

May 9, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

The Sovereignty of God and the Place of Prayer

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

The year was 1820 and Peter Richley was a grateful man. He had survived one of the strangest and most harrowing events known to mankind. The ship which he had been traveling on sank. He was rescued. By some strange twist of circumstance, however, this ship sank. He was rescued again. But, this third ship sank likewise. He was rescued for a third time. Yet, his fourth ship of passage soon sank. And unbelievably, he was rescued for a fourth time, but this fifth ship sank as well. It would have been laughable had it not been so serious. On the high seas, however, he floated with the serene confidence that somehow God did not want him to die. And sure enough, as if on cue, another ship came by and answered his call for help.

This ocean liner, The City of Leeds, was named after its British city of origin. It was bound from England to Australia and traveled the same sea lane as Peter Richley's downed ships. The crew of The City of Leeds hoisted Peter aboard. Dry clothing was provided to Peter. The ship's doctor gave him a cursory exam, pronounced him fit, and then asked an unusual favor. "There's a lady on board who booked passage to Australia," the doctor explained. "She's looking for her son who disappeared years ago. She's dying and she's asking to see her son. She knows everybody on board and since you're the only newcomer, would you pretend to be her son?" Peter agreed. After all, his life had now been saved for the fifth time. He followed the doctor below deck and entered into a cabin. There on a small bed lay a frail woman with silvered-hair. She was obviously suffering from a very high fever. Deliriously, she was crying out. ***"Please God. Let me see my son before I die. I must see my son!"***

The ship's doctor gently pushed the young man toward the bed. Soon, however, Peter Richley began sobbing. For lying there on that bed was the reason that he couldn't seem to die. Here was the lifeline that had kept him from drowning five times. For lying on that bed was none other than Sarah Richley—who had prayed for ten years to be reconciled to her son, Peter. The ship's doctor stood in amazement as the young man fell down by the bed and embraced the sick woman. "I'm here mom! I'm here. It's me!" Within days the fever had subsided and his mother awakened to find an answered prayer seated on the edge of her bed.

This story is remarkable in so many respects. It is remarkable first of all, that Peter Richley would so consistently find himself on ships that were headed for disaster – not just once or twice but five times! And it is remarkable that he was not drowned but rescued each time. And that his erratic cruise would eventually end on ***another*** ship that happened to be in the area – and that on that ship would be his estranged mother who faithfully prayed for Peter for 10 years. This goes way beyond coincidence or serendipity. I think it speaks to a number of issues, but primarily I think it speaks to the sovereignty of God over all things, and the place of prayer.

For the past three weeks, we have been looking into this matter of God's sovereignty over this universe and the fact that **all that God ordains happens, and all that He does not ordain, does not happen**. Or to put it another way, **nothing, no good thing or no evil thing, arises, exists or endures independently of God's will and plan**. He ordains days of prosperity as well as days of adversity, which He planned before they come – He reigns over our suffering and He reigns over our joy – according to His plans. All things in the universe are subject to His will and planning – nations rise and fall as He pleases according to His plans, rulers rule and are dethroned at His word according to His plans – He keeps the planets and stars and galaxies spinning and whirling through space by His power – and as Colossians 1:17 says, 'In Him all things hold together' – and when He lets go they do not hold together – according to His plans. And otherwise trusty ships that sail the seas sink or do not sink according to God's will and plan.

But the question this inevitably raises, for those who are not convinced of the sovereignty of God over all things, and even for those who are, is this: **If God is sovereign – if what He wills and not what we will, comes to pass – if, as Ephesians 1:11 says, 'He works all things according to the counsel of His will' and His knowledge and planning of all things past present and future is fixed and infallible – why pray?** What is the point of praying for something that God has already ordained will happen or won't happen? Shouldn't we just write off Peter Richley as some weird alignment of planets and fortuitous good luck? Were his mother's prayers for him any kind of factor in his survival?

