

# PERSPECTIVE

FEBRUARY 2022

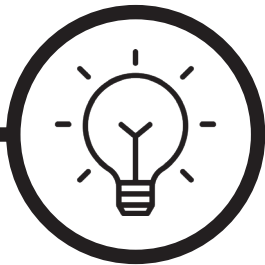


IF GOD IS  
SOVEREIGN,  
WHY PRAY?

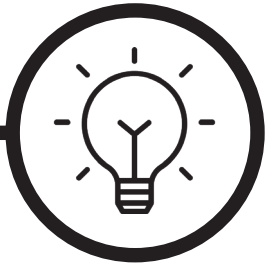
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Jeffrey Timmons



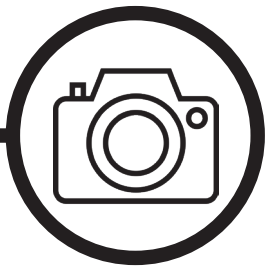
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## If God is Sovereign, Why Pray?

If you have been at MVBC for any length of time, you quickly notice that we have a “big God” theology. By “big God,” I mean the conviction that God ordains everything. And by “everything,” I’m including trivial matters from what I will eat for lunch tomorrow to matters of eternal significance such as who will respond to the gospel in faith when a sermon is preached (Eph. 1:11). God is sovereign over all the affairs of the universe, from the organization of countries for constrained periods of time (Acts 17:26) to the individual decisions of usurping kings (2 Sam. 17:14). In all situations, God “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

Though it’s clear from Scripture God is sovereign over all, this is not an easy concept to understand. We can struggle here, especially since we know that God is completely in control without in any way being the author of evil (James 1:13; 1 John 1:5).

We want to devote ourselves to grow as a praying people this year. We want to be zealous and fervent in prayer that God would act in mighty ways for the spread of the gospel and the honor of his name. However, the question quickly arises, “If God is sovereign, why pray?” More specifically, if God has already ordained everything, including the salvation of some humans and not others, then why should I pray at all? It is tempting to pray haphazardly or to stop praying altogether under the belief that my prayers can neither promote nor thwart God’s sovereign plans. These are good and important questions to wrestle with as Christians. But for those of you who like short articles, I will go ahead and give you the answer to the question, “If God is sovereign, why pray?” I answer, simply put, “because God is sovereign.”

### WE ARE NOT SOVEREIGN

To those who like long articles, let me explain what I mean with an illustration. Before becoming one of your pastors at MVBC, I was a student and a bank teller. For one or two hours a shift, it was my responsibility as a teller to leave my desk, head out to the lobby, and assist customers using the ATMs. Though they looked futuristic and complicated, the ATMs were actually very simple to use. As long as a customer who needed help followed my instructions exactly through the “Deposit” or “Withdrawal” menus, they would quickly deposit or retrieve cash. But sometimes, it wasn’t quite so simple. In fact, every day an ATM had a problem, and often problems I couldn’t fix. Every now and then, a particular denomination was out of stock, and no matter how

much a customer wanted hundred-dollar bills, there was nothing I could do to make the machine spit out their bill of choice. At other times, the ATM ran out of receipt paper. I could assuage a customer that the bank’s internal systems registered their deposit, but that required waiting in line for the next available teller to verify it on their computer. And having to wait for a teller was the exact reason the customer went to the ATM in the first place.

Customers quickly realized the limits of my ability. It’s not that I didn’t know how to perform my job at the ATM. The problem was I’m only a little “sovereign.” I could make simple and routine things work for customers, but not the really hard things. I could utter reassuring words, but I couldn’t change anything in reality. If I had been fully sovereign, I could have helped more customers, dispensed any bill, and overcome any shortage in receipt paper.

Webster’s 1828 dictionary provides the chief usage of the adjective “sovereign”: “Supreme in power; possessing supreme dominion.”<sup>1</sup> When I think about the word “sovereign” in a non-biblical context, my mind goes first to kings and the unilateral authority they possess. America does not have a king, but some other nations do. Only a few weeks ago, I was coordinating with missions partners in the UAE as to when a team from MVBC would meet them. We hoped that our team could spend two Fridays in the Emirates because that was the day their churches were gathering. But early in December, I got the same message from a few partners: the weekend has been changed, and church gatherings were moving to Sundays! The ruler decided that beginning January 1, the weekend would cease to run Friday-Saturday and would switch to Friday afternoon-Sunday. With about three weeks’ notice, the UAE’s king changed the calendar, apparently to align closer with the American and European workweek.

