

THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF MISAPPLIED PETITIONARY PRAYER WITH GOD'S IMMUTABLE WILL

Grace Gospel Church Ministry

There is an apparent conflict between the historically prevalent Christian beliefs that “**prayer changes things**”; with the immutability of God’s eternal plan, purpose and will. This has resulted in **the misapplication of petitionary prayers** that are practiced through the Christian beliefs that God changes things in direct response to the implorations of men’s requests. In stark contrast, those who espouse the **Doctrine of God’s Divine Immutability** believe that He is absolutely immutable (unchangeable), that nothing about His divine essence does or could in fact change. Accordingly, an immutable God has an unchanging and unchangeable will. On the other hand, Christians of all persuasions have held to the predilection type practice of petitionary prayer or “**making of requests of God**”; behind which lays the belief that prayer has some causal significance.

This belief in the independent efficacy of prayer is supported by and no doubt gains its place of fundamental importance in the Christian tradition from the amalgamation of the divers covenant and administrative views of Old and New Testament Scriptures. In these practices, the most casual of readings turn up a plethora of instances of various requests being made to God and God hearing and affirmatively answering such (I Kings 18:1-45; II Chronicles 6:26-27). By the same token there is equal documentation declaring these same workings of God by decrees (Jeremiah 5:24; 10:13). But if for everything that God brings about in the world, His bringing it about is grounded in His unchanging will, can one plausibly maintain that God in any real sense responds to prayers?

The primary question to be considered is whether the immutability of God’s will is compatible with entreaty-like petitionary prayers? Is it even possible to state that whatever God wills to be brought about is eternal and unchanging but that God nonetheless brings about many things in the world because of or as the result of prayers offered to Him by individuals? More specifically, is there any Scriptural documentation in favor of a compatibility thesis on the basis of the traditional argument of the efficacy of induced causality (found for instance in accounts of appeals from God’s faithful servants)? In other words, do the contents of the Scriptures contend that these traditional accounts are strengthened by their notions of "complex intentions", influencing God to act in a manner other than His original inclinations? In effect, can God be persuaded to change His mind or are there even areas wherein He has not pre-determinately made up His mind thus leaving certain decisions to the determining faculties of mankind?

Cursory examinations of certain passages of Scriptures do in fact present prima-facie incompatibility problems to the sovereign and immutable workings of God in eternity. In essence, the problems themselves are created by the tendency to view occurrences from the vantage-point of time rather than eternity. Thus, there are two views or vantage-points from which one can observe the occurrences of life’s events and situations. In effect, these diverse views will present in most instances, antithetical conceptions and perceptions of what has occurred, is occurring and what is yet to occur. This is the underlining problem under-girding the difference between those who embrace the concept of a world wherein hardly anything has been determined verses those who conceptualize everything as having been already determined.

The primary issue is the one of causality. Those whose view of life and all its occurrences is from the eternal realm, will tend to attribute ALL contributions to cause and effect to the Divine Decrees of God. In this vein, the issue of their proposition entails the statement that, “If God brings about anything, then it is because He has unchangingly willed and decreed it in eternity.” Contrariwise,

those whose view of life and all its occurrences is from the realm of time, tend to attribute the contributions of cause and effect to the concept of a shared partnership arrangement of mankind cooperating with God. In this vein, the issue of their proposition entails the statement that, "God answers prayers if and only if He brings about some things because individuals have requested them of Him."

The question now arises as to the incompatibility of these two issues. In other words, does God immutably will to bring about something simply because He has pre-determinately decreed it or are there instances where He brings things about simply because individuals make certain requests of Him? These issues are absolutely not compatible. Note, If the divine will is immutable, then there can be no alteration of God's will by anything on the part of the creature. Nothing a person requests of God will make a difference in God. No prayer can change God's mind regarding what He has previously determined to bring about. This view adopts a particularly stringent conception of immutability that it is logically impossible for anything about the divine nature to change. This statement is compounded by questions, i.e., "can prayer have any causal significance? If the answer is yes, then any request made to God in prayer would, if answered affirmatively only in response to the petition; require Him to bring something about directly as a result of the individual's prayer.

