

“Lord Teach Us To Pray”

A Study in the Exposition of the Prayers of Paul: A Sovereign & Personal God¹ One Week Study Guide

Introduction: Prayer With A View To Future Glory

In my men’s group at the church we recently completed Daniel Akin’s book 10 Who Changed The World. In its final chapter there is an emphasis on the inextricable union of the work of missions and the work of prayer, and in communicating this emphasis there is a treatment through the chapter of Revelation 5:8-10, an excerpt from a well-known and commonly referenced passage when expressing the culminating expectation and hope of world missions. This passage invigorates, encourages, and provides hope that presses the Church into action precisely because it was a real revelation of future glory that is as sure as the day that has just passed. John who saw, touched, and heard Jesus knew of his frequent references to future glory to the day in which his Lord would return in the glory of his Father and his holy angels. John witnessed the magnificence of the glorified Son in Revelation 1 and continued to be enraptured with the fullness of this image as it was developed throughout the revelation provided to him. An account that was not a wishful expectation that is dependent on the strength of man’s will, nor one that would advance independent of the work of the Church. Rather it was a sure account of what will be because God will accomplish his purposes, and he will do so through his people and in no small measure through their disciplined faithfulness in prayer. There is in this sure hope a degree of tension... it will come to pass (which is why it can be referenced with such confidence and joy), but it will come to pass *through* the sovereign work of God *through* the acts of men.² So, God will accomplish his foreordained plan that will culminate in unimaginable glory, but he will in no small measure do this through the prayers and other acts of obedience of his people. With this in view we will examine with D.A. Carson selected passages that directly address the Theological tension of the sovereignty of God in prayer with the aim of being invigorated to prayer with the unction that the Scriptures make it plain that we must be praying and that it is our high privilege to enjoy.

Elements of Tension

The subject of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility goes well beyond the discussion of man’s conversion, though it is certainly present there. This matter of tension informs the whole of how one views God and his interaction with creation and the means by which he will accomplish his purposes. Therefore, one must clearly understand that God does not have a “vision” or a “desired outcome,” rather he has a sure and fixed plan that will not and cannot be thwarted or in any way changed. Still this leaves man wholly responsible for his own acts, deeds, motivations, and thoughts – including his responsibility to petition, wrestle, plead, and give thanks in prayer. Now here many will want to be free of this apparent tension in the area of prayer and state that while man is responsible to pray with

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray’s Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School

ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² Here I am speaking to the gospel outreach efforts – not that man either produces the salvation of lost souls or that man can in any way effectuate this celestial scene of worship of the Lamb of God.

thanksgiving, in affirming truth, and like worshipful expression, he bears no true responsibility to pray in such a manner as to presume that the Lord will respond to rigorous and soul wrenching petition. Or that such praying should always be qualified with a concession that the Lord's will is what will be accomplished and that in praying we are effectively only working things out for ourselves as though it were a therapeutic exercise that is more commendable than screaming into a pillow, having a good cry, and then politely telling the Lord he is welcome to now have his way. This is a fatalistic misrepresentation of the exercise and call to petitioning God in prayer. The historic expression of the New Testament church and the subsequent language in the Epistles would find this immature forfeiture of proper and even privileged conduct of petitioning God in prayer quite foreign.

This correction however, does not require that someone rush over to another gross extreme that has no biblical merit and place God in some artificial tension in which he is bending to most if not all "reasonable" requests and all the while hoping to either magnificently redirect ultimate outcomes to their intended purposes or by necessity manipulating persons so as to direct them to petition in a way that is more conducive to his plan(s), which will be accomplished and thereby maintain his sovereignty.

Therein lies the foundational tension of petitioning a sovereign God: it is neither the fatalism of man nor the divine recovery plan of God. It is the exercise of the sovereignty of God *in* the genuine and effectual petitions of man.

