

Difficulties in understanding prayer

ADDITIONAL STUDIES IN PRAYER

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STUDY SIX: DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF PRAYER

A. PRAYER AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

It is clear from Scripture that God is sovereign: that he is the Lord of all who works all things according to his eternal purpose.

Psalm 115:3	Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.
Psalm 135:6	The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.
Isaiah 14:24,26,27	Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. ... This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?
Isaiah 23:9	The Lord Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.
Isaiah 40:13,14,22	Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counsellor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, ... who was it taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? ... He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.
Isaiah 44:24ff	I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfils the predictions of his messengers ... he says of Cyrus ... he will accomplish all that I please ..
Isaiah 45:5ff	I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.
Isaiah 46:9ff	I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please ... what I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.
Isaiah 55:8ff	For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts ... my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
Jeremiah 4:28	... because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back.
Ephesians 1:9	He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment.
Ephesians 1:11	In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ...
Ephesians 3:11	... according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.
2Timothy 1:9	... who has saved us ... because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time ...

In the above references the sovereign purpose/will of God is mentioned in relation to [1] his dealings with the nations, [2] his eternal plan of salvation, and [3] his incorporation of individuals into that salvation.

In other references God's sovereign control is seen in his ability to take hold of people and actions that are in direct opposition to his will and purpose and use those people and actions in his will and purpose:

Genesis 45:5ff	... do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ... But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.
Genesis 50:19	Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.
Matthew 26:53	Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?
John 19:11	You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.
Acts 2:23	This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.
Romans 8:28	And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
Philippians 1:12	I want you to know ... that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel (Read to 1:18).

To some people the concept of God's sovereignty makes prayer redundant: if God is sovereign, if he has everything already planned, and will bring his plan to pass, *no matter what*, then, why pray?

In answer to this very real problem it is necessary to state:

A.1 Unless God *is* sovereign ALL prayer is meaningless and worthless.

There is absolutely no point in praying to a god who is not in charge of the universe, because such a god would have neither the authority nor the ability to do anything to bring about the things we pray for. This one fact ought to silence the problems that God's sovereignty raises. Better to have a God who has the authority and ability to answer prayer, and leave us puzzled, than have no mysteries and no realistic expectation of answers.

A.2 There are some things that are *fixed* that no amount of praying can alter.

We cannot, for instance, pray that God will reduce the sinfulness of sin, or do away with hell; nor can we pray that he will act contrary to his character and contrary to his moral law. We cannot pray that he will change the rules. We cannot pray that he will provide a way of salvation other than the way he has provided, that he will, perhaps, open a back door to heaven through which some might enter. He has his plan for eternal salvation through Christ and the establishment of his eternal kingdom: towards this plan and purpose the whole of history moves. That cannot be changed.

A.3 There are other things that are God's stated intention, but can be changed by prayer.

Evidence of this:

1. God intended to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sin. At Abraham's pleading, God agreed that if as few as ten righteous men were found there, he would not destroy the cities (Genesis 18:16-33).
2. God's stated his intention to destroy the idol-worshipping Israelites and make a nation from Moses' descendants. Moses intervened and 'the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened' (Exodus 32:7-14).
3. When the people refused to enter the promised land because they were afraid of the giants, the Lord similarly said he would destroy them and make a great nation out of Moses. Then Moses again interceded on their behalf, and the Lord forgave them as Moses asked (Numbers 14:11-20).
4. The Israelites, contrary to God's stated ideal that he should be their King, persisted in their request for a human king so they could be like the surrounding nations. God finally instructed Samuel to give them a king, even though having a king would not be the best thing for them (1 Samuel 8:4-22; 10:17-25). (This should warn us against persisting in prayer for something that is *our* will, not God's.) [Note that, even though kingship was not God's ideal will for Israel, God wove it into his eternal

- plan: God later used King David not only to lead his people in glorious victories, but also to reveal his truth in the Psalms, and, greater still, to be a prophetic 'type' of Christ. God's sovereign power and authority is clearly seen in this.]
5. God announced judgement on Ahab for his wickedness. On hearing of it Ahab repented in deep humility. The judgement was delayed so that it did not fall during Ahab's lifetime (1 Kings 21:20-29).
 6. The prophet Isaiah was told by the Lord to tell Hezekiah to put his house in order because he was going to die. Hezekiah prayed to the Lord about it, and the Lord promised to add a further fifteen years to his life (2 Kings 20:1-11).
 7. God purposed to overturn Nineveh because of the wickedness of its inhabitants, but, when they repented, the announced destruction did not fall (Jonah 3:1-4:2).
 8. Some of the miracles performed by Jesus Christ superseded the fixed, natural, physical laws that God has embedded into creation, and by which creation normally functions.