But God has already pre-determined what things He will bring about and that determination is fixed. To be more precise, the difficulties of these issues are outlined with the following set of propositions:

- (1) An individual prays at a certain time for God to bring about some specific request.
- (2) God immutably has willed (in eternity before time) that the stated request will manifestly be expressed at the specified time.
- (3) In essence, did God bring about the manifestation of the specified request at the specified time because the individual prayed for it to occur?

Note the examination of the aforementioned two propositions in consideration of the above referenced accounts in the Old testament. As we analyze the specific context of the occurrences recorded in I Kings 18:1-45, we immediately note its tie-in to the Law-Kingdom dispensational covenants, i.e., Abrahamic (Promise), Mosaic (Law) and New (Kingdom). It is very important to recognize these assignments as they establish both the position and domain from which the account of events are expressed.

The opening accounts of First Kings chapter eighteen depict the circumstances surrounding the curse OF NO RAIN FOR THREE YEARS that God had placed on king Ahab and the nation of Israel through the prophet Elijah. This was six months after the king was told there would be neither dew nor rain; and from this period the three years in this passage are computed. As the account unfolds, There was a sore famine in Samaria that was pressing with intense severity on the capital. On the banks of rivulets, grass-tender shoots of grass under normal circumstances would naturally be expected but the water being dried up, the verdure would disappear. Through this ordeal, all the prophets of Baal are destroyed but the God of Israel is magnified and hence manifested through the test of fire (vs. 21-30). Subsequently we note that the rain returned and the nation was saved (vs. 45).

When this is viewed from the vantage-point of time and the plateau of the Earth, it conveys a picture of God reacting and responding to the actions of mankind, both good and evil. Thus the inference is that the persuasiveness of men's conduct is the deciding factor that determines the flow of events that transpire. Contrariwise, when this is viewed from the vantage-point of eternity and the plateau of the Heavens, it conveys a picture of God manifesting His decrees and plans according to His good pleasure. But the passage is recorded from the Earthly view as it is linked to the Earthly Covenants, thus there is insufficient information in the account to accommodate the Heavens view. For one to

comprehend the correct analysis of the events that unfolded, one must have the advantage of a panoramic scene that is only available in a forum where there is more light or information.

Here it is very important for one to understand that a thorough comprehension from the Heavens vantage-point of God determining all things in eternity; can only be ascertained in light of information that is provided in the writings of **THE MYSTERY**, the volume of truth that was revealed to the Apostle Paul. One must dwell and abide in the **INTELLIGENCE** of the **Grace Covenant** in order to perceive the Heavens workings of God's Divine Decrees that are immutably determined in eternity and manifested in the Earthly sphere of time. This information entails the facts that:

- (1) All of God's beloved were chosen (elected) in Christ before creation (Ephesians 1:4).
- (2) The hope of the elect is confirmed by His immutable oath (Hebrews 6:17-18).
- (3) God (independently) works all things after the counsel of His will according to His purpose (Ephesians 1:11).

Observe that in light of the data that is available in the Gospel of Grace, one has the advantage of understanding that everything that God ever has done, is doing and is going to do, have as their end His "eternal purpose". Thus if God's purpose is an eternal one, then His "policy" is not being "shaped" day by day. Also, if God receives input from anyone outside of Himself, it would contradict Ephesians 1:11 which expressly declares that God is "working all things according to the determination of His will," therefore it follows that "God's policy" is not being "shaped" by man's prayers. Any such statement to the contrary foist the will of the creature to be supreme, for if the prayers of humans are potent enough to shape God's policy or determine His workings, then is the Most High God subordinate to the influence of earthly creation. The absurdity of such cogitation is expressed by the Apostle Paul, as he simply makes a statement in the form of a question, i.e., "For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has become His counselor?" (Romans 11:34).

