pray. As Grudem writes,

“If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer,...then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all” (*Systematic Theology*, 377).

If God Is Sovereign, Why Pray? (Part 4)

by Matt Waymeyer

Today's post concludes our series on this important topic, with a fifth and final reason why believers should pray in light of God's sovereignty.

5. God has ordained prayer as a means by which He accomplishes His Eternal Purposes.

At this point, some may wonder how it is that Scripture can teach both that God Providentially brings all things to pass in conformity with His Eternal Purpose *and* that the prayers of men can have a significant affect in the unfolding of world history. The seeming contradiction between these two Truths vanishes, however, when one realizes that



“... the same God Who has Decreed the end has also decreed that His End shall be reached through His Appointed Means, and one of these is prayer” (*The Sovereignty of God*, 167).

In other words, God in His Infinite Wisdom was pleased to ordain prayer to be a means through which He accomplishes His Good Pleasure in and through His Creation. As A.W. Pink writes,

“God has decreed that certain events *shall* come to pass, but He has also decreed that these events shall come to pass *through* the means He has appointed for their accomplishment. God has elected certain ones to be saved, but He has also decreed that these ones shall be saved through the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel, then, is one of the appointed means for the working out of the eternal counsel of the Lord; and prayer is another. God has decreed the means as well as the end, and among the means is prayer” (*Ibid.*, 171).

Understanding this relationship between the Sovereignty of God and the prayers of men begins with recognizing the comprehensive nature of God's Eternal Purpose. Richard Pratt writes,

“God's plan is so comprehensive that it not only includes the final destinies of things but also includes the secondary, creaturely processes that work together to accomplish these ends. For instance, God does not simply ordain light to shine on the earth each day; He also employs the sun, the moon, the stars, and countless other things to accomplish that end. God does not merely determine that someone will recover from a disease; He uses doctors and medicine to accomplish the healing. As the playwright of history, God did not simply write an ending for the book of

time. He wrote every word on every page so that all events lead to the grand finale” (*Pray With Your Eyes Open*, 109-10).

In other words, the “**all things**” which God works out “**according to the counsel of His will**” (**Ephesians 1:11**) includes *the means that He uses* to bring about His ultimate Ends. God uses the sun to bring light to the earth, He uses doctors to restore people to health, and He uses prayer to bring about many things He has purposed in eternity past.

When one wants to cross the street safely, he uses the crosswalk and looks both ways before doing so; when one desires his family members to turn to Christ for Salvation, he seeks to proclaim the Gospel to them; when one desires to provide for his family, he works hard at his place of employment. And in the same way, when one desires such-and-such to happen, he prays to God to bring it about, recognizing that prayer is one of the means through which God brings about His Purposes here on earth.

Several examples in Scripture indicate that God has ordained prayer as a means to accomplish His Eternal Plans. First, when Abraham sojourned in Gerar in **Genesis 20**, he lied and told King Abimelech that Sarah was his sister, at which time Abimelech took Sarah into his harem of wives (v. 2). In response, God closed all the wombs of the household of Abimelech and threatened the king with further judgment if he did not restore Sarah to Abraham (vv. 7, 17). However, at the same time that God warned Abimelech of this judgment, He also told him, “[**Abraham**] **is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live**” (v. 7). In other words, God revealed to the king that His Plan was for Abraham to pray and intercede for the King so that Divine Judgment would be withdrawn. Then, in verse 17, God’s Preordained Plan came to fruition: “**And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children.**”

A second example can be found at the end of the **Book of Job**. God addressed Job’s friend, Eliphaz the Temanite, saying,

I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly (Job 42:7b-8a; NIV)

Then, as verse 9 reveals, Eliphaz “**did what the Lord told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer**” (NIV). From this it is clear that God not only ordained that His Wrath toward Eliphaz would be turned aside, but He also ordained that the Means He would use to accomplish that end would include the Intercessory Prayer of His servant Job.

A third and final example of God’s ordination of prayer as a means to accomplish His End can be found in God’s Promise to Israel of future restoration in **Jeremiah 29**. In verse 11a, the Lord told Israel that He knew the Plans that He had for her. In other words, the God Who knew the end from the beginning was not unaware of what He had purposed for Israel’s future. He continued by telling Israel

that His plans were “**for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope**” (v. 11b). What will happen in the future when God's Plan unfolds and He Providentially brings it to pass? He continued:

“Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile” (vv. 12-14).

God will restore His people in response to their prayers, but these prayers—rather than being an *intrusion* into God's Eternal Plan—are actually *part* of God's Plan. Both the means and the end—the prayers and the restoration—have been ordained by Him and will be brought to pass by Him (cf. **Ezekiel 36:37**).

Prayers of petition and intercession, then, should not be thought of as attempts to *alter* the Eternal Purposes of God. As Pratt writes,

“Trying to alter the eternal decrees of God through prayer is like trying to reach the moon on a trampoline; it is impossible. Our petitions cannot interrupt God's plan for the universe anymore than a trampoline can break the power of earth's gravity” (*Pray With Your Eyes Open*, 109).

Instead, prayer should be understood as

“one of the many secondary causes through which God fulfills His plan” (Ibid., 110).

It is obvious, then, that one need not deny the Sovereignty of God in order to be committed to a life of fervent prayer. For such a life begins in an obedient submission to the Command of God and the Model of Christ, it flows out of the recognition that God is able and willing to respond to the prayers of His children, and it rests in the Assurance that God has Sovereignly ordained prayer as a means to accomplish His Purposes.