

In Part 1 we reviewed principles for and boundaries around prayer, and then proposed a definition toward what it means for God to be providentially in control of all things in the universe. We also asked some probing questions about the relationship between God's providence and our prayers. Here we put it together and explore this relationship further.

Thinking about Prayer and Providence

Often we think certain things will happen *because* we pray and, reciprocally, will not happen if we do not pray. We suppose there is a kind of cause-effect relationship between our prayers and God's answers. Our prayers seem to cause or give rise to God's answers. But are these assumptions correct? Consider:

- In no way does prayer coerce/manipulate God into doing something he's not already determined to do.
- We must couch our prayers in the context of a biblical relationship between Creator and created. Prayer is not an open dialogue among equals. For example, membership in a family is not exactly symmetrical. Father and son are not equals —there is a hierarchy in human family relationships. Hierarchy, however, does not make the relationship any less personal. That our relationship with God is asymmetrical does nothing to depersonalize it. Nor should we think God is manipulating us against our wills. Rather, prayer is a dynamic exchange between the Almighty God of the universe and you as a completely dependent creature that desperately needs his touch in your life.

And so, exactly how do our prayers intersect with God's sovereignty?

- If God is meticulously sovereign over every detail in the universe, then he ordains certain ends and also specific means to accomplish those ends. In some cases, prayer is a means God has ordained to bring about circumstances that otherwise would not have occurred. "Prayers are useful in obtaining those favours which He foresaw He would bestow on those who should pray for them" (Augustine, *City of God*).
- Prayer is not a way of helping God decide between different courses of action, but a mechanism from which God's already settled decree affects our world. Some things God has purposed to accomplish *despite* human involvement while other things he has chosen to accomplish *through* human involvement, such as prayer. Simply put, God has determined to accomplish some things in response to our prayers. Just as God has ordained labor as a means of supplying our physical needs, so too God has ordained prayer as a means of supplying our spiritual needs (John Calvin).
- Consequently, God's providence does not relieve us of the responsibility to pray. In fact, if prayer is a link in the sequence of events that God has ordained to bring about his specified intentions, then we're not merely responsible to pray but highly privileged!
- Prayer, therefore, is God actively involving his followers in the process of advancing his kingdom in the hearts of men and women around the globe. Prayer is God's invitation to us to join him in changing the world! It is the divine channel through which God's free, predetermined favor should descend.

God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 1)

Week 9

- Prayer *does* change things in the world, but it does not change God and his purposes. God's will is never frustrated by our prayerlessness, yet our prayerlessness can be an instrument of discipline in God's hand (see Joshua 9:14).
- When we pray according to God's revealed will we can be sure God will answer positively (1 John 5:14-15).
- That God already knows what we need before we ask him is no hindrance to our prayers. God's foreknowledge makes it possible for him to answer our prayers even before we pray (Isaiah 65:24). The certainty of the future, though determined by God, comes about through the free agency of human choices, including our prayers. Some of what God has determined to do he has chosen to do in response to our prayers.
- In some sense, then, prayer is instrumental, not causal. For example, we are saved by faith, not because of faith. So too, God's will is accomplished *by* our prayers, not *because of* them.

*Since God has ordained the means as well as the ends to accomplish all and only what he intends for the universe, we have every incentive to be on our knees and gladly join him in changing the world for his glory by our prayers.
Such privilege we have! Amen.*