Similarly, about ten years ago, I was in another middle eastern nation, and I remember reading the newspaper one morning and finding myself shocked and in awe at the headline: “Rain and snow to come but Jordan officially cancels winter in the Kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> I didn’t understand the headline, but I knew that I preferred warm to cold weather and was thankful to be in a kingdom that would do something about it! (Apparently, two days before daylight savings time began, the government changed course to come into closer alignment with other Gulf states.) In both instances, these rulers were truly supreme in power over the affairs of their nations.

But God is the only one who is fully sovereign. And as the fully sovereign one, he is authorized to set all the rules. Unlike the rulers of our world, however, his decisions are

not arbitrary and subject to abrupt change for the benefit of the ruler but are in keeping with his perfect and kind character. But perhaps most surprisingly, *God has decided to reign in part through our prayers*. I will provide two examples from Scripture.

As you read through these examples, pay attention to how our sovereign God uses prayers to accomplish his great purposes.

#### GOD USES PRAYER TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES (EXODUS 32-34)

At the exodus out of Egypt, the Lord showed his full authority over Egypt, their gods, and the created order through the plagues. But as Israel came out of Egypt, they quickly rebelled against the Lord by constructing and worshiping the golden calf. In the chapters immediately preceding Exodus 32-34, the Lord was in the process of showing Moses the blueprint for the tabernacle that would soon be under construction in which he would dwell with his people (e.g., 25:40). In fact, it was the Lord's consistent intention that he would accompany his people and dwell with them all along in the book of Exodus. From his commissioning of Moses (3:8, 12) through his causing the Israelites to pass through the sea on dry land (15:13, 17) to the days preceding the people's idolatry (25:40), God planned to dwell in the midst of his delivered people. Nevertheless, the idolatry of the Israelites in worshiping the golden calf had profound consequences. Consider the Lord's words to Moses,

I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you. (32:9-10)

Here we have a dilemma. God has abundantly proved himself sovereign in the book of Exodus: he plagued Egypt, switched off the sunlight in the country for several days, and controlled Pharaoh's own decisions. But God is also holy and cannot leave rebellion against himself unpunished. God also clearly had a plan according to the events described in Exodus 3–25: God purposed to live among his people in the tabernacle. Something clearly has to give. Either God needs to overlook sin by sweeping it under the rug while compromising his holiness to achieve his purposes, or he needs to execute his just judgment but write off his tabernacling plans and break his redemptive promises. Neither is a good option, and both contradict his character and purposes. And the Lord chooses neither of these options.

Instead, the reader of Exodus is immediately met

with someone who, according to God's providence, zealously intercedes. In other words, God solves his dilemma by Moses' prayers. The very paragraph that follows the Lord's threat records Moses' prayers:

But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. (32:11-14)

Moses prays not as a robot programmed to execute God's sovereign decrees but as a servant passionately committed to the interests of his excellent master. When the Lord relents from destroying the nation and rebuilding with Moses, Moses doesn't take a break from his prayers. The consequences of Israel's sin continue to plague their relationship with the Lord, but that was contrary to God's purposes. So what does Moses do in this situation? Does he hedge his bets and stop praying while he's ahead? No, he rather keeps praying boldly:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. *But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.*" (33:1-3)

. . . Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." (33:15-17)

Moses' prayers center on two main premises: his prayers



are according to Scripture (*Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self; 32:13*) and his prayers are for God's glory (*Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'?* 32:12). Moses prays that God would keep both his word to Abraham concerning land and descendants and his plans to live among them so that the Lord and his character, which are great, would be obvious to all the world.

Moses has clearly acted of his own volition. In 32:19, Moses has burning anger in response to the people's sin, and he persists throughout these chapters by voluntarily seeking the Lord. But something else amazing happens to this man who prays for God's will to be done so that God would be known as glorious in the world. The very thing which Moses desired the world to know – God's glory through his presence and fulfillment of promises – he gets a personal and profound taste himself. The God who has been listening to his prayers now responds by ultimately revealing his own glory as a good God who both responds to the prayers of his faithful servants while simultaneously ordaining all things even to the extent of showing mercy exclusively to those whom he desires:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." (33:18-23)

In chapter 34, God renews the covenant with his people, the construction of the tabernacle is resumed (chapters 35-40), and the Lord descends to dwell with his people (40:34ff).

