

Chapter 3

September 15, 1996

So far we have considered the place that prayer occupies in the Christian life as that is taught in the Bible, together with the difficulties that we find and that all the godly through the ages have found in proving themselves faithful at this most spiritual work. Then, last time, we considered the definition of prayer as true and personal conversation with God and the importance of keeping that in mind in all our thinking about prayer — it is nothing if it is not always a true talking to a personal God who is listening to us speak to him.

Tonight, I want to address the question of prayer's effect and how are we to think about its effectuality.

Not so long ago I heard on Christian TV a sermon on Mark 11:22-24:

Have faith in God, Jesus answered. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, God, throw yourself into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

The preacher argued from that text that we should never pray for anything twice. Because, obviously, if it is true that if a man believes in his heart that what he has asked for will be given to him it will be done for him then to

ask a second time for the same thing is as much as to admit that you didn't really believe the first time. If you really believe, pray for something once and it is a done deal.

Now, I suspect that we know *that* isn't right. Prayer is not like some celestial vending machine which requires only the right coin to be put in the slot and the right handle pulled. The Bible speaks to often of our wrestling with the Lord in prayer, of the importance of importunity, etc.

And we certainly reject as unchristian any suggestion that the life of prayer is inconsistent with a modern view of the world and with a scientific understanding of causation. In 1924, the American biblical scholar, Kirsopp Lake, then professor at Harvard, said in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that "few educated people [today] believe in [prayer's] efficacy. . . .I do not believe that the religion of tomorrow will have any more place for petition than for any other form of magic." [In Buswell, *Problems in the Prayer Life*, p. 54n.]

Those who embrace the teaching of the Bible as the Word of God can hardly doubt that prayer is a real power and influence in the world. Over and again the Bible speaks to this influence and this power in words that cannot be mistaken.

"Whatever you ask in my name, it shall be done for you."

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

"Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you."

"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

And a great many other statements to the effect that by asking God for things we effect changes in the world. And, were statements such as these general promises not enough, we have another large class of statements concerning prayer in which we are taught that *there would have been changes in the course of events* had one prayed or had one prayed faithfully.

"You have not because you ask not." (James 4:2)

“When you ask you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives.” (James 4:3)

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18).

It is clear, then, that we must believe prayer to be an actual instrument of change, as having an effect on events in the world, as changing the course of events, because it has an effect on God and brings him to do what otherwise he would not.

But, of course, that raises all sorts of questions, or, at least, it does in the mind of someone who is thinking carefully and seriously about *all* that the Bible teaches.

Think of the possible questions, every one of which, believe me, has been raised and offered as an objection to the simple doctrine of prayer the general reader of the Bible seems to be left with, viz. we pray, God answers, and things happen in the world that wouldn't have otherwise.

1. Jesus, as part of his teaching on prayer, remarks that “your father knows what you need before you ask him.” Well, then, our prayers are obviously not informing God of what he did not already know. But if he knows our needs and is a loving father, why doesn't he just meet them. Must he be asked as if he would be unwilling otherwise? And for that matter, what of God's wisdom? Wouldn't he do the right thing anyway, without having to be asked, and won't he do that which brings to pass his perfect plan and purpose in the world, no matter what men may or may not ask of him?
2. And many texts remind us of the absolute sovereignty of the divine counsel: every hair of our heads numbered; no little bird falling from a tree without the will of our heavenly father; he brings all things to pass according to the counsel of his will. How then can we say that prayer *changes* things when all our days were ordered for us before there was a one of them, or that our prayers bring God to act in a certain way in the world when *he always does what pleases him in heaven and on earth*?
3. And what of natural laws that we now understand so much better than people did ages ago? We know what causes moisture to collect

in the clouds to the point that it begins to rain. When folk pray for rain in a drought and it rains, was it the prayer or the natural laws of evaporation and condensation? And if it was prayer is it a miracle or some kind of divinely ordered suspension of natural laws that causes that rain to fall when and where it did in answer to prayer.

Pope asks just this kind of skeptical question in his famous lines:

Think we, like some weak prince, the Eternal Cause
Prone for his favourites to reverse his laws!
Shall burning Etna, if a sage requires,
Forget to thunder, and recall its fires?
On air and sea new motions be impressed,
O blameless Bethel, to relieve thy breast?
Should the loose mountain tremble from on high?
Shall gravitation cease if you go by?

