



Purpose in Prayer

God's sovereignty over
our prayers.

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- We continue our series on God's sovereignty, THY WILL BE DONE
 - A series examining scripture to learn what it teaches us about God's work in this world and our partnership in His work
- Our topic for Week 2 is God's Sovereignty in Prayer – a lesson I am calling "Shall I Hide ..."
 - Let me begin by stating that I would have to be incredibly arrogant to think I could teach you all the Bible has to say on the topic of prayer in under 45 minutes
 - But since I was born in Texas...naturally I thought no problem
 - As I mentioned the first night, I have no intention of teaching everything on the subject of prayer
 - Nor am I trying to teach everything about God's sovereignty
- My purpose during this series is much more specific
 - Throughout this series, we are going to consider some aspect of our relationship with God and His work through us to learn what we can about God's sovereignty
 - And as I taught last week, we are especially interested in learning what the Bible says about God's sovereignty – not necessarily what Steve says, not what others have said, but simply what the Bible teaches
 - More specifically, we want to go to key passages that cut to the heart of the issue -
 - Places where we can see God's sovereignty in action
- As you may recall from last week, I said that my principle purpose in teaching this series was to stand against a tide of unbiblical teaching that has risen recently
 - I described teaching that undermines and diminishes God's sovereignty
 - Teaching that leaves the impression that God is merely a genie waiting to respond to our command
- Many Christians or potential Christians are growing up with a perspective that God can be manipulated, cajoled, bargained, even compelled to act according to our will
 - They believe that God's will can be bent to conform to our will
 - Oh, they would never say that, at least not in so many words
 - But many people – perhaps some of you in this room tonight – believe we can influence God's purposes
 - That we can influence His thinking and alter His eternal plans – at least as they may pertain to our own circumstances
 - That we can change His mind
 - And of course, the primary mechanism we turn to in trying to accomplish this task is prayer
 - But is that the purpose of prayer? Is that how prayer works?
 - How does a sovereign God in control of all things, having planned all things from the beginning make use of our prayers?
- The simplest place to start is to acknowledge that God has instructed us to pray

Phil. 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

1Th. 5:17 pray without ceasing;

James 5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

- Christ Himself is frequently seen praying in the Gospels
 - We know that we should seek God for those intentions on our heart
- But does the fact God tells us to pray mean that God will change his mind in response to our petitions?
 - Many Christians would answer that question yes, God must certainly change His mind – why else would we pray?

Num. 23:19 God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

1Sam. 15:29 “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”

- In the verse from Numbers, God is speaking through Balaam to Balak stating that God’s direction to bless Israel and prevent a curse was unchangeable, since God would never change His mind like a man
 - In the second verse, Samuel tells Saul that he has lost the throne to a better man – David – and God cannot change His mind like a man does
- These verses not only state the fact that God never changes His mind, they also give the reason why – God is not a man
 - Specifically, God does not exist as a man exists, inside creation and bound by time
- Consider your own experience and you’ll understand why God can’t change His mind
 - What would you think if I were to come to you and promise to paint your house for you for free
 - You are thrilled and thankful at first – and if you know me, you’re also shocked
 - A week passes and you are still expectant but perhaps a little concerned it might not happen
 - Since I never mentioned when I would do it, you have no way of knowing when it will occur – but the fact that a week has passed introduces some doubt
 - After a month passes, you have serious doubts I will ever follow through on my promise

- And if you had known how much I hate to paint, you never would have trusted me to begin with
- Why did we begin to doubt the promise? After all nothing happened to change my original words – I never retracted my promise, I never gave any reason to doubt
 - We begin to doubt because we know human nature and we understand instinctively that time is an enemy of any promise made by men
 - Time brings change, it give opportunity for men to think differently;
 - To consider new information;
 - To have circumstances intervene;
 - To make fulfilling the promise difficult, or impossible or inconvenient
- But God does not live within time – He already exists in the future as much as He does in the present
 - There is no new information available to God – nothing He doesn't already know
 - There is nothing acting upon God to give Him a new perspective or new motivation to act
 - There is simply no basis for God to act or think differently, because God has already considered everything that is possible
 - In fact, He already knew the words we would speak in our prayer and He already considered those words before they were even spoken
 - Remember the words of Christ in Matthew 6

Matt. 6:7 “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

Matt. 6:8 “So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

- So why pray to a sovereign God? A God who will not be changed by our prayer.
 - If you've been praying to God because you think your prayers will change God's mind, you may now be wondering if there is still any purpose in prayer
- This brings us to tonight's passage:
- In Genesis 18 Abraham and Sarah are entertaining guests, three men who brought them great news about a son to be born within the year, Isaac
 - Abraham didn't know at first that these visitors – three men – were actually two angels and the Lord Himself – a preincarnate Christ – appearing as men
 - They had just finished eating where we join them in verse 16:

Gen. 18:16 Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off.

