

PRAYER AND PREDESTINATION

Sermon preached on April 21, 1959, by Pastor Fred W. Phelps, Westboro Baptist Church

The question is, if God be the predestinator of everything that comes to pass, and the regulator of all events, then is not prayer a profitless exercise? Why has God appointed that we should pray? The vast majority of people would reply, in order that we may obtain from God the things which we need. While this is one of the purposes of prayer, it is by no means the chief one. Moreover, it considers prayer only from the human side. And prayer sadly needs to be viewed from the divine side. Let us look then at some of the reasons why God has bidden us to pray. First and foremost, prayer has been appointed that the Lord God Himself should be *honored*. God requires we should recognize that He is, indeed, "the *high and lofty* One that inhabiteth eternity" (Isaiah 57:17). God requires that we shall own His *universal dominion*: in petitioning God for rain, Elijah did but confess His control over the elements; in praying to God to deliver a poor sinner from the wrath to come, we acknowledge that "salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9); in supplicating His blessing on the Gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth, we declare His rulership over the whole world. Again; God requires that we shall *worship* Him, and prayer, real prayer, is an act of worship. Prayer is an act of worship inasmuch as it is the prostrating of the soul before Him; inasmuch as it is a calling upon His great and holy name; inasmuch as it is the owning of His goodness, His power, His immutability, His grace, and inasmuch as it is the recognition of His sovereignty, owned

by a submission to His will. It is highly significant to notice in this connection that the Temple was not termed by Christ the House of Sacrifice, but instead, the House of Prayer. Again; prayer *redounds to God's glory*, for in prayer we do but acknowledge our dependency upon Him. When we humbly supplicate the Divine Being we cast ourselves upon His power and mercy. In seeking blessings from God we own that He is the Author and Fountain of every good and perfect gift. That prayer brings glory to God is further seen from the fact that prayer calls faith into exercise, and nothing from us is so honoring and pleasing to Him as the confidence of our hearts. In the second place, prayer is appointed by God *for our spiritual blessing*, as a means for *our growth in grace*. When seeking to learn the *design* of prayer, this should ever occupy us *before* we regard prayer as a means for obtaining the supply of our need. Prayer is designed by God for our *humbling*. Prayer, real prayer, is a coming into the Presence of God, and a sense of His awful majesty produces a realization of our nothingness and unworthiness. Again; prayer is designed by God for *the exercise of our faith*. Faith is begotten in the Word (Romans 10:17), but it is exercised in prayer; hence, we read of "the prayer of faith". Again; prayer calls *love* into action. Concerning the hypocrite the question is asked, in Job 27:10: "Will he delight himself in the Almighty? Will he always call upon God?" But they that love the Lord cannot be long away from Him, for they *delight* in unburdening themselves to Him. Not only does prayer call love into action, but through the direct answers vouchsafed to our prayers, our love to God is increased—"I love the Lord, *because* He hath heard my voice and my supplications"

(Psalm 116:1). Again; prayer is designed by God to teach us the *value* of the blessings we have sought from Him, and it causes us to rejoice the more when He *has* bestowed upon us that for which we supplicate Him. Third, prayer is appointed by God for our seeking from Him the things which we are in need of. But here a difficulty may present itself to those who have only a superficial knowledge of the doctrine of predestination. If God has foreordained, before the foundation of the world, everything which happens in time, what is the use of prayer? If it is true that "of Him and through Him and to Him are *all things*" (Romans 11:36), then why pray?, the Arminian would ask. Ere replying directly to these queries it should be pointed out how that there is just as much reason to ask, What is the use of me coming to God and telling Him what He already knows? Or, wherein is the use of me spreading before Him my need, seeing He is already acquainted with it? As there is to object, What is the use of praying for anything when everything has been ordained beforehand by God? Prayer is not for the purpose of informing God, as if He were ignorant, (for the Saviour expressly declared "for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him"—Matthew 6:8), but it is to acknowledge that He *does* know what we are in need of. Prayer is not appointed for the furnishing of God with the knowledge of what we need, but it is designed as a confession to Him of *our sense* of our need. In this, as in everything, God's thoughts are not as ours. God requires that His gifts should be sought for. He designs to be *honored* by our asking, just as He is to be *thanked* by us after He has bestowed His blessing. However, the question still returns on

