

# The struggle of prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] to hear that you may work out your sovereign purposes in our lives this morning. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. If you're relatively new to our church this morning, well, first of all, welcome.

We're very delighted that you join us. We've been going through a sermon series on prayer, and today is actually the very last sermon in that series. Now again, if you are new, I just want to alert you to the fact that normally, what we do from the pulpit in our church is expository preaching. That means we usually look at a specific passage in the Bible, and we work our way through it in its context with the help of the Holy Spirit to try to understand what God intends to say to us through that passage.

And so next week, when we begin our series on the book of James, you will have noticed that flyer in your notice, we will be working our way through the book passage by passage, section by section.

That's what we do normally. Now you can ask me more personally why we do it that way if you want to, but here are just a couple of reasons. Number one, as we understand the passage rightly in its context, we actually allow God to speak to us through his agenda, not ours.

[ 1 : 26 ] And number two, it gives us great confidence to read the scriptures for ourselves. So for example, when I took you through a section of Romans chapter 8 a few weeks ago, when we considered the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer, I hope you could confidently follow the logic of the passage for yourself.

And as you did, God was speaking powerfully through his word and giving you great encouragement in prayer. But there is value from time to time in zooming out and thinking through what the whole of scripture has to say about some particular question or subject.

In fact, it's important to do that from time to time to synthesize Bible truth across the scriptures. It's like looking at a whole map instead of the road that is just in front of you.

And today, in our last sermon on prayer, that's actually going to be my approach. So you might have to flip the pages of your Bible a little more today.

And I'd like to suggest that it's probably easier to do that with a paper copy of the Bible than on your phones. So you might want to whip out an actual print Bible if you have one.

[ 2 : 46 ] And if you don't, don't worry, some of the verses will be on the screen, but not all of them. But let me just very briefly recap what we've been seeing throughout this sermon series.

We've taken our keel from Ephesians 2, verse 18, which says this, For through Him, that is Christ, we both have access to the Father by the One Spirit.

And so we've been thinking how knowing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit impacts the way we think about prayer and the way we actually pray.

We've remembered the goodness and generosity of a Father who loves to give, who wants to give, and who does give when we ask.

And He's given us His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who connects us to Him and gives us great confidence, great boldness to approach Him.

[ 3 : 50 ] And He's also given us His Holy Spirit, who assures us we are His children, and who helps us even in our weaknesses to pray as He intercedes for us.

And over the last two weeks, we've considered how King David in the Old Testament models for us that great prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, and how King David's greatest son, King Jesus, teaches us to pray.

And as Dr. Kaby pointed out earlier, you can always catch up on those sermons on our website. But today, as we finish our series, it's quite likely we still find prayer hard.

We find it a real struggle. We wonder if it will ever get easier. And at the back of our minds, perhaps we still have some questions about praying.

Now, initially, I was planning to make this morning's sermon a bit like an FAQ, frequently asked questions. I wanted to deal with three common questions or struggles people often have when it comes to praying.

[ 5 : 07 ] But in the course of the week, what I discovered was that it would actually make the sermon too overwhelming to handle. So I've restricted myself to answering just one of those frequently asked questions.

And I hope the answer will be encouraging to you in the end. So this morning, we'll be thinking about the question on the sermon outline in front of you. If God already knows, why pray?

If God already knows, why pray? Has someone ever asked you a question like that? Or have you ever wondered that yourself?

But yeah, God already knows it all anyway, beforehand. He's going to do what he's going to do, so why bother? My prayers don't matter in the big scheme of things.

The Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, raises the issue in an especially nice and succinct way. The quote is on your outline. Can we believe that God really modifies his action in response to the suggestions of man?

[ 6 : 22 ] For infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it. And really, the question behind this question is about God's sovereignty.

We say it all the time. God is sovereign. But what does it mean to say that he's sovereign, and how does that actually affect our prayer lives?

