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Lord, teach us to pray!
Message no. 2

PRAYING TO A SOVEREIGN GOD

Introduction

When Jesus talked about prayer, he didn't leave us with "fast food", something instant that we just had to apply, ready-made. He left us rather with corn to grind. Corn to grind for action: we each have to find the way to bring prayer into our lives and our personal circumstances. Corn to grind for thought: we have to work, to reflect, in order to develop a right understanding of prayer, based on His teaching.

Let's take for example His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "*When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" (Matt 6: 7-8)

How do we apply this "Your Father knows"? Why tell Him what He already knows? What's the point in asking, if He already knows "what we need"? His knowing is not just knowledge but it also includes the decision that needs to be taken. What is the meaning of our praying to a God who knows everything, who decides everything?

But let's continue to follow Jesus' teaching: "*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*" (Luke 18: 1) The parable tells us of an unjust judge being pestered by a poor widow, and who responds because of her persistence. Other questions arise here: What is the point in persisting if God knows and is sovereign in deciding? What does it mean, this picture of a judge who takes first one attitude, then another? Can our prayers make God change His mind, or His behaviour?

All this raises the question of the purpose and the effectiveness of prayer. Does prayer do any good, if God "*works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*" (Eph 1:11)? What happens if I don't pray?

If everything depends on human responsibility, we know why we pray. We reach out, full of excitement at all the things that could change. It is with this feeling that some writers encourage us to pray without giving in to "Christian fatalism": "And God changed his mind..."¹

However, if we understand that "*God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will*", it is hard to see the point of prayer. Don Carson notes that it isn't unusual for an understanding of God's sovereignty to have, as its first consequence, "a weakening of one's prayer life". He adds: "It was my own experience, not because of the doctrine itself, but because of my inability to make it fit with the other teachings of the Bible".²

We have to add to this all the reasons that we find in any case not to pray. The teaching about God's sovereignty can also be called upon as an excuse for our spiritual laziness.

¹ Title of a book by Brother Andrew (Open Doors Publications, 1992).

² Don Carson, A Call to Spiritual Renewal (Excelsis, 2005) p.167.

How can we go forward, then, amidst so many pitfalls?

1. The language of the Bible

It is useful to start by setting out some guidelines in the area of biblical language and the claims of Scripture. That is always a wise beginning, to know which pieces of the puzzle need adjusting, and to work out which way to go and which way not to go.

There are many texts which speak of God's sovereignty.

Eph 1:11; *"God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."*

Ps 115: 2-3: *"Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him."*

God's will goes into the details: it even concerns *"the smallest sparrow that falls to the ground"* (Matthew 10: 29)

Man's life is equally important: *"I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps."* (Jer. 10: 23)

The Bible also encourages us to get fully involved in prayer. It commands, urges, gives examples.

We are invited to "make known" our requests to God, by prayer, petition and thanksgiving (Phil. 4: 6)

This prayer is described like an action which is effective: it is a way of "struggling" to obtain certain outcomes (Rom 15: 30-32). The context implies a real participation in the battle, not just fighting with oneself.

Several times Paul asks people to pray for him, with a definite expectation of a consequence of the prayer: *"Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel"* (Eph 6: 19, see also 2 Cor. 1: 11, Phil. 1: 19).

The effectiveness of prayer is insisted on: *"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective"* (James 5: 16); *"I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers"* (Phm 1: 22, see also 2 Cor. 1: 11; Phil: 1: 19).

God Himself describes Himself as seeking intercessors: *"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it, but I found none."* (Ezek 22: 30). Contrast the attitude of Amos who pleads for the people, and God relents of the judgement He had announced (Amos 7: 2, 5; God's response 7: 3, 6) with that of the false prophets who don't plead, and judgement falls (Ezek. 13: 5).³

And there are many examples of effective prayers of intercession: Moses (Ex. 32: 12-14), Daniel (Dan 9: 23), Jesus (Luke 10: 18; Luke 22: 31-32).