To all of this someone may cite Jesus teaching his disciples to pray in Matthew 6 where he states, "...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."³ This is a wonderful passage and full of necessary instruction. However, it is not the exclusive passage in the Scriptures to speak of, demonstrate, or even teach on prayer. To this point Carson states, "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 ask for things. They ask God to change circumstances, to give them things, even to change his mind."⁴ So, to observe such breadth of instruction and examples in prayer throughout the Scriptures and yet still exclusively pray in such a way that fatalistically only petitions the Lord's will be accomplished is either a reflection of unbelief of the breadth of the Scriptures teaching and example or it is a reflection of one's great laziness in wrestling and petitioning with God. Either way one must come to a place of repentance and begin to pray with unction and urgency that the God who has granted his redeemed access to his presence and who hears their petition might just be pleased to demonstrate that his will was for them to petition and for himself to sovereignly respond. Just as God is no genie, you are no drone. God is a heavenly Father and in Christ you are a beloved child of God – this is a relationship in which, among other things, you petition and he both hears and responds while also maintaining his sovereign ways.

³ Matthew 6:10

⁴ A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Praying with Paul; D.A. Carson; Baker Academic, 2014; (Hereafter: Carson), Pg.125

Personal Examination & Response

Why do you think that it is critical to maintain a proper balance in not succumbing to either a fatalistic or intensively man centered approach in praying? Do you have tendencies toward one or the other?

In view of these matters, how will you either improve or protect your emphasis in your discipline of praying?

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility⁵

In developing this discussion on the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in the sphere of prayer, Carson provides two thesis-like statements that, while appearing to be in contrast to one another, are found to be mutually compatible and biblically sound.

God's Sovereignty

"God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility."⁶

Man's Responsibility

"Human beings are responsible creatures – that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent."⁷

Regarding the apparent tension of these two statements Carson provides the following qualification: "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."⁸

Robertson McQuilkin expressed this responsibility as remaining in the center of biblical tension, "It seems easier to go to a consistent extreme than to stay at the center of biblical tension."⁹ In other words it takes residual effort to not drift toward one extreme of resolution or another at any given time – concessions of always having desired understanding or resolution must be made to keep in balance the complexities of what is plainly true in the Scriptures.

⁵ Carson, Pg.126

⁶ Carson, Pg.126

⁷ Carson, Pg.126

⁸ Carson, Pg.126

⁹ Robertson McQuilkin Library (online: mcquilkinlibrary.com) accessed on July 13, 2017

As stated above how one either “resolves” or “maintains” this tension of truths that individually are clearly understood to be true, but together appear to be in conflict will inform the whole of their thinking and consequently their praying too. So, to demonstrate that there is continuity here Carson references and speaks to seven selected examples where both elements – God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility – are plainly united.

Genesis 50:19-20

The drama surrounding Joseph’s reunion with both his brothers and then his father has passed and the small clan of Israel has come to Egypt. Jacob has now died and Joseph’s brothers’ anxiety begins resurfacing as their offense toward him was a matter of no small consequence. When they attempt to insulate themselves from possible retribution Joseph sees through the matter and comforts them with theologically informed grace. “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” Genesis 50:20

While this reference is both well-known and well-cherished it is not necessarily always comprehensively thought through in regard to this matter of sovereignty and responsibility or directly related to the matter of how evil conduct is to be understood in man’s actions and God’s plan. Carson states, “What Joseph says is that in one and the same event the brothers intended evil and God intended good. God’s sovereignty in the event, issuing in the plan to save millions of people from starvation during the famine years, does not reduce the brothers’ evil; their evil plot does not make God contingent. Both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are assumed to be true.”¹⁰

Further expanding the context demonstrates that this was a finer detail of a larger sovereign providence saturated with men’s choices while the declared plan of God was clearly in motion and accomplished. Note what was declared to Abram when The LORD was formally entering a unilateral covenant with him in Genesis 15, “Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.’” Genesis 15:13-14 Here we observe: 1) his offspring will be sojourners in a foreign land (this immediately being fulfilled in the last chapters of Genesis and continuing through the silent years between Genesis’ close and Exodus’ beginning), 2) his offspring will be servants in this foreign land (fulfilled between Genesis and Exodus and through the beginning chapters of Exodus), 3) his offspring’s affliction would be four hundred years (the experience of Israel in Egypt until the Exodus), 4) God would bring judgment on their oppressive host (experienced by Egypt in the form of the ten plagues of judgment against them), 5) Israel coming out of their oppressors’ land with great possessions (the Egyptians were gladly forfeiting their riches to the Israelites as they left).