A.4 We must be careful not to confuse sovereignty with fatalism or determinism.

Determinism understands that all events, including all human actions, are the results of (that is, determined by) antecedent causes.

Fatalism understands that fate pre-determines and controls everything that happens, that everything that happens is inevitable. We cannot do anything to change our destinies. Human choice is meaningless.

When Christians confuse the Biblical teaching that God is sovereign with these two isms, they have a perverted understanding that puts 'God' in the place of 'antecedent causes' and 'fate' in the above definitions, and have joined ranks with astrology, Islam and Hinduism.

Such a perverted understanding of divine sovereignty results in the following misconceptions which are far from Biblical truth:

1. that it is useless to pray.
2. that God has predetermined everything.
3. that God is to blame for all the bad things that happen.
4. that God is arbitrary, uncaring and impersonal.

If we push this confused perception further we end up with no human responsibility for sin and evil, which is obviously very far from Biblical truth.

In contrast to both fatalism and determinism Jesus Christ actively worked against sin, suffering and evil; he saw no difficulty in interfering with and changing the state of affairs, expressing compassion, distress and anger when confronted with anything that is on this earth because of sin and/or Satan, and he stated clearly that the things he did - those miracles that changed the status quo - were the work of God. *Thus the words and the works of Jesus forbid us to understand God's sovereignty as meaning that everything that is is 'God's will' and is locked in with no possibility of change.*

Matthew 9:36	When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them ...
Matthew 14:14	... he had compassion on them and healed their sick.
Matthew 15:32	I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat ...
Matthew 20:34	Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes.
Mark 1:40f	A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"
Mark 3:1-5	... He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand."
Luke 7:13	When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin ...
Luke 13:16	... should not this woman ... whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?
John 11:35	Jesus wept. ...

Thus the words and actions of Jesus the Son, which precisely express the mind of God the Father, give us the freedom to pray. Not only this, but they also give us the hope that it is reasonable to expect that God, in his Fatherly goodness, can and will intervene and change the *status quo* - in one way or another, within the boundaries of his vast eternal purpose.

A.5 Because divine sovereignty does not mean fatalism or determinism, we can be sure that *not everything* is locked in.

We need to view 'God's will' not as something static and fixed like a steel girder or a concrete roadway, but as a great flowing river moving steadily and inexorably in and towards his purpose, constantly embracing this and that and the other thing and sweeping them along in itself, so that all these things also become incorporated into that purpose, whether they like it or not.

Representing it another way, we have:

1. Boundary of God's control
(outside this boundary does not exist).
(Can't be changed.)

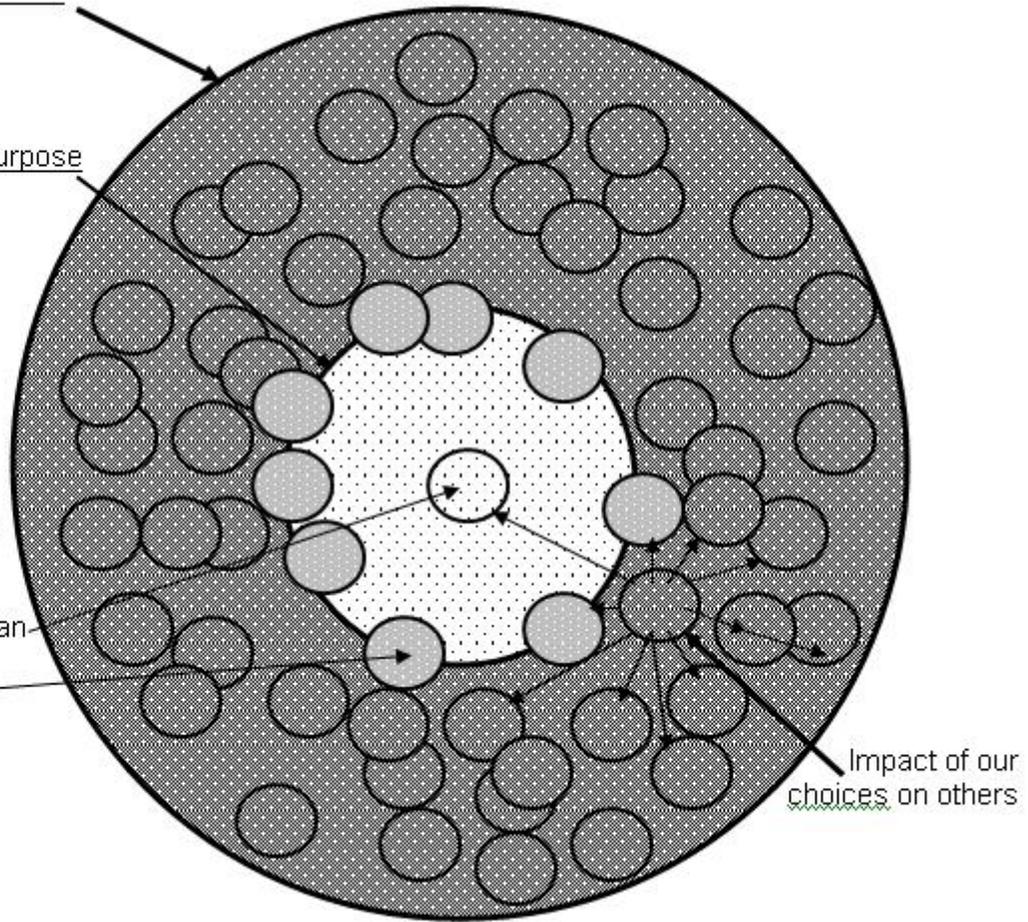
2. Boundary of God's purpose for human life
(Can't be changed).