³ This contrast is drawn out by Carson, p. 186

2. **Prayer acknowledges God's sovereignty**

It would be a mistake only to consider the link between prayer and God's sovereignty as a problem. For the simplest prayer depends on God's sovereignty. In itself, the act of praying is an admission of God's sovereignty.

1. Let's consider a *simple prayer*: "Grant that I will be successful in that job application." This assumes that God is able to work on the outlook, the intelligence, the decision of a certain number of people, including some who are not His children. It is meaningless unless God is able to create a convergence between a request and a situation and to direct the course of things. We often think of God's action in a direct and immediate way: "God speaks, the thing exists." But reality is different: in general, the granting of a request requires a collection of actions by God, starting with the present realities and persons.⁴
2. Prayer for *other people* implies, at the same time, that God is sovereign, that He works in people in their motives and their most intimate feelings (see Eph 1: 16-18). Prayer for someone's conversion assumes that God is able to work in the very heart of a person.
3. *The very attitude of prayer*, if taken seriously, is an affirmation of God's sovereignty, for praying is to put oneself on a lower level, asking God to act. Sometimes prayer has to mean abandoning oneself totally to His sovereignty: "You are my only hope". Even when we consider our involvement in prayer, we must keep an awareness of the contrast between the part played by our words and the part played by God's own actions. We can "cry out" to God, asking urgently: the intensity of our prayer shows the intensity of what God must do, not the power of our own words!⁵

3. **Prayer is in conformity with God's sovereignty**

Prayer does not justify itself. Its legitimacy only comes from this God who invites us to pray and to seek Him. "Prayer is legitimate because God commands it on certain conditions and in certain circumstances, allows it in other circumstances, and forbids it in others."⁶

Prayer is *commanded and encouraged*: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matt 26: 41); "keep on praying for all the saints" (Eph 6: 18); "Pray... for everyone" (1 Tim 2: 1-4); "Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always" (Ps 105: 4); "Present your requests to God" (Phil 4: 6).

Prayer is also *limited*: "So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them;

⁴ Some prayers express this need of convergence : "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you." (1 Thess 3: 11)

⁵ Here we must place in its biblical context the "prayer of authority", which says, "Lord, do this". We don't find it just like that in the Bible, and that should be a warning to us. Words of authority are pronounced "in the name of Jesus", referring to His words or promises. The danger of such prayers is to reverse the roles and give power to human words. God, in His grace, wants to answer such prayers, when He discerns faith. But it is better to express our commitment in faith without giving the impression that our word commands God's actions.

⁶ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP, 1993), p.153

do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.” (Jer 7: 16 compare 11:4, 14: 11). Certain prayers are forbidden, such as those which “test God”, placing oneself in an impossible situation so as to “force” God to intervene (Deut 6: 16; Matt 4: 7).

Prayer is not a “natural human right”.⁷ It is a privilege, granted and given its context by the Lord.

4. Prayer is written into our encounters with the sovereign God

Prayer is written into our encounters with the sovereign God. It is always a request of God, respecting His otherness, His person and His will.

4.1. Prayer addresses a God who is distinct from us, and free He hears our prayer, He is attentive to our cries. But He responds according to His own will. He is never bound by our demands: He grants His response, in freedom. Humility and submission are essential on our part. This dimension of humility is found everywhere in the Bible, even in the boldest and most urgent prayers (Gen 18: 22-33; Job; Acts 4: 23-31). Never, in Scripture, is God an instrument, at the service of “our” will, “our” faith, “our” word. True boldness is exercised within the framework of this acknowledgement of God’s freedom of action.

This is what distinguishes prayer from “magic”: magic possesses its own power in the magical act itself.

