

Reformation
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What shall we pray for? I can imagine a certain frustration in reading that question. You might say something like this: Surely a spiritual Christian does not need to ask that question. There are enough needs in the world to keep me busy for the rest of my life. There is food for prayer everywhere!

Of course, you would be quite right.

Nevertheless, I do not think you reacted that way to my question. Why not? I said that I could *imagine* such a frustration. The fact is, however, most Christians have more than once asked themselves, "What shall I pray for?" without coming up with a satisfactory answer.

The early followers of Christ asked, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). We may be tempted to write them off as babes in Christ, but mature Paul wrote to the Romans of our common weakness, "We do not know what we ought to pray for" (Rom. 8:26).

Why don't we know what to pray for? Let me suggest some reasons.

First, the number of choices seems to be infinite. For instance, anything that it is right to want, it is right to pray for. Think of it! "You do not have, because you do not ask God," we read in James 4:2. Do you want something? As far as you can tell, is it a good thing? Then ask God! That is James's message. There you have a wide open door for literally millions of prayers, but that fact is likely to seem overwhelming when you think about it. How can you choose what to pray for, out of such a vast ocean of possibilities?

Here is a second thing that may hinder us in knowing what to pray for. Our theology may get in our way. Suppose we believe that God is sovereign and has decided what will happen in history. What difference, then, will our prayers make? Suppose we believe that man's free will is the decisive factor in day-to-day living. What can God do then? Aren't His hands tied? From either perspective, we come upon important theological hindrances to prayer. Each of

these views has its own ways of explaining why prayer is still meaningful, but they are not obvious to the casual observer. Just thinking about these things may keep us from choosing what we will pray for.

There is one kind of prayer, however, that bypasses these difficulties. I want to make it the subject of this article. I am speaking of *prayer that asks God to do precisely what He has already made up His mind to do*. The obvious advantage to this kind of prayer is that our prayers will always be answered, and the answer will always be, "Yes!" Has God made up His mind to send the Lord Jesus a second time to earth? Well, then, if you pray, "Father, send Your Son back to earth," without specifying when or how, your prayer will be answered exactly as you prayed it. What more could you want?!

At this point you may think I am joking, or you may ask the question, "Does the Bible really teach us to pray prayers of this kind?" I have two answers to this question, and I think one of them will surprise you.

The first answer is, "Yes, it does." To stick with our illustration about the return of Christ, here is such a prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

The second answer is the surprising one. Most of the prayers in the New Testament are of this type. Or, more accurately, most of the *petitions* of the New Testament are of this type. (Thanksgiving, which is also prayer, is very frequent.)

Take this prayer from 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Is this a prayer that might possibly be answered when Jesus comes? What are the chances that it will be heard?

Paul tells us in the following verse, verse 24: "The One who calls you is faithful and *He will do it*."

This prayer is a sample of the kinds of things Paul prays for all of his converts and for other Christians of whom he hears. It is clear that God does not work sanctification in every Christian in the same way or at the same pace, but it is equally clear that God will do this eventually in every believer.¹

The clearest examples of what I am talking about, however, come from the prayers and teaching of the Lord Jesus. It is true, of course, that the Lord Jesus knew a great deal more than you and I do about the will of God. But the important thing is this: When He knew exactly what His Father was going to do, He prayed for it to happen anyway. Not only that, He taught His disciples to pray the same way.

Let us start with the Lord Jesus' own prayers. Listen to Him praying in John 17: "Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world" (v. 24).

His request is a simple one. He wants His followers to be with Him in heaven. We might, perhaps, think that up to this point in His life, there was some doubt about that. Would they or wouldn't they join Him there? In fact there was no doubt about it at all. Already in John 14 Jesus had told His disciples:

In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am (vv. 2-3).

Nothing could be more definite than that, yet the Lord Jesus did not hesitate to pray that it might happen. In other words, He prayed for something that God had already made up His mind to do.