us, If God be 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 to the soul that believes the Bible is, that God *bids* us to *pray*—"*Pray* without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And again, "men *ought* always to pray" (Luke 18:1). And further: Scripture declares that, "the prayer of faith shall save the sick", and, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16); while the Lord Jesus Christ—our perfect Example in all things—was pre-eminently a Man of Prayer. Thus, it is evident, that prayer is neither meaningless nor valueless. But still this does not *remove* the difficulty nor *answer* the question with which we started out. What then is the *relationship* between God's predestinating grace and power and Christian prayer? First of all, we would say with emphasis, that prayer is *not intended to change* God's purpose as Armenian preachers preach, nor is it to move Him to form fresh purposes. God has decreed that certain events *shall* come to pass, but He has also decreed that these events shall come to pass through the means He has appointed for their accomplishment. God has elected, for instance, certain ones to be saved, but He has also decreed that these ones shall be saved *through* the preaching of the Gospel as the means. The Gospel, then, is one of the appointed means for the working out of the eternal counsel of the Lord; and prayer is another. 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. Therefore, instead of prayers being in vain, they are among the means through which God exercises His decrees.

As Robert Haldane says, in his exposition of the book of Romans, "If indeed all things happen by a blind chance, or a fatal necessity, prayers in that case could be of no moral efficacy, and of no use; but since they are regulated by the direction of Divine wisdom, prayers have a place in the order of events" (Haldane). That prayers for the execution of the very things *decreed* by God are *not* meaningless, is clearly taught in the Scriptures. Elijah *knew* that God *was* about to give rain, but that did not prevent him from at once betaking himself to prayer, (James 5:17). Daniel "understood" by the writings of the prophets that the captivity was to last but seventy years, yet when these seventy years were almost ended, we are told that he "set his face unto the Lord God, *to seek* by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:2, 3). God told the prophet Jeremiah these words: "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"; but instead of adding, there is, therefore, no need for you to supplicate Me for these things, He said, "*Then* shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you" (Jeremiah 29:12). Once more; in Ezekiel 36 we read of the explicit, positive, and unconditional promises which God has made concerning the future restoration of Israel, yet in verse 37 of this same chapter we are told, "Thus saith the Lord God; *I will yet for this be enquired of* by the house of Israel, to do it for then"! Here then is *the* design of prayer: not that God's will may be *altered*, but that it may be *accomplished* in His own good time and way. It is because God *has* promised certain things that we can ask for them 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, and that is, by the 'means' and 'terms' of entreaty and supplication, denominated simply "prayer." Did not the Son of God *know* for certain that after His death and resurrection He *would be* exalted by the Father? Assuredly He did. Yet we find Him *asking for* this very thing: "O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine Own Self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was!" (John 17:5) Did not He know that none of His people could perish? Yet He besought the Father to "keep" them (John 17:11)! And, finally; it should be said that God's will is immutable, and cannot be altered by our cryings or prayers. When the mind of God is not toward a people to do them good, it cannot be turned to them by the most fervent and importunate prayers of those who have the greatest interest in Him. We read strange words in Jeremiah 15:1. We read: "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" (Jer. 15:1). And, you know the prayers of Moses to enter the promised land is a parallel case. Our views respecting prayer need to be revised and brought into harmony with the teaching of Scripture on the subject. The prevailing idea seems to be, that I come to God and *ask* Him for something that I want, and that I *expect* Him to give me that which I have asked. But this is a most dishonoring and degrading conception. The popular belief reduces God to a servant, *our* servant: doing our bidding, performing our pleasure, granting our desires. No; prayer is a coming to God, telling Him my *need*, committing my way unto the Lord, and

leaving Him to deal with it as seemeth *Him* best. *This* makes my will subject to His will. And prayer is pleasing to God only if it is actuated by this spirit: "*not* my will, but thine be done". Mr. John Gill once said: "When God bestows blessings on a praying people, it is not for the sake of their prayers, as if He was inclined and turned by them; but it is for His own sake, and of His own sovereign will and pleasure. Should it be said, to what purpose then is prayer? it is answered, This is the way and means God has appointed, for the communication of the blessing of His goodness to His people." And, now, "peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen." (Ephesians 6:23-24). I love you. Amen.