Paul Helm reminds us that we should not consider God’s thoughts as a “blank slate” waiting to have our requests written on it. The Lord already has His own thoughts when we approach Him.⁸

4.2. In our encounters with God, prayer must aim at a convergence between God’s will and ours. We have the freedom to “make our requests known” (Phil 4: 6). But the aim is to enable us to be conformed to God: “Your will be done” (Matthew 26: 39, 42, compare 6: 9-10). The most telling example is that of Jesus in Gethsemane. In a demanding and costly situation, he applies the first part of the Lord’s Prayer. But there is no resignation there, no giving up. In this prayer, Jesus voluntarily enters into His Father’s plan. He commits Himself to it, in a responsible and accepting way. He asks for a final synthesis between what He feels, what He dreads, what He knows of God’s plan, His love for the Father, His confidence in Him. The letter to the Hebrews makes of this prayer an authentic sacrifice, and emphasises that it was answered because of His respectful attitude (Heb 5: 7-10).

Another way of entering into God’s will in prayer is to bring into it the words of God, His promises, His commands (compare Acts 4: 23-31).

4.3. The encounter of prayer is a relationship in which we are built up. In this dialogue, something happens: we open ourselves to God’s will, the stakes are clarified, we discern what God wants of us, a work is done in us. The presence of God is a reality: we are strengthened, renewed internally, to do His will. Don’t let us ever reduce prayer just to a means of obtaining something: we ourselves need to be transformed by it. “Her face was no

⁷ Helm, p. 153

⁸ Helm, p. 159

longer downcast”, it was said of Hannah after she had drawn near to God (1 Sam 1: 18). An encounter with the sovereign God is not crushing: it always leaves space for a transforming relationship.

5. The effectiveness of prayer

“The prayer⁹ of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5: 16). How can we take account of this statement when we admit the sovereignty of God? Does prayer really change the course of events? What does it bring to the scene that God has decided?

Another way to ask the question is to ask what happens if I don’t pray. Does that make a difference? Or is God’s will done in any case?

5.1 How effective is it?

What we have already said refers to the first effect: prayer transforms us. It enables us to go forward. That is often an essential aspect of the problem. That is often our primary need, when we bring a problem to God: we need a new way of understanding things. As He transforms us, God brings that which will enable the problem to be resolved. A certain number of “mountains” before us are no longer obstacles, because God has renewed us, in prayer, giving us the resources to climb them.

But we can’t limit the effectiveness of prayer to the transformation of the one who is praying. Some prayers require specific interventions by God. To speak of effectiveness must mean *in relation to what has been asked*. In this sense, the effectiveness of prayer means that “certain things only happen because there has been prayer”.¹⁰

5.2 Effectiveness versus sovereignty

Some people, in order to emphasise the effectiveness of prayer, minimise the sovereignty of God.

SEPARATE DOMAINS OF RESPONSIBILITY

The commonest form of language is that which speaks, in everything, of “God’s part” and “man’s part”. There is a distinction between the areas for which each is responsible. God does His part if we do ours. If we pray with enough faith, fervency and perseverance, God will act. Otherwise His work will not be done because we haven’t done our part. In that way, human responsibility is emphasised.

Therefore we have to mobilise our efforts and our commitment to get God’s power to work. It is our faith which counts most: all that we ask for with faith, we will get. Some even speak of a kind of effectiveness that prayer has in itself, as a word of power, effectiveness, authority.

In this view of things, God “adapts” His actions to our requests. God certainly “*sees ahead*”, by his foreknowledge; but He sees in advance what *we* are going to ask for. The decisive factor, in this view of things, is our action, our prayer, our faith, our perseverance. That is what sets God’s power in motion and steers it.

What are the consequences of this view of “shared domains”?

⁹ the fervent, or active prayer

¹⁰ Helm, *The Providence of God*, p. 146

5.2.1. The sovereignty of God is limited, at least in part In “our” domain, God adapts His actions to our intervention. He “submits” His actions to ours. He is certainly all-powerful to act and intervene. But He chooses only to do so on the basis of our own involvement. The theological consequences: God’s power is entire, and unlimited, but His sovereignty is voluntarily limited.