Why is prayer mentioned at all in the Bible? Is Jesus being disingenuous when He tells the disciples in Luke 18 that *'Men ought always to pray and not to faint'*? Is Paul mocking prayer when he says in Philippians 4:6 *'Don't worry about anything – pray about everything'*? (NLT) If God is sovereign over all – what is the place of prayer in this world? What is the point of praying for anything to happen? **How do we reconcile prayer – praying for things to happen – with the fact that all that God wills, happens, and that nothing happens that He does not will?**

Paul had been encouraging the Thessalonians to stand firm in the face of the affliction that he had told them was coming and was now here; he reminded them that they were destined for this affliction – that God had ordained what was coming at them now – in long ages past – so that they wouldn't be shaken by the trouble they we now encountering. And he had gotten a good report from Timothy that they were standing strong and not shaken. And then he says: *For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?* 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10

Knowing that God holds everything in His hands and nothing happens that is outside His will and planning – Paul says that he is asking God – literally *'begging exceedingly beyond all measure'* – that he would be able to minister in person to the Thessalonians. Furthermore he prays that God would order things so that there would be no barriers or stumbling blocks to his coming: *Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,* 1 Thessalonians 3:11 The word 'direct' means **to make a straight path and remove all the obstacles** – which is understandable when we remember that Satan had twice prevented Paul from doing just that.

And then he prays: *and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,* 1 Thessalonians 3:12 In other words, he is asking God for an increase in that Calvary love that was shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit when they first believed. It is the same love that God showed toward us, in that while we were still sinners, still in rebellion and hostile enemies of God, not even remotely loveable – Christ died for us. And Paul prays for the experience and testimony of this kind of love to increase and abound – literally here **increase** means to 'have more than enough' and **abound** means to 'overflow'. So he is really asking God to make the saints to be so filled up with the love of Christ that at every bump, love spills out.

And finally he prays: *so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.* 1 Thessalonians 3:13 Hebrews 12:14 tells us that without holiness, we won't see the Lord. That is, holiness in the believer's life is a condition for eternal life. And here we see that our abounding and increasing in love is the means through which our hearts are established in holiness. It is as we love one another with the love that God has poured out in our hearts through Calvary, and we reach out in that love to other unlovely, rebellious sinners that God establishes our hearts blameless in holiness. That is, through His love He strengthens and confirms the purposes of our hearts so that they are blameless in regards to Him.

So Paul is praying for some specific things. Paul is asking for stuff to happen. And Paul knows better than anyone that all that God wills, happens and all that He does not will, does not happen. Paul knows that God is never caught off guard – God is never surprised by events. In fact God has willed that some in Thessalonica come to Christ and be saved and abound in love and be among those who are blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. **So why is he praying?** And why should we? There are at least three good solid reasons to pray. Firstly, because the Bible commands us to pray. Secondly, prayer is that vital connection that links our hearts with heaven. And thirdly, prayer is the God-ordained means through which His will is carried out on earth.

The Bible commands us to pray.

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, Matthew 5:44

"When you pray..." Matthew 6:5

"Pray, then, in this way..." Matthew 6:9

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, Luke 18:1

I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also 1 Corinthians 14:15

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, Ephesians 6:18

'pray without ceasing...' 1 Thessalonians 5:17

'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray...' James 5:13

Prayer is the vital connection that links our hearts with heaven

We see the first picture of this in Genesis 28 when Jacob is running for his life and God appears to him in a dream: *And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.* Genesis 28:12-13 And then Jacob woke up and said: *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."* Genesis 28:17 The Bible affirms many times that the house of God is a house of prayer. And the angels, the messengers of God that are going up and down on the ladder set up on the earth and reaching into heaven, give us this graphic visual of our prayers and askings ascending to heaven on this connection of earth and heaven – and then heavens' answers descending with the angels to earth again.

When Jesus was on the earth, His vital connection to the Father was through prayer. He says in John that He could do nothing on His own, but only what he saw the Father doing. If He was on earth, and the Father in heaven, the obvious implication there was that He knew the Father's will because He talked to Him about it. I believe that is the most important aspect of prayer. It is to pray – 'Not my will -but Thine'. **Prayer lines our hearts up with heaven's will.** In prayer, we see what God is doing and then do it. Prayer is not first and foremost asking God to do something – but rather to put ourselves in the place where we see what He is doing and agree with Him in the doing.