In regard to the last two questions, those concerning the relationship of prayer to God's absolute sovereignty and to natural laws, the answer is simply to say that this is one more instance of the dialectic that encounters us everywhere in the Bible between divine sovereignty and the means and instrumentalities that God uses to bring his will to pass. Prayer is just a particularly good example of such a means or such an instrumentality because it places such emphasis on the free personal action of human beings and its result in the world. But we could ask the same question concerning preaching or witness-bearing as a means to the salvation of the elect, or obedience as a means to God's blessing in our lives, or the use of medicine. If, for example, as the Bible says, the day of our death is already appointed for us, does this mean that we are not to use medicine when we fall ill or wear our seatbelt in the car? Not at all. We are taught in the Bible to live responsibly and that our actions, our choices are directly connected, as cause and effect, to outcomes in our lives. God's sovereign plan and counsel embraces not only the ends he intends to bring to pass but the means by which those ends will come to pass and the means are as fundamentally important as the ends. It is not just forgiveness that God is after for us, but forgiveness *through our faith in Jesus Christ*.

I read a few days ago an interesting little book on the subject of Charles Spurgeon's controversy with the hyper-Calvinist, who were actually quite numerous among the Victorian Baptists of Spurgeon's day, the descendants of the great Baptist theologian, John Gill. Now, to many people, "Hyper-Calvinism" is simply another word for Calvinism, because, to them, Calvinism itself is "hyper enough." But, actually hyper-Calvinism is that understanding that denies what has come to be called "the free offer of the Gospel." Hyper-calvinists believe ardently in the sovereignty of divine grace. God is the one who chooses and God is the one who grants a new birth and God is the one who gives faith to his elect that they might come to Christ and be saved. To offer salvation indiscriminately to everyone, to urge any and everyone to repent and believe, to tell them that if they believed they would be justified, seemed to them to leave the powerful suggestion that salvation is finally in man's hands not God's. Therefore, they held that the gospel offer of forgiveness to those who believe in Christ should be made only to those who show signs of being under the convicting influences of the Holy Spirit, that is, as much as possible, the gospel should be offered only to the elect.

Spurgeon, of course, mightily disagreed with this position as he should have. The Scripture teaches no such thing and everywhere the gospel is represented as being preached to all men and all men are urged to repent and believe in Jesus. The hyper-Calvinists, who have so firmly grasped one pole of this truth cannot see the other polls: the love and compassion God has for the whole world, his desire that none perish, and the true and effectual liberty of action that God has given to man and which free actions are somehow, mysteriously and wonderfully taken up into God's sovereign plan so that God's will is finally done, the elect are saved and they only, and at no point is the free exercise of the human will either violated or rendered unimportant or not decisive at its own level.

Spurgeon wrote:

"I believe in predestination, yea, even in its very jots and tittles. I believe that the path of a single grain of dust in the March wind is ordained and settled by a decree which cannot be violated; that every word and thought of man, every flittering of a sparrow's wing, every flight of a fly. . . that everything, in fact is foreknown and foreordained. But I do equally believe in the free agency of man, that man acts as he wills, especially in moral operations —

choosing the evil with a will that is unbiased by anything that comes from God, biased only by his own depravity of heart and the perverseness of his habits; choosing the right too, with perfect freedom, though sacredly guided and led by the Holy Spirit. . . I believe that man is accountable as if there were no destiny whatever. . . Where these two doctrines meet I do not know, nor do I want to know. They do not puzzle me, since I have given up my mind to believing them both.” [I Murray, Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism, pp. 82-83.]

Well, the same thing may be said of sovereignty and prayer as can be said about sovereignty in salvation and the freedom of man’s will. Both are true, both are real and God includes them both in the life of the world in any true understanding of it. Everything works out according to the divine will, but that divine will embraces prayers that bring to pass events that would otherwise not have occurred. (David at Keilah in 1 Sam. 23:7-12 “Will the men of Keilah surrender me to Saul?” Yes they will; so he didn’t return there!) A real if. . . then, but as well a real certainty in the divine plan, an absolute, unqualified control. Theologians can say that human acts (such as prayers) are the means God uses to accomplish his will — which is true of course —

As Augustine wrote, “prayers are powerful to attain those things which He foreknows that He will give to such as pray for them.” [In Paul Helm, “Asking God,” Themelios (Sept. 1986), p. 23.]

But that doesn’t really help too much. There is still a great mystery. How can God speak of a real if. . . then as he does so clearly, when all is certain to fall out as it does from eternity past? But both facts are taught clearly enough in the Bible and we must hold fast to them both and be willing to confess that God’s ways are far above our ways.

Accordingly, we will believe that prayer changes things, brings things to pass in the world that would not occur otherwise and that certain things happen that would not happen if only we had prayed. We are entirely prepared to believe, as we are taught in Rev. 8:3 that the prayers of all the saints that ascend up to heaven come back down to earth as “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.”

That leaves us with the first question: why do we need to ask of God that

which he already knows we need, why do we need to ask blessing from a God of infinite love and perfect wisdom who surely can be counted on to do what is best for his children without our feeble efforts to advise him?