We have to recognise that that affects whole areas of reality. “There is no revival because Christians aren’t praying for revival!” If there was more urgency in praying for the lost, many more people would be saved! If we prayed more for persecuted Christians, we would see some amazing deliverances! All that is strongly determined by human involvement in prayer. This raises the question of the consistency of God’s plan, as a whole, since He is so dependent on human decisions.

5.2.2. A very heavy burden rests on the shoulders of the intercessor: if, in a given situation, evil is not overcome, or the desired outcome is not obtained, it is because he didn’t pray with enough zeal, or faith, or perseverance. We know what damage this kind of explanation can do when healing has been promised and doesn’t happen. One of the other difficulties of this kind of argument is that it has no end or limit: we can say about anything that it would have been different if people had prayed more. The weight of the whole of reality can in the end fall upon the intercession of God’s people.

Whom do we blame for Auschwitz? We could say, from this point of view, that once the reality of the camps was known by Christians, the blame for the continuation of the atrocities can’t be laid on God or on the Nazis, but on the number of potential intercessors who failed to take prayer to heart.

OPEN THEISM

Over recent years, the notion of “open theism” has been offering a more radical view of the limitation to God’s sovereignty.¹¹ This states that God is voluntarily limited, leaving room for human freedom. He is all-powerful, but He “voluntarily limits the exercise of His power” in relation to his free creatures.¹² God does not impose an eternal and unchangeable plan: rather, He chooses to act in response to what His creatures are and do. He accomplishes his plans “*ad hoc*”, taking into account the situation: “if Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B”.¹³ His omnipotence is redefined: “We should not define omnipotence as being the power to decide everything, but rather as the power which makes God capable of dealing with whatever situation arises.”¹⁴

In the same way, God’s omniscience is rationalised. One can see that God’s foreknowledge is incompatible with an absolute definition of human freedom, so the exercise of this foreknowledge is limited: “To respect the integrity of human freedom and not interfere with its exercise, God often seems to limit His knowledge of human actions as if He enveloped them

¹¹ See the collective work, Clark, Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God, A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (IVP, 1994, 202pp)

¹² Pinnock, Clark, *The Openness of God*, p. 112

¹³ Pinnock, Clark, *The Openness of God*, p. 113

¹⁴ Pinnock, Clark, *The Openness of God*, p. 114

in a bubble of non-interference, thus sheltering them from His omniscience.”¹⁵ Bilézikian speaks of “voluntary limitation”. Others hold an even more radical position: “Philosophically, if choices are real and if freedom has any meaning, future decisions can’t be exhaustively known in advance.” In other words, “God knows everything that can be known – but God’s knowledge does not include that which has not been decided”.¹⁶ Could He be taken unawares? They do put a limit on this: God knows everything He needs to know in order to be able to deal with whatever situation may arise.

In this open view, the prayer of faith and perseverance seem to acquire a real power to direct the course of things, and to lead the Lord to modify His plans. But the Lord does not have the possibility of opposing His creatures’ freedom in order to carry out His plans. Prayer loses in divine power what it seems to gain in human potential.

Let us remember, in the face of this reconstruction, some basic statements of Scripture. (1) “The Lord reigns!” This is the central theme of many of the Psalms; (2) God directs the history of the nations (Is. 45: 1-15): the oracle insists several times: “I act, raise up ...”; (3) God presents Himself as the one who “commands” and the thing “is” (Ps 33: 9); (4) Scripture proclaims that God’s plans stand, in spite of all man’s plans (Prov. 19: 21); (5) God “resists” the proud and opposes their designs: when Pharaoh’s hardness of heart was announced, it wasn’t God who adapted to Pharaoh’s will, but Pharaoh who entered into what God had decided; (6) God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1: 11): the source of God’s action is in Himself with regard to “everything”.

In these two approaches described above, God’s sovereignty is limited. Human freedom plays an absolute role. God submits to it, in a way, or limits Himself in order to respect it.

