

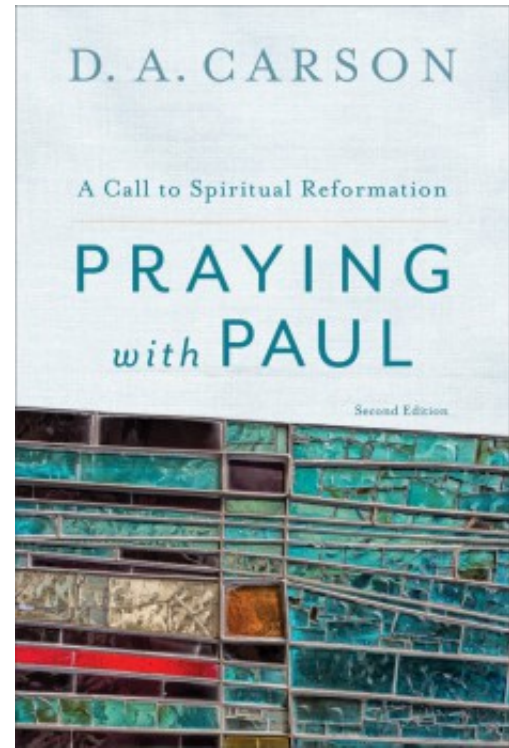
Lead Stories

Why pray to an all-knowing God?

FAITH & INSPIRATION | Scripture teaches us how God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility work together

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*D.A. Carson is a leading theologian who writes well—not a typical combination. In this excerpt from *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Baker Academic, 2015), Carson explains how God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility (two truths that some say cannot be combined) work together. How do God-appointed means lead to a God-appointed end? Read on, please. —Marvin Olasky*



Baker Academic

Prayer changes things. You find plaques promulgating this notion everywhere. You may have one in your home. Countless sermons have been preached, countless prayers prayed, under this assumption: “Prayer changes things.”

Or does it?

If prayer changes things, how can we believe that God is sovereign and all-knowing? How can we hold that he has his plans all worked out and that these plans cannot fail? If not a bird falls from the heavens without his decree, if we live and move and have our being under his sovereignty, if he works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Eph. 1:11), then in what meaningful sense can we say that prayer changes things?

Indeed, that is precisely why some people argue that God must be severely limited in certain ways. They reason something like this: “Frankly, it seems to us that although God is extraordinarily powerful, it is unreasonable to think he is all-powerful, absolutely

sovereign. Surely that would reduce the entire universe to a toy, God's toy. We would lose our freedom; we would become mere puppets, chunks of matter moved around by a despotic Deity. If in that sort of universe we pray, well, we pray only if God has ordained that we pray; if we do not pray, God has ordained that too. In either case it is hard to see how our prayers actually change anything. Certainly there is little point in encouraging people to be fervent or passionate in prayer: your encouragement has been ordained, and if they listen to you and offer fervent prayer that, too, has been ordained. The entire business becomes pretty phony. Surely there is no other reasonable option: we simply have to conclude that God cannot be utterly sovereign, absolutely omnipotent."

If God is not absolutely sovereign, goes this line of reasoning, maybe the reason he does not answer your prayers as you would like is that he can't. Suppose you are praying for the conversion of your sister. If God has already done everything he can to bring her to himself, but somehow she won't give in, why bother asking him to save her? Isn't it a little indecent to pressure God to do more when he has already done the best he can?

Or, one might reason that God is powerful, but somewhat aloof, unwilling to do very much until we ask him. Then, of course, he grants some requests but turns down others simply because he can't do any better.

So prayer does change things, after all—even if the price of these sorts of reasoning is that God is not as powerful, and therefore not as trustworthy, as we might have thought. In fact, if God is not really all-powerful, one might wonder, in darker moments, how we can be certain that he will make the universe turn out all right in the end.

Others argue that the only change prayer effects is within the person praying. Because I pray for certain things (they hold), I focus on them and strive for them, and I myself am changed. I may pray to do a good job at work, and because I am praying along such lines my determination is reinforced, I am slightly changed for the better, and the result may be that my work really improves. But the only immediate change effected by the prayer is in me. Put crudely, this means it does not really matter if God is out there at all. Prayer is nothing but a psychological crutch.

