

Do we really have some kind of control over circumstances by our prayers? If God never changes (Malachi 3:6), exactly how do our prayers "influence" God to act?

Part 1 (of 2) offers some reflections on how our prayers intersect with God's meticulous sovereignty. To set the stage, we review boundaries around how we think about prayer. Then I offer some thoughts on divine providence as it pertains to human activity with a view to defining God's providence.

Thinking about Prayer

- Prayer, at its most basic level, is an expression of our dependence upon God.
- Our purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not us, must be the center focus of our prayers and it is his will and not just our own that we must pursue.
- Submission is an essential ingredient in Jesus' prayer life and should be in ours.
- In our prayers we should consistently recognize how God is working in and through circumstances, rather than merely expect to change them.
- Thankfulness for God's movement in others gives us an opportunity to avoid self-absorption.
- Prayer for knowing God better, gaining special insight into our eternal hope, and for power to live for God's glory should govern all prayer requests.
- When we pray, we should emphasize a growing love for one another, pure and blameless living, and all that accommodates our maturity in Christ.
- Only prayer can gain the depth of insight into the limitless dimensions of Christ's love for us.
- God is more interested in us than in what we want and he occasionally denies our requests so that his glory and our good are optimal.

Thinking about Providence

Exactly how do our prayers intersect with God's sovereignty? In what sense does God *respond* to prayer when his purposes are changeless? Why pray if God is all-wise and all-knowing? Similarly, if God has already determined the end from the beginning and the outcome of every event, why bother praying? Do our prayers really influence God to act in ways that he otherwise would not? Do our prayers really cause things to happen?

Consider this definition: "***Divine providence is like a blueprint or master plan consisting of a stream of dynamically related events through which God brings about precisely what he intends for the universe and from which he governs the world***" (See Psalm 115:3; 33:10-11; Proverbs 5:21; 16:1-4; 9; 33; Daniel 4:34-35; Isaiah 14:24; 26-27; 46:10-11; Acts 4:27-28). Four observations follow.

1. Prayer, as one element in God's blueprint, is an expression of our trust and reliance upon God's providence and, therefore, is **a means God uses to affect change** for accomplishing his will.

2. **Prayer is a condition for, not the cause of, God acting in the world.** God *does* respond to the prayers of his people, but not because he is compelled to do so but because he has calculated to do so (See Gen. 18:22-33; 21:17; 30:17; Ex. 32:14; 1 Chron. 14:14; Dan. 10:12; Mt. 7:7-11; Acts 4:29-31; 12:5-11).

Note: God's providential control is seen in governing the affairs of nations. He is the chief architect and ruler over the nations (Job 12:23; Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Ps. 22:28; 33:14-15; Pr. 21:1; 16:9; Dan. 4:34-35; Acts 17:26). Even in the midst of evil, God redirects the results of sinful human choices toward his ultimate purposes, whether his purposes are for blessing, discipline, or judgment (Gen. 37:28; 45:5; 50:20; 2 Kgs. 19:25; Is. 10:5, 12; 13:17; Jer. 25:9, 12; Ez. 14:9; Hab. 1:5-12; Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 1:11). As the sovereign, all-knowing Architect of the universe, he has an overall "blueprint," known only to him, in which he has already engineered every effect from every cause and every consequence from every condition. In his perfect wisdom and almighty power, God's conception and resolve is to bring about the precise goal, which he intends for his creation. Ultimately, everything that comes to pass is what he has purposed, and everything he has purposed comes to pass (Is. 14:26-27; Eph. 1:11). And prayer, as one link in the chain of God's meticulous care, offers us the exciting opportunity to actively be involved with God in changing the world!

3. Nevertheless, God has set some parameters around answered prayer, which include **prayers offered in Jesus' name** (Jn. 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24). To pray in the name of Jesus is to enter the presence of God by the authority and reputation of Jesus rather than any individual authority (e.g., Acts 3:6; 4:7; 16:18; 1 Cor. 5:4). It implies a surrendering of all personal authority and privilege and a submission to the Lord Jesus' authority. Therefore, humility and dependence are necessary prerequisites to effective prayer (2 Chron. 7:14; Jm. 5:16; 1 Pt. 5:6-7).
4. Another parameter is **praying according to God's will** (Mt. 6:10; 26:39; 1 Jn. 5:14-15). The fact that God knows in advance what we need before we ask (Mt. 6:8) suggests God's provision is not only in the answers he provides, but also in the prayers we pray.

Like a conductor and composer, God has orchestrated each note and rhythm in the universe to perform his perfect masterpiece of history. The motif repeated in every refrain includes the prayers of the saints that serve to bring the grand finale to a climax when the chorus will one day sing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Next week: God's Providence, Our Prayers: Part 2