5.3 Effectiveness within God’s sovereignty

When we consider biblical language, the outline is much more all-encompassing. This is not man’s freedom against God’s sovereignty, in a wrestling-match, or a sharing out of responsibilities. But what the Bible shows us is men fully committed in their actions, with motives, initiatives, perseverance, real choices ... and who, as they act in this way, are contributing to the accomplishment of God’s plan.

How to formulate this

To sum this up in a formula: “Man’s freedom exists within God’s freedom”. God carries out His plans using the free choices of humans, in the full exercise of the abilities and the decisions of those who act.

Another formula: God is at once sovereign and personal.¹⁷ God is sovereign: He decides His plan, of His own initiative and according to His free choice, and carries out this plan according to His power and the means He has chosen in advance. God is personal: He communicates with us, enters into an interaction with us and with the world, while remaining free and transcendent.

This view, which refuses to oppose God’s sovereignty and human responsibility is often called “compatibilism”.

¹⁵ Bilézikian, Gilbert, *Elementaire, mon cher Théo!* (Farel, 2004), p. 36

¹⁶ Pinnock, Clark, *The Openness of God*, p. 123

¹⁷ A formula suggested by Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Renewal*, title of chapter 9

Some needed redefinitions

This way of looking at things needs some explanations.

5.3.1. It is important to define human freedom correctly. It exists but should not be defined as being absolute. It is a gift given to man as a creature. It remains at the level of the creature. Freedom is often defined as “the absolute power of opposites”: there is only freedom if it is possible to do one thing or to do the opposite. If freedom is the “absolute” power of opposites, then by definition there can be no predetermination by God, nor even foreknowledge on the part of God.

We therefore need, in the biblical perspective, another definition of freedom: a free action is one that we choose to make, voluntarily, in a responsible manner. Thus we can define a “spontaneous freedom”.¹⁸

Many philosophers adopt a more “humble” definition of freedom, remembering that it is always set within a certain context, which can include conditioning and limits of many kinds. We must remember that, philosophically, many thinkers deny human freedom because of the power of conditioning (behaviourism, psychoanalysis, marxism, neuro-sciences of man and his behaviour).

5.3.2. It is important to realise God’s ability to integrate freedoms into the realisation of His plans. The Lord has such an intimate knowledge of things and such mastery that He is able to cause free wills to accomplish His plans, in the exercise of their freedom. Where we would have to make someone into a “robot” if we wanted them to do what we envisaged, God has the ability to involve people in the full exercise of their choices, motives and actions.

Several biblical examples illustrate this. In the story of Joseph, God’s plan, announced in advance through Joseph’s dreams, is accomplished. But that happens through a whole series of responsible actions, good and bad, carried out by all kinds of people.¹⁹ No-one is made into a robot. Each one acts freely and spontaneously. The death of Jesus, again, was the centre of God’s plan. But each of the actors who contribute to it is fully responsible and acts according to his own choices and means.

Explanations

Some principles of God’s actions can help us to grasp the compatibility of prayer and God’s sovereignty.

1. God uses secondary causes which are effective Why does such and such a thing happen? The “first cause” is that it is written in God’s plan, for He has commanded the whole thing. How does this plan of God’s come to pass? The Lord can intervene directly: such an intervention would be another “first cause”. But He can also use created realities: nature, man, circumstances. In that case He uses “secondary causes”. They act on a particular aspect of reality. Together with the others, they create a situation within which a

¹⁸ cf Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, IVP, 1993

¹⁹ Those who have a role in the story are: a father given to favouritism; brothers who give in to jealousy; merchants doing their work; the desire and lies of a woman angry that she couldn’t manage to seduce Joseph; Joseph’s loyalty to God and to his master; the positive attitude of Joseph while unjustly imprisoned; Pharaoh’s decision to throw his cupbearer and baker into prison; the wisdom and faithfulness of Joseph in explaining their dreams; Joseph being remembered by the cupbearer after months of being forgotten...

person will act, or react.