¹⁰ Carson, Pg.128

This is a magnificent example of these dual principles at work. Because of God's sure promise to Abram in Genesis 15 these matters would come to pass in all their known and unknown details (such is the sure nature of prophecy). However, they would come to pass in no small measure because of the righteous and unrighteous acts of men as well as the overt and "divine interruptions" by God.¹¹

2 Samuel 24

This chapter of Samuel presents a beautiful range of David's character and heart – it begins with a tragic failure, transitions to faith rich repentance, and concludes with sacrificial worship. Also, in this chapter we see the mystery of man's responsibility when he is supernaturally incited toward an action and even The LORD relenting in the breadth of his declared judgment.

2 Samuel 24:1-9

The account begins with the anger of The LORD burning against David and consequently The LORD inciting David to number the people and for reasons that are not immediately expressed this action was regarded as a matter of sin.¹² Even Joab, the commander of the army, was initially reluctant to follow this order, but complied at his king's direction and provided him with the results for men who could draw the sword in war.

2 Samuel 24:10-17

Then the text makes a wonderful transition from the uncomfortable offense of sin unfolding to the rapid response of repentance: "But David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And David said to The LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly.'"¹³ However, though David's heart was repentant there were still consequences for his sin and he is provided a most unusual proposition to choose his punishment from three options. David here reflects his heart and submits himself to The LORD in his punishment by choosing that which was overtly from the hand of God, he states, "I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of The LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man."¹⁴

The punishment was executed and 70,000 men died from pestilence and the angel of The LORD who was carrying out this punishment advanced to Jerusalem, but The LORD relented from the full breadth of his judgment and stayed the angel's hand. The place at which the plague was stopped was by the threshing floor of a man name Araunah. Following this the narrative returns its focus again to David who when seeing the plague being carried out against the people of Israel affirmed his sin and their innocence. He then requests that the punishment be on him and his father's house demonstrating the genuineness of his repentance – seeking to take full ownership not only in admission and grief, but in consequence too.

¹¹ Examples of what I mean by "divine interruptions" would be: Joseph and his prophetic ministry that led to national leadership and Moses unique deliverance as a baby in the Nile

¹² There were several occasions that it was fitting that the people be numbered and it is overtly clear what the offense was here – presumably one of motivation (possibly seeking security in one's great strength, unduly taxing the people, etc. it is not known).

¹³ 2 Samuel 24:10

¹⁴ 2 Samuel 24:14

2 Samuel 24:18-25

David was then provided instructions to build an altar to The LORD and he commences to do this at the place where the plague had stopped, Araunah's threshing floor. He advises Araunah that he has come to purchase this threshing floor for this purpose and it is offered to him for free, but David declines the offer with this statement, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to The LORD my God that cost me nothing."¹⁵

2 Samuel 24 clearly is a complex narrative when working through God's sovereignty and man's responsibility as well as The LORD's choosing to respond with a merciful change of declared course of action. To these matters Carson responds not by attempting to unpack their nuances, but to use their complexities to remind us of some things. "...God is presented as sovereign over David's life, including this particular sin in his life, while David himself is not thereby excused: David is still responsible for his actions. Both propositions are assumed to be true."¹⁶

Isaiah 10:5-19

Israel persisted in rebellious idolatry and, though called to repentance, she continued in her vulgar whoring after other gods. Now the time of her judgment had come and Assyria was God's tool for this work of judgment. However, the tool has elevated itself above its master in its own heart and has failed to see that it is but subordinate to the sovereign Judge. Therefore, while Assyria will serve her purpose as a tool of judgment they too will suffer the fate of The LORD's wrath in a judgment of their own.

John 6:22-59

Jesus is giving his "Bread of Life" discourse here and, while it is weighty with the sovereignty of God in salvation, it does not lack a consistent gospel exhortation that one believe – exercising the volitional element of the inner man and acting in repentance and faith. So here it is plainly demonstrated that salvation is the work of God, but that man also has the responsibility to act, to believe, an act beyond his capacity without God having first acted – yet man will give an account for believing or not believing the gospel.