Gen. 18:17 The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

Gen. 18:18 since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in

him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

Gen. 18:19 “For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.”

Gen. 18:20 And the LORD said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.

Gen. 18:21 “I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

Gen. 18:22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD.

- As the three supposed men prepare to leave Abraham, the scripture records God’s words to Himself – words Abraham could not hear
 - God asks an interesting question – shall I hide...
 - As the rest of the story demonstrates, this is a rhetorical question – one that God never answers directly
 - In fact, the question is really no question at all – it’s a statement
 - God has determined that He shall not hide from Abraham what He is about to do
 - Before we can examine what it is God is about to do, we’ll need to consider some background from earlier chapters
- Abraham lives outside of any city, living the life of a nomad, a wanderer Hebrews calls him – because he was determined to remain set apart from the local godless culture
 - When he first left his ancestral home in Ur, he was answering God’s call on his life
 - That call included the instruction to leave his family behind, meaning only he and his wife should travel
 - Abraham leaves – but he decides to take family despite God’s instructions
 - In particular he brings his nephew Lot, since Lot’s father had already died
 - The wisdom of God’s direction to leave family quickly becomes evident soon after Lot and Abraham settle in Canaan
 - Lot and his animals compete with Abraham for the grazing pastures
 - Eventually, Abraham and Lot part ways, with Lot traveling to settle outside the city of Sodom
 - Abraham prefers to remain separated from the local culture, but Lot eventually moves into the city of Sodom
 - Abraham’s troubles with Lot continue in Chapter 14
 - In Chapter 14 we hear about kings from the north led by King Chedorlamar who invade Canaan and plunder the towns
 - They ride away with the people of Sodom, including Lot and his family
 - Abraham is forced to ride after the army with 318 men and defeat Chedorlamar at Damascus, bringing home Lot’s family and the rest of the

captives

- Still, a disobedient Lot decides to return to the live in the evil and depraved city of Sodom
 - So, in Chapter 18 God is ready to act in justice against Sodom, but before He acts, He asks rhetorically shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?
- Remember, God’s plan is fixed, His resolve is firm – Sodom will be judged – it must be
 - His character requires justice and His holy purpose intends to make Sodom an example for all time

2Pet. 2:6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter;

- I think Christians often overlook that just as in Abraham’s day, God is constantly at work in our world
 - And He is persistent in making known His work to His children, inviting them to join Him in that work – we have only ourselves to blame for missing those opportunities
 - But with each opportunity we seize, we give the Father the opportunity to train us up in His ways – just as God has said will happen for Abraham here
- Did you take note in those verses...of God’s reason for including Abraham in His work?
 - God has chosen Abraham as the man through whom God will bring many nations
 - And through whom God will bless many nations
 - And God demands that Abraham be a man who will stand as an example to all those generations as a man who will walk in His ways and observe all He commands, and a man who will raise His children in the same way
 - So God is determined to teach Abraham both the mercy and the judgment of God – and He sees in these circumstances the opportunity to train Abraham in the process
- Our father in Heaven is truly doing no different with us than our earthly fathers will do from time to time

There is a story of a father with a young child, a son. The father is about to go into the garage to work on his car. As he is walking out, the father turns to the son and asks “Son, would you like to help fix the car?” Now sometimes the son will say “No I’m too busy watching tv,” or “I’m distracted right now, it’s not something I feel like doing right now.” But when the son says “Yes Dad, I want to be a part of it” they head out to the garage together. When the father asks for a wrench the son hands him a screwdriver. The father helps correct him. The son wants a turn to help, but the father needs to start him off. Before long, the father and son have fixed the car.

- Do you think the presence of the son made the father’s job shorter or longer?