I believe that one of the reasons Jesus stayed on course all the way to the cross was the importance of prayer in His life. He was always going away to pray. We see it in Matthew: *After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray* Matthew 14:23 He had just fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes – and you might think He should have taken a break – vegged out a little. But His estimation was that He needed some time with the Father. Luke tells us that *'...Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.* Luke 5:16 And the night before He chose the twelve apostles out of the many disciples that gathered around Him, the Luke records that *'...It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.* Luke 6:12 He couldn't afford to pick the wrong guy.

Finally, we should pray because **prayer is the God-ordained means through which His will is carried out on earth.** If we understand that God is sovereign over all – then prayer must fall under that sovereignty. But those who reject God's complete control of things say that if God is sovereign – if what He wills and not what we will, comes to pass and His knowledge and planning of all things past present and future is fixed and infallible – why pray? The implication in this is that if God is sovereign, then events will happen whether we pray or not. People will get well or die whether we pray or not. Those whom God has pre-destined to salvation will get saved in spite of our praying or not praying.

But at the heart of this objection is man's incessant struggle for self-determination and the desire for independence from what he sees as the constricting and constraining will of God. For individuals to really be free, God cannot determine everything – and if prayer is to mean anything, it must mean that God can somehow be persuaded to do something that we think or feel is necessary, or that He doesn't really want to do. But this requires a God who is not quite sovereign, who is able to be surprised by events, and is not really in control of everything. And it totally misses the place of prayer in God's administration of all things.

First and foremost, **prayer is praying that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.** Which implies that God has a plan, a direction, a purpose that He wants accomplished – and our work is to line up with His will in prayer for that to happen. George Mueller once wrote: *'I seek at the beginning [of prayer] to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.'*

The objection to the sovereignty of God over all things is usually most often encountered with regard to His sovereignty in salvation. The question becomes 'If God has predestined some to salvation before the foundation of the world [as **Ephesians 1:4-5 tell us**] then what is the point in praying for anyone's salvation? **And the implication here is that if prayer is to be effective at all, then everyone's decision to be saved must ultimately belong to them and not to God** – otherwise all their decisions are determined by God and fixed in His eternal will.

Let's look then, at someone who is in need of salvation. The Bible says that they are '**dead in their trespasses and sins**' – Ephesians 2:1; they are '**slaves to sin**' – Romans 6:17; they are '**blinded by the god of this age**' to the things of God – 2 Corinthians 4:4; **their understanding is darkened because their hearts are hardened** – Ephesians 4:18; and **they are enemies of God – hostile to Him** – Romans 8:7. So to those who question the sovereignty of God in salvation I would say, '*Yes indeed, if mans choices are not circumscribed by the will of God, if you insist that he must have the ultimate power of self-determination, why pray at all?*' Because in praying for them, you cannot ask that God would overcome their self-determined resistance and their free will to rebel against God – because that is exactly what a lost person is choosing. But then, how can God save someone who doesn't want to be saved – [**that is what the Bible says about the uncovered – they don't want God**] It would mean that God must overcome that person's choice to be hostile and rebel and take away his free will.

So the question remains, why pray? Or given the fact that we are commanded **to** pray, **how** will you pray? Will you ask God to draw his heart toward the Father? If you do, you violate his free will that doesn't want to be drawn. Will you pray that God arranges his circumstances so that he will see his need and cry out to Him? Again, you are asking God to do something that will change his heart and mind and in fact you are conceding that the ultimate determination of his decision to trust Christ is God's and not just his. It would be inconsistent to pray for God to draw their hearts and change them if you do not believe in the sovereignty of God – that He has the power and the right to save unrepenting and hard-hearted people who do have no desire to be saved in the first place. **It is not the notion of the sovereignty of God over all things that stifles prayer – it is the unbiblical notion of self-determination that would put an end to prayer, particularly those concerning lost people.**