In the story of Joseph, a series of secondary causes is found at the level of his brothers and their hatred; another series at the level of the Amalekite merchants; the conjunction of these causes creates a new cause which moves the story forward...

Prayer comes into this collection of secondary causes which bring about an event or a situation. If Joseph prayed in his well, this prayer is one of the causes which brought about the development of events, just as did the hatred of his brothers.

2. God determines the means along with the ends. As He exercises His sovereignty, God sets the objectives. But He brings in at the same time the means which will bring about these aims. The two are bound together. Our prayer is therefore, from the time when God formulated His plan, one of the means He appointed to bring about His plans.

This is what permits us to get fully involved. Prayer is the means appointed by God! It is the motorway on which we can engage ourselves fully, without hesitation. At another time, it will be by action. In this view of things, prayer is effective because God has determined to use it to accomplish His plan. It is one of the "links in the chain".

So there is no opposition in principle between "sovereignty of God" and "effectiveness of prayer". On the contrary, God's sovereignty legitimises fully the effectiveness of prayer and gives it a basis on which to work.

The difficulty is that, seen from above, that can look like something very inflexible. Everything has its place, linked in advance to what goes before it and what follows it. How can we speak of spontaneity or freedom?

It can help to draw a comparison with our view of history. When we look at a section of history from this end, we only see the final line that is traced and it can all seem inflexible. But if we take the time to consider the same section of history, not starting at the end but looking at how it took its course, each act can be seen in its place with all its significance: it contains choices, uncertainties, motives which carried it along; it holds within it a whole potential which develops progressively. It is the same with God's plan. We have to think of it in the dynamic of its working out. When God chooses to include my action, or my prayer, that is something I have to do. The action that God includes is full of all that it carries within it, and in what it is called on to give. It is like a computer program that we download – it is in the computer but it will not give up all that it contains until we activate it. In the same way, what God includes in His plan remains full of potential until the time when it is put into action. The spontaneity, the richness of the action, are thus preserved. This is because, in biblical thought, God enhances the value of time, even as He controls it.²⁰

6. The God who shares

Why does God want us to pray? Why does He invite us to ask Him to fulfill His plan? Why does He invite us to battle, with our feeble resources, so that His plan is carried out?

The key is not simply in the effectiveness of prayer. He knows how to order things, without our aid, so that the desired outcome happens.

²⁰ This is why it is important to emphasise that, for God, the progress of time does have meaning. Our time is analogous with God's time which is the free unfolding of His being.

The key is in sharing. Prayer is grace. It shows that God wants us to be partners with Him. Abraham's prayer of intercession reveals this in an extraordinary way. It all starts with a word of grace and of sharing from the Lord: "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?*", He says at the moment when He prepares to "go down and see" the reality of Sodom. God wants Abraham as a partner in His concern for justice and righteousness, in His will to be merciful as far as He can...

Not only is prayer grace, but the effectiveness of prayer is grace: it means that God chooses to "suspend" His action until we take it to heart, to ask Him for it, not only as "His" will but also as "ours". There are elements in His plan that God will not unleash until they are part of "our" plans. That shows, in an amazing way, a God who shares.

In this partnership there is more than a question of effectiveness. It is about a relationship. We take to heart what God has on His heart. We live with Him that seeking after what is good, what is "according to His will". We join together sometimes one with another to take to our hearts a situation or a person. That is something beautiful, something good. It rejoices God's heart, and ours too. Bonds are forged in this relationship and in this battle.

"I looked for a man among them who would stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it" (Ezek 22: 30). That doesn't mean that God needs an army of warriors, who plead so earnestly that He can't not give them what they want. No! God is the One who is concerned not to destroy His people: He so longs for someone to share His concern, someone who will take to heart what He has on His own heart. It is a desire for harmony, for sharing, which is expressed here. In the same way, praying for persecuted Christians isn't aimed at hassling God so that eventually He does something. The key is different: God loves to see a part of His Body joining together on behalf of another part which is suffering.