Man's Responsibility to Believe

"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.' Then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" John 6:27-29

"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.'" John 6:35

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life." John 6:47

"Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." John 6:58

¹⁵ 2 Samuel 24:24

¹⁶ Carson, Pg.129

God's Sovereign Work

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” John 6:37-40

“Jesus answered them, ‘Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.’” John 6:43-44

Philippians 2:12-13

This passage is perhaps one of the plainest passages to demonstrate the mutual compatibility of the two thesis-like statements provided by Carson above – demonstrating the dynamic of two principles that while appearing to be in contrast are in immediate harmony (God is sovereign and man is responsible). Here these two principles are bound without qualification or threat of contradiction in Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to exercise their responsibility to work out their salvation, to press on in their sanctification process. Do this knowing that it is not simply God who commands or inspires, but who is himself actively at work in this exact process and in such is accomplishing his own good pleasure.

Acts 18:9-10

Here we see Paul receiving special comfort from the Lord’s sovereign preservation and work in salvation – he is sure in both his security and in the returns for his gospel labors in Corinth. Note the implicit outworking of the wills of God and man in this short encouragement provided to Paul. First, the Lord will provide a context in which men are either unable or disinterested in attacking or harming Paul (this is conduct that is being directed by God and for which men are culpable). Second, the Lord has assured Paul of conversions in Corinth meaning that he will draw them to himself and they will believe.

Acts 4:23-30

An early persecution of the Church had begun and upon Peter and John’s release the believers were praying together and cite a portion of Psalm 2 that clearly references The LORD as the Sovereign One over the nations who has established his Son upon the throne. This Son to whom the nations are warned they had best pay homage to as he will rule with great power over them... this Son is Jesus who will return to rule on the throne of David through the Millennial Kingdom. Their prayer continues to speak of his first advent in which Jesus was rejected and men who are responsible for their respective actions participated in his crucifixion, but this too was by the sovereign plan of God having been predestined. “...truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” Acts 4:27-28

Here Carson makes a very strong statement regarding how necessary this apparent tension of ideas and wills is for one's faith. He states, "God is absolutely sovereign, yet his sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility and accountability; human beings are morally responsible creatures, yet this fact in no way jeopardizes the sovereignty of God. At Calvary, all Christians have to concede the truth of these two statements, or they give up their claim to be Christians."¹⁷

Genesis 50, 2 Samuel 24, Isaiah 10, John 6, Philippians 2, Acts 18, and Acts 4 all inform us as to the Scriptures' treatment of the tension of God's sovereign purposes and man's responsible actions (including man's wicked conduct at times for which he alone is morally culpable). But what do such passages inform us about prayer? They demonstrate that God will accomplish his purposes and plans, that God accomplishes his purposes and plans by and through man, and an element of the most intimate merging of these principles of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is demonstrated in prayer – God being pleased to hear and respond to the petitions of his people in the execution of his immediate and greater desires. So far from the fatalistic diminishing of prayer to a pious relic or to some mystic control center for the outcome of the world, these two truths in their balanced tension provoke the believer to personal obedience that is confident in God.

Personal Examination & Response

What do you think about Robertson McQuilkin's statement? "It seems easier to go to a consistent extreme than to stay at the center of biblical tension."¹⁸ How does this work itself out in your studying of the Scriptures and the doctrines/theology developed from them?

If you have not already, read the passages that were referenced above and consider what was expressed about each of them in this study guide. Next, write out one reflection from each of the seven texts and how this reflection impacts your prayer life:

Genesis 50:19-20

Reflection

Impact

¹⁷ Carson, Pg.134

¹⁸ Robertson McQuilkin Library (online: mcquilkinlibrary.com) accessed on July 13, 2017

2 Samuel 24

Reflection

Impact

Isaiah 10:5-19

Reflection

Impact

John 6:22-59

Reflection

Impact

Philippians 2:12-13

Reflection

Impact

Acts 18:9-10

Reflection

Impact

Acts 4:23-30

Reflection

Impact

Mystery and the Nature of God¹⁹

While the aim of this study to present has been to reconcile two apparent tensions, particularly as they impact prayer, Carson also recognizes that the very examining of these matters provokes other necessary conversations. Early in this section he makes a helpful statement that establishes the tone of the discussion, “Christianity is not interested in tempting you to believe contradictory nonsense. It invokes mystery now and then; it does not invoke nonsense.”²⁰