- Was it more complicated for the father than it would have been otherwise?
- Did they make a few more mistakes than if the son hadn't been involved?
 - So why did the Dad do it?
 - What good is there in bringing along someone who makes the job harder?
 - It makes no sense if your goal is fixing the car.
 - It makes perfect sense if your goal is fixing the son.
- Our heavenly father is doing no differently than with Abraham and with us – He is fixing the son
 - But His plan doesn't depend of Abraham, and He doesn't need Abraham's help
- “Shall I hide from Abraham” is equivalent to the father in our story saying “Son you can't know what I'm about to do in the garage. Stay here and watch tv.”
 - But that's not love
- So, in Abraham's hearing, God announces his plan to visit Sodom and determine whether it is as sinful as He has heard
 - Of course, God already knew the truth about Sodom – though He spoke honestly about visiting Sodom, His words were spoken for Abraham's benefit
 - My wife and I used to do something similar with our children when they were younger
 - When we knew their rooms were a mess, we would say something like, “I have a treat for anyone with a room that's clean. I think I will go check and see who has a clean room.”
 - Then the children go scurrying down the hall to their rooms...
 - Now we knew the room was messy, and we weren't going to look because we were unsure of what we would find
 - We had a different purpose in mind, and the statement – though it was true – was more designed to influence behavior
 - I think my wife has taken this technique a bit too far – I recently heard “I have a treat for anyone who has mowed the lawn
 - Similarly, God knew what he would find in Sodom, but He wanted Abraham to share in his plans so that he might join in the work God had planned
 - Now, imagine Abraham's reaction to God's words
 - He knows Sodom is desperately wicked– after all, if the city's reputation is so bad that it reached all the way to heaven, certainly it reached Abraham only a few miles away
 - And even today, we use the term “Sodom and Gomorrah” to describe an incredibly sinful place
 - Abraham also knows that his nephew Lot is still living there
 - So, as Abraham considers the situation, two things are immediately obvious to Abraham – this city is sunk and Lot is going down with the ship
 - And he responds with one of the most dramatic examples of prayer given in the Bible –

- And make no mistake this is prayer; a petition placed before the Lord by a man desiring God's favor
- And it offers one of the clearest pictures of how prayer works that we can find anywhere – one that demonstrates the purpose of praying to a sovereign loving God

Gen. 18:23 Abraham came near and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

Gen. 18:24 “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?”

Gen. 18:25 “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

Gen. 18:26 So the LORD said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.”

Gen. 18:27 And Abraham replied, “Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes.

Gen. 18:28 “Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?” And He said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.”

Gen. 18:29 He spoke to Him yet again and said, “Suppose forty are found there?” And He said, “I will not do it on account of the forty.”

Gen. 18:30 Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?” And He said, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

Gen. 18:31 And he said, “Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?” And He said, “I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.”

Gen. 18:32 Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?” And He said, “I will not destroy it on account of the ten.”

Gen. 18:33 As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place.

- Abraham is quite the negotiator, isn't he?
- He looks for a way to engage God and he begins the proper way – appealing to God's character and nature
 - God will never act against His holy and perfect nature
 - If we ask Him to, we are guaranteed to see our prayer fall on deaf ears
 - So Abraham seeks God's will by appealing to His nature in a proper way – he appeals to God's perfect mercy and justice by asking if God would indeed destroy the wicked and the righteous?
 - And the obvious answer is no

- God will preserve the righteous and judge the unrighteous – the righteous being those who have faith, of course
 - 2 Peter also declares that this story is proof that God does exactly that – saves the righteous while keeping the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment
- Next, Abraham begins to do his best Monty Hall imitation by bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom
 - He begins with 50, then 40, then 30, then 20 and finally 10.
 - What's he doing here?
 - Does he really care for the city of Sodom? Does he want it saved?
 - Certainly not, and if truth be told, he probably would prefer it be destroyed
 - What does he care about? Lot and his family!
 - But yet what does he pray for? – The city of Sodom – so he bargains for God's pardon
- Abraham fears that the only righteous in the city might be Lot and his family and perhaps a few more – after all if Lot only had a little impact in the culture of Sodom there ought to be a few more righteous in the city, right?
 - In fact, when the angels arrive, they find Lot city in the gate, a position of prominence
 - Abraham must have known how powerful and important Lot had become in the city – surely he had witnessed about the true living God to a few people? So 10 should be enough to ensure the city would be saved
- God agrees to Abraham's proposal...so did Abraham change God's mind?
 - Well, we need to jump to the end of the story to see that answer, but before we do, we should ask why did Abraham stop at 10? Abraham stopped asking before God stopped agreeing...
- Well, the angels proceed to visit the city and sure enough, they find exactly what they expected to find – great depravity, so great that the city's destruction is assured
 - So the angels warn Lot to leave and avoid destruction
 - They give Lot one night to convince his wife, his daughters and future sons-in-laws to leave with him
 - We pick up the story in Chapter 19, verse 15

Gen. 19:15 When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.”