Prayer is asking God to do something that He is waiting and wanting to do – and what God must do is overcome our resistance to His will for us to be saved. Until we embrace the sovereignty of God, we cannot pray as we ought. We cannot pray 2 Corinthians 4:4 – "**Father unveil their darkened minds and release them from control of the god of this age who has blinded their minds.**" We cannot pray Acts 16:14 – "**Father open their hearts so that they believe the Gospel.**" We cannot pray John 16:8 – "**Holy Spirit, give them a growing fear of death, and final judgment; and a realization that they are not living right and they need a Savior.**" We cannot pray Acts 2:37 – "**Holy Spirit let the Word of God convict them deeply.**" We cannot pray John 6:6 – '**Father, no one comes to You if you do not first draw them – so draw them Father, in spite of their hostility and rebellion.** Embracing the sovereignty of God will put power and conviction in your prayers. Embracing the sovereignty of God will cause you to pray with authority – '**Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven**'.

Finally, because God is sovereign, and has a plan and purpose in ordering all things for His glory, **prayer then is ordained as well.** He ordains not only the end of things but the very means themselves. Just as preaching the gospel is the means God has ordained through which people hear the word and come to Christ – [**Romans 10:13 – 15**] **prayer is the means God uses to change hearts and circumstances and events to accomplish His will in the earth.** Just as God will see to it that His word is proclaimed as a means to saving the elect, so He will see to it that all those prayers that are prayed which are necessary for His will to be accomplished. God's purpose will be accomplished and He will raise up preachers of the gospel to awaken faith in all those whom He has chosen – and He will inspire prayer for not only that to be accomplished, but all that relates to His purpose.

Through the prayers of the saints, all that God has ordained will come to pass. He has ordered it so that our prayers produce His purpose. When the time was right for the Messiah to come – God set an old man and a widow to praying for that to happen. When the time was at hand for God's people to be released from the Babylonian captivity, God stirred up Daniel's heart to pray for it to happen. A man named Russell Elliott once said: **There is a divine principle in regard to prayer which runs all through the Scriptures. It is that God is pleased to unite His people with Himself in whatever He is about to do. He first of all leads them to pray, and then does what He intends in answer to their prayers.**

God uses prayer in part I believe because **prayer reflects our acknowledgment of His sovereignty and power over all things and because it demonstrates our dependence upon Him as the Author and Finisher of all.** And furthermore, His response to our prayer is just as contingent upon our prayers as prayer is in accordance with His will. John tells us that '*this is the confidence we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us*'. 1 John 5:14 And when we don't know how to pray as we ought, the Bible tells us that the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. (Romans 8:27)

Therefore, Paul could pray powerful, truth-filled prayers for the Thessalonians that He could be confident that God would hear and answer. Knowing that the will of God for the believers was their holiness or sanctification he prayed that that would happen as the love of God abounded in their lives toward one another and all they came into contact with. Because the love of the brethren is one of the signs for the unbelieving that Christ is real and the gospel is truth, Paul knew it was the will of God that their love would increase and abound. So he prayed.

And that is why we should pray – because God is sovereign over all things, and because He has ordained that our prayers to be the means through which His will in heaven is carried out here on earth – we can pray with confidence and assurance, '**Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**'.

Our gracious God and Sovereign Lord,

Grant us to know the power of prayer that is grounded in Your Divine Providence and eternal goodness. Help us to know that the first purpose of prayer is to bring our wills in line with Your own. Teach us that we only succeed when we pray according to Your will and promise, and grant us to pray bold, Scripture-soaked prayers that presume on all the promises of God. Help us not to only desire small things, but with holy boldness to desire great things for Your people and for ourselves that we might live to show Your glory in all things. May we understand that when You inspire prayer in our hearts for anything, it is because You intend to give us what we ask. Grant us unwavering faith in knowing our prayers are never in vain and help us to be all prayer and never cease praying so that we might delight in God through Jesus Christ spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and prayer-answering name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.