Now, reflecting back over some of the passages that were referenced in the previous section Carson speaks to the matter of the “freedom” of their principle characters. Fundamentally the discussion regarding men’s freedom is not one of it being present or absent, but *of what nature*. The conclusion is that men are most free in their desire of their voluntary choice and less free in their sovereignly ordained direction. “...many theologians have refused to tie ‘freedom’ to absolute power to act contrary to God’s will. They tie it, rather, to desire, to what human beings voluntarily choose. Joseph’s brothers did what they wanted to do; the Assyrians did what they wanted to do. In each case, Gods sovereignty was operating behind the scenes: the human participants, to use the language of the early Christians, did what God’s power and will had decided beforehand should happen. But that did not excuse them. They did what they wanted to do.”²¹

Another substantial subject that will only receive minimal, but sufficient, treatment here is the matter of man choosing and executing evil deeds when God is absolutely sovereign and both history past and what will be is all in accordance to his plan (if such were not so then promise and prophecy is in grave danger as is the very nature of the character of God).

“The Bible insists God is sovereign, so sovereign that nothing that takes place in the universe can escape the outermost boundary of his control; yet the Bible insists God is good, unreservedly good, the very standard of goodness. We are driven to conclude that God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way. In other words, he stands behind good and evil *asymmetrically*. He stands behind good in such a way that the good can ultimately be credited to him; he stands behind evil in such a way that what is evil is inevitably credited to secondary agents and all their malignant effects. They cannot escape his sway, in exactly the same way that Satan has no power over Job without God’s sanction; yet God remains mysteriously distant from evil itself.”²²

Biblically Responding with Prayer

Perhaps, for some, now more than before there is greater anxiety over the perceived tension of man’s responsibility in view of God’s sovereignty. So how does one respond in view of this... one responds with obedience and specifically here with obedience in prayer. Further, we respond with a view to the examples provided for us in the Scriptures. “We must do our best to ensure that these complimentary truths function in our lives in the same ways they function in the lives of believers described in Scripture.”²³ There is wisdom in this

¹⁹ Carson, Pg.134

²⁰ Carson, Pg.135

²¹ Carson, Pg.135

²² Carson, Pg.136

²³ Carson, Pg.138

counsel... we are not the first persons to have been charged to walk in faith and obedience – working through the apparent tension of these two truths, so what better place to look than the examples provided in the Scriptures?

The Doctrine of Election

Perhaps no one articulated the doctrine of God’s sovereign election in salvation more exhaustively than the Apostle Paul, who also happened to be a vigorous evangelist and church planter. Far from producing pride, fatalism, or indifference this truth served to invigorate Paul in his gospel efforts – praying, pleading, and preaching to find and call out to God’s elect.

The Doctrine of God’s Sovereignty

This was a doctrine that fueled all faithful believers in the Scriptures. They had an absolute confidence in God and at no time articulated a need to press him to action or provide intervention so that his plans were not thwarted. There are occasionally painful prayers and struggles in prayer when the elements of God’s sovereignty are examined in view of suffering and struggle – but the believer’s confidence and greater hope is in the perfect sovereignty of God. There is more solace and comfort in not understanding God’s ways rather than presuming that God’s ways are in some regard dependent on another’s actions, conduct, or even prayer.

Personal Examination & Response

Romans 9 is a frequently cited chapter when expressing God’s sovereign election of the beloved unto salvation, but Romans 10 makes it preciously clear that rather than this high doctrine stifling Paul’s prayers for his people for whom he expresses anguishing affection, it continues to fuel his zeal in prayer for them. “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.” Romans 10:1 If your theology has stifled your prayer life then while your theology might not be deficient your understanding of its proper beauty most certainly is lacking. So, in view of this how does the doctrine of election impact your prayer life?

Do you find more solace in the mystery of God’s ways or in the egregious fallacy that God’s ways are dependent on man and often thwarted from their intended ideals? How does genuine comfort in truth, even when it is not wholly understood, impact your prayer life?