Gen. 19:16 But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city.

Gen. 19:17 When they had brought them outside, one said, “Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away.”

- How sad that a righteous man like Lot would be so attracted to the world that he would hesitate to leave even though his death was certain if he remained
- Why are the angels helping Lot? God never mentioned that He would help Lot nor did Abraham ever mention Lot or his family
 - Because just as Peter explained, God knows how to rescue the righteous from temptation
 - Lot couldn't compel himself to leave because he was tempted to stay – tempted by the world in Sodom – its pleasures and riches and comforts
 - But the angels removed him from that temptation – they placed him outside the city away from the temptation – yet he was still in harm's way
 - He and his family were not yet safe – if they didn't run they would still perish – as his wife later does
 - God will remove your temptations, but then He still directs us to take steps to leave our sin – to escape its danger and follow Him to safety
- But back to the issue of prayer...did Abraham's prayer work?
 - Well, consider what Abraham prayed for...that the city would be saved if 10 righteous were found
 - Only 4 were found and the city was destroyed...God gave Abraham exactly what he asked for
 - And yet God's plan to destroy the city came about exactly as planned
 - Good job Abraham
 - But wait...what did Abraham want?
 - He wanted Lot and his family saved – but he never asked for that – and yet that's what God gave him
 - Remember that God knows what we want even before we ask – and even if we don't ask for the right thing!
 - And God's character required that Lot and his family be saved, as Peter taught us in his letter, regardless of whether Abraham asked or not
 - So what did Abraham's prayer accomplish
- Through prayer, God bent Abraham's will, rather than Abraham bending God's will
 - God did everything He planned to do, everything He promised to do and everything that His perfect nature required that He do
 - And He also gave Abraham exactly what he wanted because what he wanted was consistent with God's will
 - And how did Abraham know God's will? Because God purposed to reveal it to him and set about circumstances so that Abraham would respond in His Will
 - And God does all of this to train us up in His ways while ensuring that He receives all the glory as He rightly deserves
- When Jesus gave us the model for prayer in Matthew 6, He began this way:
 - Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed by Your name, Your kingdom come , your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

- Those are declarative statements. They are not requests. They are wishful thinking. They are facts. Jesus says pray this way because those things are true
- The first request doesn't come until "Give us this day"...give us only what we need
- Our first request in pray should be to see God's will be done, and therefore we seek to know it so we may request it
 - And God is so gracious and so loving that he will reveal His will to those who love Him and desire to know it, so that we may seek it and in seeking it and having seen it realized, we will give Him glory for it
 - For only those things in His will can He grant us
- Had Abraham prayed for God to spare the city forever, He would not have seen his prayer answered successfully, because to grant that prayer God would have to deny his very character by not judging unrighteousness
- When you take time to examine the many verses related to prayer, you'll find this common quality to each of them – our prayers must be offered in the faith that knows we are already operating within God's will

John 14:13 "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

John 14:14 "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it."

- To ask something in the name of another person was a very specific concept in the Far East, especially in ancient times
 - It meant you were standing in for the person you represented, speaking on their behalf, with their full authority and permission
 - And you were able to do this thing – to speak in their name – because you knew them so well that you knew their thoughts and intentions and you had received their specific direction on how to speak
 - It was as if they were you, so naturally anything you said would be honored by the one you represented
- If you are ask in the name of Jesus, it isn't just that you add his name to a sentence – it means you added him to your life
- So often we forget that our life on this earth – including our prayer life – should exist for His glory and to do His will
 - And especially when God answers our prayers – the very prayers He gave us through His Holy Spirit and through circumstances – it is often in these circumstances that we are so quick to steal some of his glory
 - Like the child who helps his father fix the car...