The man who prays according to God's will, in order to enter into His plans, is the man "in the image of God": he lines up his intelligence, his will and his heart with what God wants, intends and loves. When you think about it, this is infinitely moving: our idea of things is so limited, but God wants to use it, not override it.

At the same time, prayer has this characteristic that it is at one and the same time action and entrusting the action to God. I engage in prayer, and I ask God to act...

What will be the key to effective prayer? It is a deep complicity. The more there is a mutual knowledge, respect and sensitivity towards another, a mutual understanding and closeness in thought, the more we are on the same wavelength. The more a relationship is stable, strengthened by this mutual understanding, the more in tune we are, while acting in freedom and without constraint!

7. And if I don't pray?

What happens if I don't pray? We have to consider this question if we want a balanced view of prayer. But we can't answer it in a uniform way [there is more than one answer].

7.1. God chooses to give certain things only in response to prayer. James 1: 5 says it about wisdom. We have to say here that if we don't ask, or if we ask wrongly, we won't get. There is real spiritual poverty for the one who doesn't pray. Let us remember that we can be in different places in God's plan – not all the vessels in a house have the same use. Prayer can be an element in this differentiation, as we pray either more or less.

7.2. God includes a bundle of means in order to accomplish certain objectives: He frequently includes the united prayer of His people to work on behalf of a person, or to intervene in a situation. If I don't pray, the thing may still come about through the prayers of others. But I won't have been a participant. I won't have taken my place in God's plan.

7.3. God has "destinations" in His plan: in the collection of networks at His disposal, there can be a number of routes to the destination. If I don't pray, perhaps the road to the place that God has appointed for me will be longer, or I will find it more tiring, or I will have to take detours and go through learning experiences. The "destination" will be reached, but not in the same way. And that impacts on other kinds of usefulness.

7.4. Finally, since prayer is a grace where God shares with us but remains sovereign, He has a thousand other means of reaching His goal apart from my prayers. My failure to pray won't stop the Lord from accomplishing something that He has on His heart. If God wants to send revival to my church, He will be able to make it come even if I fail to pray for that revival. "What can hinder His plans?" On the other hand, I will have the shame and sadness of having totally missed this wonderful work of God. I will need to be humbled because of this. I will certainly be less useful than the one who prepared himself spiritually.

Ps 33: 11 "The plans of the LORD stand firm for ever, the purposes of his heart through all generations"

Is 55: 11 "...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

These are several examples to take into account, within the broad diversity of the ways and situations which make up God's plan.

But it is important to give to God what belongs to Him. The burden of directing the world, of realising His great design, rests on His shoulders. It is not right to make it rest on our shoulders as intercessors. Even if the Lord does grant us the grace of being partners with Him.²¹

The Lord is in heaven, and you are on earth...

²¹ Helm, p. 159

APPENDIX

GOD'S "RELENTING"

How do we understand the texts which tell us that, following the prayer of believers, God "relents"?

One telling example is a series of brief texts in Amos (Am 7: 1-3, then 7: 4-6). How do we understand this strong expression: "God relented"?

Some understand it in this way: the Lord "changed his mind". He had intended to punish Israel. Amos prayed. God changed His plans following Amos' prayer. The difficulty of understanding it in this way is that God's sovereignty is downplayed.

Another way to understand it is: "The Lord moves on to another phase of the plan which He had always had..." God's sovereignty is certainly affirmed, but prayer seems like an "alibi" used by a God who draws the lines in His own way.

Another reading considers the overall situations described in the text, taking account of their movement and their succession in time. In the first stage, the only reality is unfaithful Israel, who deserves punishment. God announces this punishment, for it corresponds to the situation in this first stage. In the second stage, Amos intervenes in prayer. The overall situation changes with this new element. God follows His plan by including this new element: so there is a change, which is why the word "relent" is used. But God continues to progress His plan, coherently with the elements that constitute the second stage, including prayer. God does not "change" His plan, but makes it advance in relation to the collection of means which He includes.