The Promises and Prophecies of Scripture

All throughout the Scriptures God's people have joyfully submitted their lives to the promises and prophecies articulated throughout the Scriptures rather than it becoming a means of indifference (God will do what he will do – he has already said that so let what will happen, happen). The assurance of God's promises and prophecies produced energized and enduring faith as we see with the examples of: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses as made plain in Hebrews 11. Consider also the example provided by Daniel who, when he examined the words of Jeremiah the prophet and determined the number of years left for Israel's exile, he responded in prayer... "Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession...." Daniel 9:3-4 Finally consider the response to the chief of revelations provided to the Apostle John – his response, "Come, Lord Jesus!" – a prayer, Revelation 22:20

Personal Examination & Response

Have you given much consideration to the prophecies and promises of God in the Scriptures? How have the prophecies and promise of God impacted your prayer life?

God's Appointed Means and Relenting

Whereas those who delight in God's sovereignty are susceptible to drift toward a deficient esteeming and execution of prayer, there is another threat by those who are weak in the Scriptures and whose superficial laboring in the text has led to erroneous conclusions regarding God and his ways. Such is the disposition and folly of those who upon coming to texts that express God relenting conclude that they have the capacity to manipulate God. It likely is not framed in such a crass way, but it is what one is fundamentally communicating when they conclude that their prayers in and of themselves are why God relents or changes his mind. The conclusion is that when one prays it potentially redirects God in a way that otherwise would not have happened and when this fails to occur they usually express great disbelief and anxiety that God did not "answer" their prayers (or again, more directly, when God did not submit to what they have determined to be best). So how does one balance the sovereignty of God, the responsibility of man, and the language of relenting occasionally expressed in the Scriptures? Know the expressed character of God as revealed in the Scriptures. After all, one is attempting to examine why God acted in a given way – namely relenting when there was vigorous petition or when a given conduct or change thereof was embraced by someone. So, if the matter is one of understanding the character and ways of God then wisdom would say one should know the plainly revealed character and ways of God. With this in view consider the book of Jonah where we plainly observe that the prophet of God explicitly states that he fled from his initial charge to declare judgment explicitly because, knowing the revealed character of God, he anticipated God's relenting from said judgment. Jonah directly references God's verbally expressed glory from

Exodus 34 and based off of this revelation of the character of God he knew that God is pleased to relent (change his mind) from judgment in response to faith and repentance. Jonah knew that judgment was sure against the Ninevites, but should they repent and put their faith in The LORD that he might choose to relent because such is the revealed character and ways of God. Therefore, it was not as though God relenting was a transition to “plan b” – rather in the magnificent sovereignty of God the whole of every action was directed by God (Jonah’s actions included – the will of man subjected to God and entailing actions for which man was still culpable) and the outcome was wholly as God intended. Now, what is to be taken away from this is that Scripture sincerely uses the language of relent and/or change, but it is within a precise context – namely that God has been pleased to use petition, prayer, repentance, and change *as a means to execute his larger purposes*. God’s plan is in accordance with the revealing and exercising of his character which includes the sovereign application of his relenting in like cases at his own discretion. Another way to consider this matter is to recognize that like the Ninevites you were actively under the wrath and present judgment of God (as one who was an enemy of God and citizen of the kingdom of darkness). However, when God effectually drew you to himself, you repented, and put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins... then the context changed. You from that moment forward were a redeemed child of God and a member of the Kingdom of God – no charge can stand against you. In this, God’s disposition toward you changed – you were an enemy and now are beloved. All very good news that you are quite familiar with as a believer. Now recognize that this is of a like nature as the Ninevite’s context because in this regard too God’s disposition toward you changed, but he did so wholly consistent with his revealed character and conduct. The argument might now be that we were secure in Christ from before the foundation of the world because of God’s sure election of the beloved. This is true as it is true that he is sovereignly overseeing every other affair and outworking of his creation.

“Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country.” Isaiah 46:8-11

“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!”²⁴

²⁴ Carson, Pg.143 (In Carson’s last sentence I would qualify that “discipline” would be a better term for a believer in disobedience and not “judgment”)

Personal Examination & Response

Recognizing that God is often pleased to respond to great and consistent petition and that such is well within his sovereign working – how will this impact your efforts in prayer?

Conclusion

A right view of God will be the most invigorating blessing to your life of prayer. Theology and its wonderful mysteries will not challenge your praying, but rather challenge you to pray and to pray better. May our magnificent and sovereign God be pleased in finding us faithful to the end that we joyfully participate in the execution of his great plan that will culminate in his infinitely deserved glory.