Each small dot represents human choices resulting in attitudes, words and actions.

Small circles represent individual human lives.

Jesus Christ, perfect man

Christian



It is obvious from this diagram that most human choices are made outside of God's purpose for human life - which is that we are created to reflect his glory, to image his nature - and are therefore contrary to his 'will'. Only one man, Jesus Christ fully lived according to this purpose, within this circle, in his own personal choices.

It is also evident that the choices made outside this circle impact those who live, or strive to live, with choices within this circle. In this way the choices of the Jews, of Judas, of Pontius Pilate, impacted the life of Jesus Christ. These choices, contrary to God's will for human life, are nevertheless within the boundary of his control, and are swept up and woven into his eternal purpose and used to bring that purpose to pass. God can do this because all things are within the boundary of his control. These choices also are within God's knowledge for he sees and knows all things even before they happen.

How does this relate to prayer?

- We cannot pray for something that does not exist - something that is not actually possible - we cannot ask God to make a square circle, or to make $2+2 = 5$. All things are possible to God, as the Scripture says, but a square circle is not anything, nor is $2+2=5$ anything.
- 'However, God can take our squares and make them into his circles.' (Vishal Manglawadi 'Letters to a Post-modern Hindu' p.24f). He can take our $2+2$ and add his 1 to it to make 5 for us.

- Because the suffering caused by human sin is not his perfect creative will for human life, we can pray for his intervention without any thought that to pray such a prayer is to act contrary to his will. Evil and suffering are contrary to God's will, they are here only by default - the words, attitudes and actions of Jesus Christ demonstrate this beyond question, as do the promises concerning the removal of all suffering in the eternal kingdom. Thus, it is reasonable and right to pray for God's help in the presence of suffering, with the expectation that he both can and will do something to relieve our suffering in some way or other, and also bring good out of it.
- At the same time we realize that in this life we will never be free from the impact of wrong choices - both ours and others'. Even Jesus, who lived his life 'at the centre of God's will', was not immune from suffering caused by others' sinful choices. To expect, as some do, that God will make our lives free from all kinds of suffering, to expect perfect relationships, trouble-free parenting, perfect health and limitless wealth, in our current earthly existence, is to ask God to make earth heaven. That he will not do. But we can expect him to use suffering for our good and for his glory, for that he has promised; we can expect him to limit our suffering to what we can bear, and to rescue us from the suffering before it becomes too much for us to bear, for that he has also promised; we can pray that he will change our circumstances, according to his will, for that he has given us the liberty to do.
- We can, in fact, pray to him concerning anything in the space between the two circles, and concerning any impact that the small dots in that space have upon us, our loved ones, our churches and our nation, as he has told us to do.
- And we can certainly ask him to enable us to do anything within the inner circle, for everything there is exactly what he created human life to be.

B. THE PROBLEM OF 'UNANSWERED' PRAYER

Most questions concerning unanswered prayer can be resolved by checking out the boundaries for prayer in the previous study:

- Are we praying to the one true God?
- Do we believe in this one true God?
- Is our praying God-oriented or self-oriented?
- Did we leave the answer in his hands (his will)?
- Did we approach him 'in Jesus' name' - not trusting in our own righteousness?
- Was our prayer and our praying expressive of the mind/heart of God?
- Did we trust in his fatherly goodness towards us?

For some Biblical examples of unanswered prayer read the following, and note *why* they were unanswered:

Exodus 32:30ff

1Sam 28:6,16,17 (See 15:28)

Proverbs 1:28-31

Isaiah 1:11-17

Isaiah 29:13ff

Jeremiah 11:11-ff

Jeremiah 15:1f

Lamentations 3:8

Ezekiel 8:18

Ezekiel 14:13-20

Hosea 11:7

Micah 3:1-4

2 Cor 12:7-10

C. PRAYER AND UNBELIEVERS

There seems to be a general uncertainty surrounding prayer and unbelievers, with four questions predominating:

C.1 Does God hear the prayers of unbelievers?