Those who embrace the proposition of viewing things from the Earthly vantage-point foist the premise that the efficacy of prayer is the basis of SECONDARY CAUSATION. This has been accepted as a compromise of the issue, supposedly to authenticate the need to maintain simultaneously the immutability of God's decrees and the causal efficacy of the actions of human agents. This proposition has received prominent endorsement and a long tradition in Christian theology. Classical theologians have traditionally resorted to the distinction between so-called primary and secondary causes to achieve this goal. The Protestant scholastic Jerome Zanchius explains: "In consequence of God's immutable will and infallible foreknowledge, whatever things come to pass, come to pass necessarily, though with respect to second causes and us men, many things are contingent. . ." (Absolute Predestination, The Will of God, position 11).

In the Westminster Confession it reads: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" (III.i). Others have been careful to avoid the two extremes of (a) affirming the necessity of human actions and (b) making the decree of providence mutable. Some, holding that all things come about by necessity (whether physical necessity or the immutability of God's decree), deny the usefulness of prayer; while others, affirming the usefulness of prayer and that human actions are ruled by providence (though without necessity), make the divine decree variable. Yet the prevalent proposition remains that stresses the importance of affirming human acts as true causes, while retaining the immutability of the divine will as expressed in the decree of providence. This position leads them to maintain that providence disposes both effects and the manner in which they will be brought about.

From the Earthly vantage-point, human acts are true causes and therefore men must perform certain actions, not in order to change divine providence, but in order to obtain certain effects in the manner determined by God. In this effect, what is perceived as being true of natural causes would also be true of prayer. . One does not (nor can) pray in order to change the decrees of divine providence, rather it is designed in order to impetrate those things which God has determined would be obtained, which includes the function of prayer. In other words, the prayers of the elect are aligned with the will of God to receive what the Almighty has decreed to give from all eternity. Human agents should never be construed to function as secondary causes even though their deeds may seem to genuinely effectuate an event; when actually their actions are willed by God. This should never be explained by stating that causes are the results of man's prayer, as it is not the efficient cause but only a tool that is utilized in the efficient disposition of the cause.

Thus if God has in eternity willed to bring about a certain occurrence, He has pre-determinately decreed it so by willing that it be manifested by some person's action, wherein this action may be the act of prayer and in this, the person does not actually have any causal effect on bringing about the occurrence. If one views this otherwise, it is to say that God couldn't have willed to bring such occurrence about without some human agency or that God can only will to bring about (some) things if human agents are involved in the causal process. Some may attempt to explicate the so-called causal relations that are perceived to be involved technically by the proposition that bringing-about relations functions as being both transitive and the preservation of the efficacy of the primary agent (God). In this view, if God decides to do something, it requires the employing of creatures to accomplish the task, i.e., human agents actually performed the action but God Himself is involved in the causal process. But the flaw is that even in view of the transitive relation notwithstanding, it is also true that God willed to bring about the human function as a manifestation of that which resulted in the occurrence. Thus all must be applied to the Divine Will of God, for **even if human actions are functions of the cause, they are not determinants of the cause.**

However, the question still remains, if God is the Predestinator of everything that comes to pass and the Regulator of all events, then is not prayer a profitless exercise? A sufficient answer to these questions is, that God mandates us to "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This is corroborated by Scriptures across the entire spectrum of dispensations, i.e., Luke 18:1, which states (KJV), "men ought always to pray." Thus, it is evident that prayer is neither meaningless nor valueless. But this does not reconcile the difficulty of the issue being considered in these writings nor does it settle the antithetical nature of the two propositions. What then is the correct relationship between the immutability of God's sovereignty and petitionary prayer?