Well, when we turn to the scriptures to look for an answer, we find something surprising. Now, just turn with me for a moment to Acts 4, verse 23 to 30, our Bible reading this morning.

If you've closed your Bibles, I'll just give you a few seconds to find it again. Acts 4, verse 23 to 30. Now, notice what we have here.

Peter and John, freshly released from arrest, report back to the church about their experiences, and they would have brought bad news.

[ 7 : 31 ] The authorities are clearly opposed to them and their message. So the church gathers to pray. But how do they begin? They start by acknowledging God's sovereignty over everything, verse 24.

When they, the church, heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.

They declare, God, you stand supreme over the entire created order of heaven and earth. But not only that, they say, Lord, you are sovereign over the entire course of history.

In verses 25 to 26, they quote Psalm 2, a psalm that recalls the opposition of the world to God's anointed one, his chosen king.

This psalm is then fulfilled in the events surrounding Jesus' death, according to verses 27 and 28. Notice again how they phrase their prayer, verse 28.

[ 8 : 52 ] They, that is, Herod, and Pontius Pilate, and all the people, they were all involved in conspiracy.

Notice the second word of verse 28. Did. They did. They did something. What did they do? They plotted. They executed.

They did what they wanted to do to Jesus. But they did, verse 28 continues, what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

In other words, everything they did had been directed and planned by God all along. He already knows.

And so in verses 24 to 28, we find the church unashamedly testifying to God's complete sovereignty.

[ 9 : 59 ] And what does that lead them to? Well, in verses 29 to 30, they make their prayer requests. They ask.

They petition. They appeal. Enable us to speak your word with great boldness and so on. So whereas we might ask if God already knows, if God is sovereign, why pray?

The early church seemed to believe if God already knows, if God is sovereign, we must pray.

They saw God's sovereignty not as a barrier to prayer, but as an incentive to prayer. Now, how does all this work?

Well, let's keep digging by zooming out and looking across the scriptures. And I hope that you will see that as we pay close attention to some of the verses we're going to look at, we'll see how knowing these things actually impact our praying and our living and everything in between.

[11:17] It's always wrong to think of doctrine and theology as irrelevant and impractical. No, it goes into the very heart of our lives. And what we'll be looking at might be a bit stretching in places, but let's work hard to understand the deep things of God.

And what we notice as we dig all throughout the Bible is that we find two things consistently affirmed which we must hold together.

if we don't hold these two things together, we will find ourselves going off on the wrong path. So what are these two things?

Firstly, God is always completely in control. I hope you saw that already just from that prayer we've looked at in Acts chapter 4.

But let me take you on a quick tour around the Bible to reinforce what we're actually talking about when we say God is sovereign.

[12:26] It means he's in control of every bit of creation. Psalm 148 verse 8 says he controls natural processes.

Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds all do his bidding. Matthew chapter 6 verse 26 says not a single bird falls to the ground outside his providential care.

And you see that on your handout there's plenty more verses that affirm this and you can always go home and look them up. It means that God governs human history.

Isaiah especially has tons to say about this. He keeps affirming it again and again. I put down a few examples on your outline but let's just turn to one of them.

Isaiah chapter 14 verse 24 to 27. Let me read it. The Lord Almighty has sworn surely as I have planned so it will be and as I have purpose so it will happen.

[13:41] I will crush the Assyrians in my land on my mountains I will trample him down his yoke will be taken from my people and his burden removed from their shoulders.

This is the plan determined for the whole world. This is the hand stretched out over all nations for the Lord Almighty has purpose and who can thwart him?

His hand is stretched out and who can turn it back? Isaiah is saying God will accomplish every single one of his purposes.

What he says goes. Assyria, God's purposes cannot be thwarted or frustrated.

God governs the course of human history at every point. Past, present, and future. And to say God is sovereign is to mean his purposes are carried out not just among nations, but even in individual lives.

[15:17] just look at what God says to the prophet Jeremiah. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations. God has already mapped out Jeremiah's future. He's in control of this individual's life.