Before we try to find a rationale for this kind of prayer, let us see some further examples from the life of Jesus. Here are some words of Christ from John 14: “If you love Me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (vv. 15-17a).

We cannot doubt that the presence of the Spirit with Christ’s followers was part of God’s plan from the beginning. Yet here the Lord Jesus speaks of asking the Father to do what He has clearly already made up His mind to do.

This is the way the Lord Jesus instructed His own disciples to pray. After looking on the crowds that thronged Him and feeling compassion for them, Jesus said to His followers: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field” (Matt. 9:37b-38).

Here the Lord tells His disciples to pray for a central part of God’s plan, the sending of workers to preach God’s truth. God is the Lord of the harvest, according to Jesus. We must appeal to Him to send forth laborers. Will He do so? Certainly He will. The very title, *Lord of the harvest*, shows that He has both power to raise up workers and power to control the extent of the harvest. We may not see immediately why we should ask, but the answer to that prayer is certain. The beginning of its fulfillment is found in the following chapter where the Lord Jesus sends out the Twelve to preach and to heal.

I have not yet come, however, to the clearest example of praying that God will do what He has already decided to do. That example is the Lord’s Prayer as given to us in Matthew 6:9-13:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have

forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

We have all known this prayer for many years, and we may also know a good deal about its contents. So far, so good.

But have you ever looked at the Lord’s Prayer from this perspective: What are the chances of these petitions being answered? As far as I can see, the answer is this: *God will do all of these things. Not one of them shall fail.*

How about the first request, “Hallowed be Thy name?” Is that going to happen? Certainly it will. God will see to it that He is glorified in all the universe, through both men and angels as well as through the created world. God has made up His mind that it will happen, and nothing on earth will stop it from happening.

Let us take the next request, “Your kingdom come.” Will it come? It surely will! That will be true even though Christians are not fully agreed on what that prayer means. They do agree on this: Whatever it means, God will surely do it! God’s kingdom will come.

The third petition is this: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Again there is not full agreement on the meaning of this request. Is it another way of asking that God’s kingdom would come? Is it a prayer for a future millennium? These are hard questions, but one thing is sure: God’s will will be done on earth sooner or later, whether in a millennial kingdom or in the new heavens and the new earth. All sides agree that this prayer will be answered even though we are still praying it after 2,000 years.

Let us look at the fourth request, “Give us today our daily bread.” Will the Lord do that? Yes, He will. It is true that He may see that we need the discipline of going hungry, and then He may withhold our bread. But many exegetes have

seen *bread* here as representative of our daily needs generally. The Lord Jesus taught us that God is a Father to His spiritual children. What does a father do? He provides his children's needs. In this same context, in fact, Jesus taught us that we need not "keep on babbling like pagans, . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:7-8). It is clear that Jesus was not just supplying academic information when He said that. The point was plain: Your Father is going to look after you; that is what a father does!

The fifth request asks for the forgiveness of our sins. Will God forgive our sins? The answer lies at the heart of the gospel: "Yes, He will." Again, Christians have understood this forgiveness in various ways, but most have seen that without the perpetual forgiveness of our sins there would be no Christians. "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2a). If our sins are to be unforgiven, we will be lost forever!²

The final request goes like this: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."³ Will the Lord deliver us from Satan? If we are saved, He has already done so to some degree. As Paul told the Colossians, God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness [the devil's kingdom] and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves" (1:13). More than that, He will perfect that work, so that all the power of Satan over us shall be broken forever. That was the very purpose for which the Lord Jesus came. John wrote in his first letter, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (3:8b). We need not doubt that He will do it!

The conclusion is clear: An important part of prayer is praying that God will do what He has already made up His mind to do. A corollary blessing is this: If we pray this way, the answer will be "Yes" 100 percent of the time!

Let me close by taking up the question: "Why would anyone pray for the things that God is going to do, whether we pray or not? What is the point of that?"