First of all, it should be stated with emphasis that prayer is not intended to change God's purpose nor is it to move Him from the intent of His decrees. God has decreed that certain events will come to pass but He has also predetermined these events through the means He has appointed for their manifestation. God has elected certain ones to be saved but He has also decreed that salvation of His elect should be manifested through the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel then is one of the appointed means for the manifestation of some of the eternal decrees of the Lord; as prayer is another. Thus God has decreed the means as well as the end and among the means is prayer. Even the prayers of His people are included in His eternal decrees. In this sense, when one prays in a certain instant, it is because one has been caused to pray. Therefore instead of viewing prayers as being in vain on the one hand, or even misconstruing them as determining factors on the other hand; they are understood to be among the predetermined exercises of His decrees. In other words, prayers are regulated by the direction of Divine wisdom, in that they have been assigned a place in the order of events.

In the earlier mentioned account in the Scriptures, Elijah had already received the information that God would provide rain but that did not preclude him from the act of praying (James 5:17-18). In another instance, Daniel "understood" by the writings of the prophets that the captivity of God's people was to last only seventy years, yet when these seventy years were almost ended, he was caused to

act as he, "set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:2-3). Yet in another account, God told the prophet Jeremiah, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end" (Jeremiah 29:12). Here, because prayer was a predetermined function of God's decree to deliver, it is further recorded, "Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you" (Jeremiah 29:12). In a more corporate and even future sense, there is documentation in Ezekiel chapter 36 of the explicit, positive and unconditional promises which God has made concerning the future restoration of Israel, as in verse 37 it is stated, "Thus saith the Lord God; I will vet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for then."

Accordingly, the design of prayer is not that God's will may be **altered**, but that it may be **manifested** in His own good time and way. It is because God has predetermined and thus promised certain things that one should petition Him for such with the full assurance of faith. It is God's purpose that His will shall be brought about by His own appointed means and that He may do His people good upon His own terms, i.e., by the "function" of entreaty and supplication. Finally, it should be noted that God's will is immutable (unchangeable) and cannot be altered by ones supplication. When God has foreordained the performance of a certain act, He cannot be persuaded by the most fervent and importunate prayers of those who have the greatest interest in Him; to do other than what He has decreed. This is certified by the Apostle Paul's account of God's response to his thrice submitted petition, i.e., "And he said unto me, My grace is **sufficient** for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). This is further corroborated by the testimony of the prophet Jeremiah, as he states, "Then said the Lord unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth" (Jeremiah 15:1). Note the denial of Moses prayers to enter the promised land, which is also a parallel case.

Thus the views concerning prayer need to be revised and brought into harmony with the teachings of the Scriptures on the subject. The prevailing idea seems to be, that one comes to God, requests something that one desires and fully "trust" Him to provide that which has been petitioned. But this is a most dishonoring and degrading conception. This popular belief reduces God to the role of a servant who is obligated to: do ones biddings, provide for ones pleasures and grant ones desires. Contrariwise, proper petitioning to God entails: the submission of ones perceived needs, committing all to the alignment of His will and trusting Him to respond according to what He has previously determined to be best. This correctly subordinates ones will to God instead of as in the former case, the attempt to subject God's will to ones own. No petition is pleasing to God unless the spirit actuating it is, "not my will, but yours be done."

Accordingly, when God bestows blessings upon the prayers of His elect, it is not for the sake of their requests, as if He was inclined and influenced by them; but it is for His own sake and of His own sovereign will and pleasure. To this proposition, it could be asked, "to what purpose then is prayer?" The answer to this inquiry is, "this is the way and means, which God has appointed for the communication of the blessing of His goodness to His people. For though He has purposed, provided, and promised them, yet they are all according to His will and in His manner to give them, as it is not only a duty but also a privilege to petition Him for such. When one is prompted with a spirit of prayer, it forebodes well that God may have intended to bestow the good things as they are requested with submission to the will of God with the stipulation, "**Not my will but yours be done.**" The bottom line is, the point of prayer is not designed to change God, but to change His people, i.e., to bring them to a point of daily acknowledgement of Him as their sovereign Creator, even those who have need of Him as the source of life and goodness and the One **who works all things after the council of His own Immutable Will!!!!**