Well, clearly we do not pray because God needs information? Jesus tell us he already knows our needs. We do not need to persuade God to be merciful and kind to us. He is that far more than we know and was that long before we ever prayed to him our feeble prayers. He who did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not, with him, freely give us all things? Prayer must have another function entirely. Joseph Hart says in his hymn:

Prayer was appointed to convey
The blessings God designs to give.

But why was it appointed? Why does God wish to give us his blessing in this way and why has he made it so important than in his rule blessings will be actually withheld if his children do not pray to him — blessings that would be their benefit and the benefit of the world?

Why should Jesus say to us: “If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give his Holy Spirit to those that ask him?” Why add those last words, “to those that ask Him?” Why doesn’t he just give them the gift?

1. Well, in the first place, he usually does! In fact, he does in almost all cases. If you stop and think you will quickly realize that most of what you have and enjoy every day, you have without having specifically asked for it. God just gave it to you. How often have you and I been rebuked in our conscience because we have received some great kindness from the Lord, some gift, that we did not pray for but should have?

Above all other examples, we didn’t ask for his election, we didn’t ask for Christ’s redemption, we didn’t ask for the new birth, and we hardly ever ask, really ask, for our daily bread and for protection from the thousands of temptations that endanger us every day. But he gives us these mercies anyway! Prayer clearly is not necessary in any kind of natural or physical way, as if God could not give us these blessings except in answer to prayer. Most blessings he gives without and apart from our prayers.

2. But, there is a reason why he should call upon us to pray to him and make of our prayers such an important part of his plan and purpose for our lives and the life of the world.

Here is P.T. Forsyth:

“To common sense the fact that God knows all we need, and wills us all good, the fact of His infinite Fatherhood, is a reason for not praying [it seems to make prayer superfluous]. Why ask what He is more than willing to give? But to Christian faith and to spiritual reason it is just the other way. Asking is polar co-operation. Jesus turned the fact to a use exactly the contrary of its deistic sense. He made the all-knowing Fatherhood the ground of true prayer. We do not ask as beggars but as children. Petition is not mere receptivity, nor is it mere pressure; it is filial reciprocity. Love loves to be told what it knows already. Every lover knows that. It wants to be asked for what it longs to give. And that is the principle of prayer to the all-knowing Love.” [The Soul of Prayer, p. 63]

What Forsyth is saying is that prayer is appointed to be a chief means of our Christian life precisely because God wants us to live in *personal communion* with him; he wants there to be a real relationship of love for and dependence upon him on our part. He wants us to talk to him of what matters most to us and to him: that is what prayer is and that is what the Christian life is.

Dr. Buswell uses a different illustration, but it makes the point beautifully. Parents know that theoretically it would be possible to provide for one's children in an impersonal and distant way. You could provide meals prepared ahead of time that they could take from the freezer, leave money for them to buy what they want, have servants to take care of laundry and so on. They would never have to ask you for anything. But, every parent also knows that the result would be an utterly different and debased and denatured relationship with our children. We would not provide for our children that way even if we could because it is impersonal and does not express or foster love. We want them to come to us and ask and we want to provide for them directly and in answer to their appeals. In this way a true parental-child relationship is formed and expressed; in this way and no other. No father

would be happy to have his son take everything and ask for nothing. It would be thankless. It would make the son not admirable, but self-centered and ungrateful. He would not be humble nor would he be wise. He would and could not learn to give to others as he had been given to. And he would not know how great was the mercy he had been shown. These lessons must be made personal and actual in our lives by asking and receiving. That God has made it so in our lives before him indicates that it could not be so in any other way.

Is this not what the Lord means when he says in Ezekiel 36:37-38:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Once again I will yield to the plea of the house of Israel and do this for them: I will make their people as numerous as sheep, as numerous as the flocks for offerings at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts. So will the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. *Then they will know that I am the Lord.*”

God’s goodness will only have its proper effect on them *as they have it in answer to their pleas to the heavenly Father*. Einstein had not true understanding of God because he thought that if there was a God he would be far too busy with the great universe to care about a little creature like him. But, as a matter of fact, God is far greater than Einstein thought: capable of caring for the distant reaches of the universe and every grain of dust carried aloft by the March wind *and still care personally and deeply and really about the needs, the problems, the feelings, the cares, the fears, the concerns, the longings, and the love of each human being and, especially, of each of his chosen children*. It is in prayer and by prayer that such a view of God and his relationship to us is sustained and fostered. Prayer is appointed to convey the blessings God designs to give because when blessings are given that way they are seen to be the love and faithfulness and goodness of our heavenly father — which they are, whether or not they are given in answer to prayer — and being seen to be so, they call forth in us love and gratitude and consecration. Prayer makes personal our relationship with God, it makes it real at the level of our actual daily life and that is why God has made such a great place for prayer in the Christian life.

And that is why we should love to pray — it is the link that binds us to God in the most personal, immediate, and genuine way, as one person to another,

as a child to his father.