Prayer is all right, but only for weak and insecure people.

Christians will never think along any of these lines, for such thoughts are basically atheistic. Ironically, some of us adopt a Christian version of the same approach. We too sometimes say that what prayer changes is primarily the person who prays, but we attribute this change not to psychology but to obedience. The only meaningful prayer, we may think, is, "Not my will, but yours be done." If that is answered, then we have become better attuned with the will and purpose of God, and that is a good thing.

Yet despite the importance of praying that God's will be done, it is certainly not the only prayer in the Bible. In the Scriptures, believers not only pray for themselves; they also ask for things. They ask God to change circumstances, to give them things, even to change his mind. In many passages, as we shall see, we are told that God, on hearing such prayers, "relented"—which is not much different from saying that he "changed his mind."

But if God changes his mind, why do other passages of Scripture picture him as steadfast, reliable, immutable? Sad to tell, we are sufficiently perverse that we can find reasons for not praying no matter what perspective we adopt. Consider missions. If, on the one hand, you believe that God "elects" or chooses some people for eternal life, and does not choose others, you might be tempted to conclude that there is no point praying for the lost. The elect will infallibly be saved, so why bother praying for them? So you have a good reason not to pray. If, on the other hand, you think that God has done all he can to save the lost, and now it all depends on their free will, why ask God to save them? He has already done his bit; there's very little else for him to do. Just get out there and preach the gospel. Either way you have another reason not to pray.

You can really hurt your head thinking about this sort of thing.

The Bible insists that we pray, urges us to pray, gives us examples of prayer. Something has gone wrong in our reasoning if our reasoning leads us away from prayer; something is amiss in our theology if our theology becomes a disincentive to pray. Yet sometimes that is what happens. The slightly ingenuous but enthusiastic believer may have more experience at prayer than the theologian who thinks a lot about prayer. Or again, sometimes when a Christian develops an increasing appreciation of "the doctrines of grace"—truths that underline God's sovereignty, freedom, and grace—one of the first results is a tragic decrease in the discipline of prayer. That was part of my own pilgrimage at one point. The fault was not in the doctrines themselves but in me and in my inability to mesh them properly with other biblical teachings.

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

In this chapter I want to take some steps that have helped me to think about prayer a little more biblically than I used to. Although I am far from the kind of maturity in prayer I would like to achieve, these biblical reflections have helped me not only to think about prayer but also to pray. I shall begin by articulating two truths, both of which are demonstrably taught or exemplified again and again in the Bible:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.

2. Human beings are responsible creatures—that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices; however, human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God’s sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent.

My argument is that both propositions are taught and exemplified in the Bible. Part of our problem is believing that both are true. We tend to use one to diminish the other; we tend to emphasize one at the expense of the other. But responsible reading of the Scripture prohibits such reductionism.

We might begin by glancing at the large picture. Proverbs 16 pictures God as so utterly sovereign that when you or I throw a die, which side comes up is determined by God (16:33). “The Lord works out everything to its proper end—even the wicked for a day of disaster” (16:4). “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps” (16:9). “Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Ps. 115:2–3).

According to Jesus, if the birds are fed it is because the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26); if wildflowers grow, it is because God clothes the grass (6:30). Thus God stands behind the so-called natural processes. That is why biblical writers prefer to speak of the Lord sending the rain, rather than to say, simply, “It’s raining”—and this even though they were perfectly aware of the water cycle. The prophets understood the sweep of God’s sway: “Lord, I know that people’s lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps” (Jer. 10:23). “The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” (Ps. 135:6). The passage in Ephesians 1:3–14 is as strong as any: God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11). In some mysterious way, and without being tainted with evil himself, God stands behind unintentional manslaughter (Exod. 21:13), family misfortune (Ruth 1:13), national disaster (Isa. 45:6–7), personal grief (Lam. 3:32–33, 37–38), even sin (2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Kings 22:21ff.). In none of these cases, however, is human responsibility ever diminished. Thus although it is God in his wrath who incites David to take the prohibited census (2 Sam. 24:1), David is nevertheless held accountable for his actions.