Let me just read to you Proverbs 16, verse 9. You don't have to turn to it. I'll just read it out to you. Proverbs 16, verse 9.

In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. And these are all things that God stands personally behind.

He doesn't just wind the world up like a toy car. and then walks away and does something else. Just look at Psalm 65, verses 9 to 11, for example.

[16:26] You care for the land and water it. You enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain.

For so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges. You soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your cards overflow with abundance. Notice how the psalmist phrases his language. I hope it was very clear to you as I read it out. You, God, cared for the land. You enriched it.

You watered it abundantly. You ordained the streams to be filled with waters. You softened the land with showers. God didn't just create the world and leave it alone to get on with it, like when we switch on a washing machine and leave it alone to run its cycle, its course.

He is more like the air traffic controller, intimately at work, 24-7, to direct and sustain the course of the universe.

[ 17 : 48 ] Colossians chapter 1 verse 17 makes clear that Jesus is very involved. He is before all things and in him, that's Jesus, all things hold together.

God's involvement in his world is personal. He's hands on. He's getting his hands dirty, so to speak. So whenever we say God is in control, God is sovereign, this is what we mean. He is in control over every little thing, sustaining the whole universe every second of the day, governing the entirety of human history so that his purposes are accomplished.

How do you know that things will turn out in the right way in the end? How do you know for sure that God will keep his promises?

Because our God is this kind of God. It's fundamental that he is sovereign if we are to pray.

[ 19 : 11 ] Imagine an activist advocating for, let's say, a change in the government's climate change policy. Who does he lobby? If he lobbied the person who cleans the toilets in the parliament, he'll get nowhere.

But if he lobbied YB Yobiyin, or even the prime minister himself, he will make more progress because these are the people with sovereign power and authority.

That's who they want access to. And God is the most sovereign being in the whole universe, to whom we already have access to if we trust in Jesus.

And so we pray. But, if we were to look only at those verses, if that was the extent of the picture we have, then it's easy to go down one wrong path.

And that path is fatalism. What does it mean to be a fatalist? It's basically what happens when we think that God being in absolute control is exactly the same as saying God is a dictatorial puppet master.

[ 20 : 36 ] It's when someone says, no matter what I do, the same thing will always happen to me. My beliefs, desires, actions, and yes, prayers, have no effect whatsoever on the external world.

Okay, Sarah, Sarah, whatever will be, will be. And you can sort of see why we could potentially reach that conclusion if we were just to consider those verses we've looked at.

Since God is sovereign in this way, the thinking goes, and he's already decided whether my auntie is going to live or die of cancer in three months' time. So why pray?

We're back to our original question. So let me now introduce the second thing that the Bible consistently affirms throughout.

Secondly, humans are morally responsible creatures who make choices that matter. Let me say that again. Humans are morally responsible creatures who make choices that matter.

[ 21 : 53 ] I'll just give you one example. Come with me to the end of the book of Joshua, to chapter 24, verse 15. Now Joshua is Israel's leader at this time, and he's at the end of his life, and so he's giving his farewell words.

And in the middle of his stirring speech to God's people, he says this, Joshua is clearly presuming that people have freedom to make choices, and that they will be held responsible for their actions. And again, on your outline, I've put other examples that demonstrate a similar point. You can go back and look them up for yourselves. God has given us free will, God has given us free will, a lot of us will say.

But we need to think more carefully about what that means. And more importantly, we need to make sure that this second statement, that humans are morally responsible creatures who make choices that matter.

We have to make sure that it fits with the first statement, that God is sovereign and in control. Let me explain what happens if we only affirm the second thing without the first, which is indeed what some Christians, including some very smart theologians, have done, both in history and in modern times.

[ 23 : 56 ] They go onto another wrong path, which I'll simply call the path of God's limitation. When Christians go down this path, this is the reasoning that they use.