First, you may have noticed that I have subtly changed the question here. We were not discussing what God would do *whether we pray or not*. We were discussing what God will certainly do. How do those two ideas differ?

They differ in this way: One of them assumes that God had not already taken our prayers into consideration when He formed His plans. There is no reason to assume that. While He was planning everything else He was going to do and allow, He no doubt included our prayers. In that way our prayers can be seen as really effecting something in the total outworking of God's purposes. He did not plan everything else and leave to chance whether or not we would pray. He planned to move us to pray as well. Millions upon millions of Christians have prayed the prayers we have looked at. They have asked Him to send forth laborers; they have repeated the Lord's Prayer; they have focused on "Your will be done."

But there is more, much more.

Many people have adopted the slogan "Prayer changes things!" They are right in one sense—a subsidiary sense—and wrong in another sense—a primary and fundamental sense.

Does prayer change things? Indeed it does! But it does not change the plans of God. When He made His plans He included among them the prayers of His people. In answer to prayer He changes events and circumstances from what they were, but He planned to do that all along!

Any other kind of change would be suicidal to the human race. Why? Because God's plans, the things He chose to do or to allow, arose from infinite wisdom. Does any Christian seriously want to change that?

Surely not! The world would love to change God's plans. That much is clear. But any man, woman, or child who has prayed, "Your will be done," does not want God to change anything that He has planned to do or allow. We may ask

with Paul, "Who has been His counselor?" (Rom. 11:34). Paul did not ask this in despair, as though God would need advice. No, Paul asked it in leading up to the doxology in verse 36, "To Him be glory forever!"

What is the role of the prayer that asks God to do what He has already made up His mind to do? Why would anyone pray such a prayer?

Let me answer with an illustration. The illustration is trivial in itself, but it does illustrate the point. Suppose you are at a football game and your team has been pushed back near their own goal line. What will happen next?

One thing that is likely to happen is this: Cheerleaders and others may begin chanting, "Hold that line! Hold that line!"

Now let me ask you a question about that chant. Is it a piece of advice to the team to change their plans? Hardly!

But if it is not that, what is it? Those who are cheering are not giving the team advice; they are encouraging the team to do what the team has already planned to do! They are encouraging the team by saying, in effect, "Go for it! Do your thing! Carry out your plan! Put it into action!"

That is what the Christian is to do in prayer. A Christian is a *God-admirer*. More than anything else, he wants God to carry out His plans and to do His will.

No, that is not all that prayer is about. There is a place for asking God to do things when we have no idea what His will is. We may pray for healing, for example, if it is His will. I do not want to discourage that, any more than I would want to discourage praise and thanksgiving to God in prayer. All these things go together to make up Christian prayer.

But in a day of man-centeredness, when man is the measure of all things in the eyes of many, we who are Christians must be careful. Our business is not to follow the world in preoccupation with ourselves. Neither is it our business to give God advice.

The great want of every age is God-centered men and women. We need them. You and I need to be such people.

How will God-centered men and women pray? They will pray as those who admire the infinite wisdom of God; they will ask God to do His own will first of all. In doing that, they will follow the example of Scripture.

What if you and I prove to be such people? What then? Then we will cheer God on by asking Him to do precisely what He has already made up His mind to do. And we will do it with enthusiasm, as admirers of God.

- 1 For more of Paul's prayers along this line, see Ephesians 1:17-19a; Philippians 1:9-11; and Colossians 1:9-12.
- 2 For simplicity's sake I have omitted discussing the words "as we also have forgiven our debtors." They may introduce a condition, but that condition is also part of the request, so the request remains certain of fulfillment.
- 3 I am frankly uncertain about what the first half of this request means, so I am treating it as a negative way of asking the same thing that we ask in the second half. If the first half is a separate request, it may be an exception to the point I am making about the certainty of these requests. If so, however, it is the only exception in this prayer.

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