The second of my two statements is no less strongly supported in Scripture. There are countless passages where human beings are commanded to obey, choose, believe, and are held accountable if they fail to do so. God himself offers moving pleas to incite us to repentance, because he finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Isa. 30:18; 65:2; Lam. 3:31–36; Ezek. 18:30–32; 33:11). In his day, Joshua can challenge Israel in these words: “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. ... But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. ... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:14–15). The commanding invitation of the gospel itself assumes profound responsibility: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ... As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame’” (Rom. 10:9, 11). Of course, none of this jeopardizes God’s sovereignty: only a few verses earlier we find the apostle quoting Scripture (Exod. 33:19) to prove that “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (Rom. 9:18). ...



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How does God’s sovereignty function in passages of Scripture where prayer is introduced? Certainly it never functions as a disincentive to pray! It can forbid certain kinds of preposterous praying: for instance, Jesus forbids his followers from babbling on like pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words. “Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). However, this prohibition cannot be taken as a blanket condemnation of all perseverance in prayer, since the same Jesus elsewhere urges that such perseverance is important (Luke 11, 18).

God’s sovereignty can also function as an incentive to pray in line with God’s will. Thus Jesus prays, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). This is important. The hour in John’s Gospel is the time appointed by the Father at which Jesus will be glorified by means of the cross and thus returned to the glory that he enjoyed with the Father before the world began (John 12:23–24; 17:5). By saying that the hour has come, Jesus is acknowledging that his Father’s appointed time has arrived. This does not prompt Jesus to say only, “Your will be done.” Still less does it breed silence: the

hour has arrived and there is not much anyone can do about it, since everything has been ordained by my heavenly Father. Rather, Jesus's logic runs like this: my Father's appointed hour for the "glorification" of his Son has arrived; so then, Father, glorify your Son.

This sort of logic is not in any way unusual. Those who pray in the Scriptures regularly pray in line with what God has already disclosed he is going to do. A wonderful example is found in Daniel 9. Here we are told that Daniel understands from the Scriptures, "according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet" (Dan. 9:2), that the period of seventy years of exile was drawing to an end. A fatalist would simply have wiped his or her brow and looked forward to the promised release as soon as the seventy years were up. Not Daniel! Daniel is perfectly aware that God is not an automaton, still less a magic genie that pops out of a bottle at our command. God is not only sovereign; he is also personal, and because he is personal he is free. So Daniel addresses this personal God, confessing his own sins and the sins of his people: "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (9:3). In other words, precisely because Daniel is aware of the promise of this personal, sovereign God, he feels it his obligation to pray in accord with what he has learned in the Scriptures regarding the will of that God. Most of the rest of the chapter records Daniel's prayer. Daniel reminds God that while Daniel and the children of Israel have sinned, God is the one "who keeps his covenant of love" (9:4), that God is "merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him" (9:9). "For your sake, Lord," he prays, "look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. ... Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name" (9:17, 19). In other words, he appeals to God to preserve the integrity of his own name, the sanctity of his own covenant, his reputation for mercy and forgiveness.

And the exile ends.

Perhaps the most startling passages that mingle God's sovereignty and God's personhood are those that speak of God relenting. While Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the tables of the law, the children of Israel succumb to the terrible idolatry of the golden calf. God is furious: "I have seen these people ... and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exod. 32:9-10).

But Moses simply will not "leave God alone." The arguments in his intercession are remarkable, appealing to God both as the Sovereign and as the supreme personal Deity. Moses argues that if God carries through with this plan of destruction, the Egyptians will sneer that the Israelite God is malicious and that he led his people into the desert to destroy them. At the same time, Moses reminds God of his own sovereign promises: "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self [for there is

none higher by whom to swear]: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’” (32:13). In other words, if God destroys his people, will he not be breaking his own promises? How can a faithful God do that? In Moses’s eyes, this is an argument not for pietistic fatalism—simply trust the promises of God and everything will work out—but for intercession. So Moses comes to the point: “Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people” (32:12).

“Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (32:14).