God's sovereignty and our freedom is a zero-sum game. If God is sovereign, we can't be free. And if we are free, then God can't be completely sovereign.

So how? Well, we have to make one choice. And the choice that they go for is this. God can't be completely 100% sovereign, because if he was, we will lose our freedom.

We will become robots. So God must have deliberately limited himself. God won't work unless we pray. Or maybe we could even say, God cannot work unless we pray.

Ever heard that? God will do it. And so we need to pray passionately and urgently. Otherwise, God won't do anything. Maybe he can't do anything. And some theologians who go down this path go

even further.

[ 25 : 13 ] You know what? They say, since God has given us free wills, God doesn't actually know what choices we are going to make. He can only guess. And so the question, if God already knows why pray, makes wrong assumptions.

God doesn't actually know the whole future. He has to anticipate and then respond to our choices. But don't worry, he's powerful and wise, so he can handle the uncertainty.

He'll take the risk. And how does that affect our prayer lives? Well, one of the theologians who take this view says this, our prayers make a difference to God because of the personal relationship God enters into with us.

God chooses to make himself dependent on us for certain things. In prayer, we ask God for divine guidance and assistance, but he allows us to decide our final destiny.

Now, as we'll see in a moment, there is some truth in what they say. Prayers do make a difference. Prayer is about relationship. But I hope that statement, God chooses to make himself dependent on us for certain things, troubles you.

[ 26 : 41 ] As we've already seen, the Bible doesn't permit us to say that. God will do all he can, but since he doesn't know what choice your father will actually make, he doesn't know what choice your father will actually make.

say that you're praying for the salvation of your father. But the trouble is, since God isn't completely sovereign over the future, he doesn't actually know for sure whether your father will be safe or not. God will do all he can, but since he doesn't know what choice your father will actually make, and since he has made himself dependent on the human choice of your father, father, then in the end it all boils down to your father's choice.

In a sense, your dad decides his destiny, not God. He almost becomes his own God. If so, then we are back to where we began.

Why pray? The question might no longer be, if God already knows why pray? But it simply changes form.

[ 27 : 55 ] Since God can't do much about the future, and is ultimately dependent on our choices, why pray? And so, if we go down this path, we are actually robbed of our assurance.

If God limits himself in this way to human freedom and human choices, we cannot sing. because I know, I know he holds the future.

There's no guarantee that he can answer your prayer for the salvation of your father, even if he wanted to. And it would be difficult to say that God knows what is best for us.

Is it possible to pray, your will be done, if God is not completely sovereign? sovereign? And so, the two things, God is sovereign, and humans are morally responsible creatures, must in the end go together.

But how? Well, think of a beautiful musical piece. To make beautiful music, there's more than one chord involved, isn't there? And that's what God does.

[ 29 : 13 ] He takes the chord of his sovereignty and our responsibility and uses that to purposefully craft the shape of this world in ways that we don't fully understand.

He actually takes those three responsible human decisions, including our prayers, and then weaves them into his sovereign purposes so that beautiful music can be created.

Again and again, you see this kind of reasoning in scripture. Let me just take you to one example in Philippians 2, 12-13. Let me read it.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

So who is working? On one level, it's us. We are working out our salvation. We are living out our faith. And yet, at the same time, it is God working in us to fulfill his purposes.

[ 30 : 34 ] both God and us are working. And let me try my best to paint a picture of how the two intersect.

Remember how earlier we said that God didn't just create, but sustain the world? In him, all things hold together. But how does he hold all things together?

Well, he designs it such that he puts in secondary causes that help make the world run. So for instance, let's ask the question, why do crops grow?

Well, we could say it's because of God. That's a perfectly valid answer. But we could also say because people planted it. They watered it. Why does a baby come into the world? Yes, because God created it. But also because a man and a woman got together. Now, God can obviously bring a baby into the world without a man and a woman getting together. [ 31 : 39 ] That's essential to the gospel message, the fact of the virgin birth. But he doesn't usually work in the world that way, what we call miracles.

