

Why Pray?

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Nothing escapes God's notice; nothing oversteps the boundaries of His power. God is authoritative in all things. If I thought even for one moment that a single molecule were running loose in the universe outside the control and domain of almighty God, I wouldn't sleep tonight. My confidence in the future rests in my confidence in the God who controls history. But how does God exercise that control and manifest that authority? How does God bring to pass the things He has sovereignly decreed?

Augustine said that nothing happens in this universe apart from the will of God and that, in a certain sense, God ordains everything that happens. Augustine was not attempting to absolve men of responsibility for their actions, but his teaching raises a question: If God is sovereign over the actions and intents of men, why pray at all? A secondary concern revolves around the question, "Does prayer really change anything?"

Let me answer the first question by stating that the sovereign God commands by His sovereign, holy Word that we pray. Prayer is not optional for the Christian; it is required.

We might ask, "What if it doesn't do anything?" That is not the issue. Regardless of whether prayer does any good, if God commands us to pray, we must pray. It is reason enough that the Lord God of the universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, commands it. Yet He not only commands us to pray, but also invites us to make our requests known. James says that we

do not have because we do not ask (James 4:2). He also tells us that the prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much (James 5:16). Time and again the Bible says that prayer is an effective tool. It is useful; it works.

John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, makes some profound observations regarding prayer:

But, someone will say, does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem in a sense superfluous that he should be stirred up by our prayers—as if he were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until he is aroused by our voices? But they who thus reason do not observe to what end the Lord instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his own sake as for ours. Now he wills—as is right—that his due be rendered to him, in the recognition that everything men desire and account conducive to their own profit comes from him, and in the attestation of this by prayers. But the profit of this sacrifice also, by which he is worshiped, returns to us. Accordingly, the holy fathers, the more confidently they extolled God's benefits among themselves and others, were the more keenly aroused pray

Still it is very important for us to call upon him: First, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor. Secondly, that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand. (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960], Book 3, chapter 20, section 3.)