A casual reader might be tempted to say, “See? God does change his mind. His purposes are not sovereign and steadfast. Prayer does change things because it changes the mind of God.”

But such a conclusion would be both one-sided and premature. On the one hand, if God had not relented in his declared purpose to destroy the children of Israel, then, paradoxically, he would have proved fickle with respect to the firm promises he gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On the other hand, if God is to remain faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs, then, as Moses realizes, God cannot destroy the Israelites, and he must therefore turn from the judgment he has pronounced against Israel. It is that very point Moses is banking on as he prays.

We gain additional insight into God’s relenting when we compare the prayers of Amos, a true prophet of God, with the prayerlessness of false prophets. Amos learns of God’s threatening judgments against the people, and he passionately intercedes on their behalf: “I cried out, ‘Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’” (Amos 7:2). Amos’s prayer proves effective. Twice we are told, “So the Lord relented” (7:3, 6). By contrast, God berates the false prophets of Israel precisely because they do not intercede for the people. “You have not gone up to the breaches in the wall to repair it for the people of Israel [an idiom that means they have not interceded with God on behalf of the people] so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord” (Ezek. 13:5). No one was seriously interceding with God: “I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek. 22:30–31).

The extraordinary importance of these passages must not be missed. God expects to be pleaded with; he expects godly believers to intercede with him. Their intercession is his own appointed means for bringing about his relenting, and if they fail in this respect, then he

does not relent and his wrath is poured out. If we understand something similar to have happened in the life of Moses, we must conclude that Moses is effective in prayer not in the sense that God would have broken his covenant promises to the patriarchs, or in the sense that God temporarily lost his self-control until Moses managed to bring God back to his senses. Rather, in God's mercy Moses proved to be God's own appointed means, through intercessory prayer, for bringing about the relenting that was nothing other than a gracious confirmation of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The really wonderful truth is that human beings like Moses and you and me can participate in bringing about God's purposes through God's own appointed means. In that limited sense, prayer certainly changes things; it cannot be thought to change things in some absolute way that takes God by surprise or browbeats him into something he hadn't thought of.

Of course, we are circling around the fundamental mystery, the mystery of the nature of God. This God presents himself to us as personal, and so we can pray to him, argue with him, present reasons to him, intercede with him. But he is also sovereign, the kind of God who works in us—not least in our prayers!—"both to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13). His sovereignty does not diminish his personhood; that he is a person does not diminish his sovereignty. He is always not less than sovereign and personal.

The perverse and the unbeliever will appeal to God's sovereignty to urge the futility of prayer in a determined universe; they will appeal to passages depicting God as a person (including those that speak of his relenting) to infer that he is weak, fickle, and impotent, once again concluding that it is useless to pray. But the faithful will insist that, properly handled, both God's sovereignty and his personhood become reasons for more prayer, not reasons for abandoning prayer. It is worth praying to a sovereign God because he is free and can take action as he wills; it is worth praying to a personal God because he hears, responds, and acts on behalf of his people, not according to the blind rigidities of inexorable fate.

It is also helpful to remember that the prayer we offer cannot be exempted from God's sovereignty. If I pray aright, God is graciously working out his purposes in me and through me, and the praying, though mine, is simultaneously the fruit of God's powerful work in me through his Spirit. By this God-appointed means I become an instrument to bring about a God-appointed end. If I do not pray, it is not as if the God-appointed end fails, leaving God somewhat frustrated.

Instead, the entire situation has now changed, and my prayerlessness, for which I am entirely responsible, cannot itself escape the reaches of God's sovereignty, forcing me to conclude that in that case there are other God-appointed ends in view, possibly including

judgment on me and on those for whom I should have been interceding!

In short, even though God's nature is in many respects profoundly mysterious to us, we shall not go far wrong if we allow the complementary aspects of God's character to function in our lives the way they function in the lives of his servants in the Scripture. Then we will learn the better how to pray, and why we should pray, and what we should pray for, and how we should ask. We shall discover that the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty and on God's personhood, if they function in our lives properly, will serve both as powerful incentives to prayer and as direction for the way in which we approach God.

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