See Additional Studies in Prayer: Study 5: especially A, B and E.

C.2 Should we pray for God to intervene or interfere in the lives of unbelievers?

Yes. We should. The compassion and kindly intervention of Jesus Christ extended to 'the multitudes', not just to those who had expressed genuine faith in him. He also affirmed that God sends his rain and his sunshine on both the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:43-45). In addition, the following Scriptures require us to pray prayers which necessitate divine 'interference' in the lives of those who do not acknowledge him. Study these references:

Reference	Who/what to pray for/about	Why
Gen 32:9ff	'Save me ... from the hand of my brother'	'I am afraid ... but you have said ... '
2Chron 32:20	Impossible situation	For deliverance/rescue.
Neh 1:11; 2:4	Favour with 'this man'	For success of God's cause.
Matthew 5:44	Pray for those who persecute you ...	To demonstrate that God is our Father
Luke 6:28	Pray for those who mistreat you	Expression of loving our enemies.
Rom 10:1	The Israelites	That they may be saved.
Rom 15:31	Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea	So that Paul can go to Rome
2Thess 3:2	Pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men ...	Because not everyone has faith; also so the message can be spread.
1Tim 2:1ff	I urge ... that ... prayers ... be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority	That we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

C.3 Should we pray for the salvation of unbelievers?

This question is partly answered by two further questions:

Q1: Does God want unbelievers to be saved? Yes, he does.

2 Samuel 14:14	God ... arranges ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.
Ezekiel 18:23	Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?
Ezekiel 33:11	As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?
Luke 13:34	O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!
Luke 19:10	The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.
John 3:16,17	For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.
Acts 17:30	God ... commands all people everywhere to repent.

1Tim 2:4 God ... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 ... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Q2: Is the salvation of unbelievers something that is in God's hands? Yes, it is.

Matthew 11:27 ... No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

John 1:13 ... children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

John 6:37 All that the Father gives me will come to me ...

John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him ...

John 10:29 My Father ... has given them to me

John 17:6 (9,24) I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.

2 Corinthians 4:6 God ... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Ephesians 2:5 God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

Colossians 1:12,13 The Father ... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light ... he rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves ...

There are actually no commands to pray for the salvation of unbelievers (there are a few *examples* of prayer for the salvation of others (Isaiah 63:14-64:12; Jeremiah 14:7-9,19-22 [but see Q4 below], Acts 26:29; Romans 10:1)). However, the two facts above would indicate that such prayer is in keeping with what God has revealed of his will and purpose, and that the salvation of a person is something only God can bring about. And, as we saw in the Studies on the Lord's Prayer, the first three petitions are for God's name to be honoured, God's kingdom to come, and God's will to be done. These prayers can only be answered in individual lives when they are saved, that is, when they repent and believe. Also in keeping with God's purpose of saving the lost are the following texts where prayer is made, commanded or requested concerning the proclamation of the message of the Gospel:

Matthew 9:32 Ask the Lord of the harvest ... to send out workers into his harvest field. (Also Luke 10:2)

Acts 4:29 Lord ... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Rom 15:30 ... join me in my struggle by praying to God for me ...

Ephesians 6:19,20 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel ... Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Colossians 4:3-4 Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ ... pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

2Thess 3:1 ... pray for us, that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.

Philemon 6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith

As we read through the New Testament we find, instead of a focus on praying for the salvation of unbelievers,

1. a focus, in both prayer and purpose/commitment, on the proclamation of the Gospel. Without the proclamation of the Word there can be no true knowledge of God and therefore no salvation (John 8:32; Romans 10:9ff; Acts 26:17-18). This, therefore, is where the focus of prayer is.
2. much thanksgiving and prayer for people once they have believed.

If we are to pray parallel with the emphasis in Scripture, our prayers will be focused more on asking God to give boldness and clarity of expression to those who proclaim his Word, than on prayer for the salvation of individuals, but not excluding the salvation of individuals.

Q4: Is it ever wrong to pray for the salvation of unbelievers?

In the Old Testament we find the following texts which indicate that there are times when prayers for the salvation of unbelievers will not be 'heard' - because of their persistent refusal to respond to and obey the word of God. It is obvious that there came a time when God's judgement *had* to fall.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Jeremiah 7:16 | Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. Do you not see what they are doing ... ? |
| Jeremiah 11:13,14 | You have as many gods as you have towns ... Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me . |
| Jeremiah 14:11,12 | Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague. |
| Jeremiah 15:1 | Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence. |
| Ezekiel 14:13-20 | ... even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness ... |