That's why it's called miracles. He works in the world through what we will call ordinary means, through people caring for their crops and having sexual relations. Of course, there's really nothing ordinary about it when God's behind it, so the terminology isn't perfect, but that's probably the best we can come up with. And so in this sense, God's sovereignty and our human responsibility are working together without one necessarily pushing out the other. Our choices are significant, who we marry, and so on. God made it as such. Our world is significant, it's not controlled by fate.

And yet those choices always happen within the boundaries of God's sovereignty. He never loses control. So when we pray, we find the same beautiful melody playing.

[ 32 : 57 ] Our prayers do make a difference. There are the secondary causes, the ordinary means by which God will use in our world.

Remember earlier in the year when we were going through the Amos series? God was about to bring judgment on Israel, but Amos prays and God relents for a while.

His prayer made an impact. And so we are not fatalists. And yet all this was happening within the boundaries of God's sovereignty. God wasn't just fulfilling his purposes while Amos stood on the sidelines watching on.

No, God wanted to accomplish his purposes of giving Israel one more chance through Amos and his prayer. God knew the outcome, but he also wants to involve us humans in bringing about that outcome.

God Now, we might ask, why did God design it that way? Well, I don't know. And the best answer I can come up with is the same one as what the theologian said earlier.

[ 34 : 05 ] Because God has designed prayer not to be a vending machine. I press a button, something comes out or something doesn't come out. Rather, God wants prayer to be a relationship with him.

He wants to dignify us as people made in his image. And so he gives us the gift of prayer, of talking to him. The great evangelist George Muller once decided to pray for the conversion of five of his friends.

After a few months, one of them came to know Christ. Ten years later, another two people did.

Muller continued praying and someone asked him, do you really think God will save them?

He answered, do you think God would have kept me praying for them all these years if he did not intend to save them? One was eventually saved after 25 years of prayer and the other after Muller died.

God is pleased to use our prayers to accomplish his purposes. God is so that means you can pray.

[ 35 : 26 ] You can ask God that your family and friends will come to know him. You can ask God that he will anchor you in every trial. You can ask God to keep you safe on the roads.

There is not a single atom in this universe that is untouched by God's hand. God will be with you.

And you can plead on the basis of God's promises and hold him accountable for them.

You can plead for God's mercy on you knowing that he has promised true cleansing when you repent and trust in Jesus. You can plead his presence be with you for he has promised never to forsake you.

You can plead for wisdom as we'll hear about in James 1 next week. Knowing that he is more than willing to give you what you need. You and I can pray big prayers and you and I can pray bold prayers.

And when God doesn't answer your prayer the way you expect him to, you can trust that he knows what he's doing anyway because he knows more than you, he's bigger than you. And he has never lost control.

[ 36 : 44 ] And remember as we finish, he uses that control to bring about the greatest good in our lives. Let's just turn back to Acts 4 27-28.

Again, this is the last verses we'll be looking at today. Let me read them again. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. We can pray because our sovereign God is the Father who loves us by planning to give us his son so that the greatest evil world has ever seen.

The execution of Jesus actually results in the best thing that could happen to us. Reconciliation with God.

God is not just sovereign but good. Now, it's been a bit of a dense sermon and if you want to keep digging a bit more about what I've just said about God's sovereignty or you still have some questions about how it all fits together, let me just recommend a book that will be in our library once it's reopened, a book by D.A.

[ 38 : 13 ] Carson called How Long, O Lord? You can dig further by reading that book if you want to. As we finish this series, let me encourage you, keep struggling in prayer, don't give up.

We can pray. Let's pray now. Father, I pray indeed that you open the eyes of our hearts more and more just to know the riches of our inheritance in you, to know the depth of your love and to know the hope to which you have called us to and the power that is at work in us that causes us to live for you, to plead to you, knowing that you are the most supreme being in this universe.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.