We have come full circle here. The man who prays for God to be known as glorious among the nations himself gets to actually see God's glory. Moses, the one zealous for God to accomplish his promises in redemption actually becomes the means of God redeeming his people. Moses' prayers mattered! The one who fights in prayer for God's purposes that he come and dwell with his people is the one to whom God privately reveals his own tabernacling presence. The

one who fervently prays for mercy for God's people is God's determined means of showing mercy to his own.

To the question, "if God is sovereign, why pray?" part of the answer from Exodus 32-34 is that prayer is the means God chooses to use to accomplish his promises to his people and purposes in the world. But it's more than that. In a very special sense, the one who prays gets God to enjoy for himself.

#### CALLED TO PRAY (JOHN 15:16)

The second example comes from some of Jesus' final words to his disciples in the gospel of John. Jesus gives us reasons to pray even though God is sovereign. According to Jesus, the Father's sovereignty over all things and our responsibility to pray for all things are perfectly compatible. Consider Jesus' words in John 15:16:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

Jesus has an answer to our question, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" He tells his disciples that because God is sovereign, he chose them for himself so that they would be very productive for him (bear much fruit). Furthermore, they are given authorization and motivation to ask from the Father with certainty to be given anything in Jesus' name. Jesus' words here turn our question around. Our Savior provides a profound reason for God's sovereignty which issues forth in our prayers. Jesus is saying that we were chosen to pray. God had mercy on us to bear fruit for him.

"In my name" doesn't mean concluding with "in Jesus' name" at the end of any prayer, but rather communicates praying for Jesus' purposes. In John 14:13, Jesus explains it like this,

And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

Jesus says he will grant the prayers of his disciples, which have as their objective the Father glorifying the Son. Like the disciples who walked with Jesus, we have been called to pray, too!

#### CONCLUSION

It is an all-too-common temptation for me to think that prayer is my private lifeline to heaven so that God will provide me with something I want or need. Yes, in God's kindness, he generously gives us his ear. And yet, Moses

and Jesus have such a loftier view of prayer than this. Moses teaches that prayer is God's means for exercising his sovereignty. Through prayer, believers participate in God's amazing plans. Furthermore, Jesus tells us to pray because God had mercy on us for that very purpose—God has called us to pray. Our prayer is a response to his grace. We are not given the gift of communicating with God primarily to speak with God concerning our wants and needs. Rather, God has decided that we would assist him in ruling the universe by asking him to advance the purposes of his Son in every conceivable way. And it is in that way, the way of prayer, that God gives us the gift of himself.

As you wrestle with your own, personal prayer life in light of God's amazing sovereignty, consider these few principles:

- *First, marvel at the mercy you've received.* There are some things in the Christian life that are hard to understand. One of them I've been writing about in this letter! How is it that the God who somehow ordains all things simultaneously uses our prayers to accomplish his purposes? Perhaps, when you are struggling to understand this mystery, it would be good to marvel at another mystery: God's amazing mercy toward sinners. God's ways are higher than our ways, and that includes his decision to save those who deserve his wrath. When you are struggling with the mystery of God's sovereignty and prayer, lean into the mystery of his mercy toward us.
- *Second, pray for God's plans to be realized as you come across them in your daily bible reading.* God has major purposes in Scripture: his glory, Jesus' name being made known, the salvation of his people, the church's growth in holiness and evangelistic zeal—to name just a few. Our sovereign God will accomplish his purposes. Therefore, whenever you see God's aim for the cosmos (and for our church) in the Bible, pray for God's will to be done! If you are reading one of Paul's letters and you find instructions for the church at Corinth, you can be confident that the same principles ought to be at work in Mount Vernon. Pray that we would glorify Jesus by becoming increasingly faithful to those instructions.
- *Third, remember the incentive to prayer.* If you're like me, your mind can short-circuit as you contemplate just how prayer works: God ordains your voluntary prayers to accomplish his predetermined plans! Please don't take this truth to check out of prayer. Instead, marvel at the sheer wisdom, sovereignty, and power

of God. Remember how Moses labored in prayer for God to fulfill his promises. Like Moses, God has chosen to use you for his glory by commanding you to pray. Let God's promise to answer your faithful prayers be a glorious incentive to keep on praying.

– Jeffrey Timmons

<sup>i</sup> "Sovereign." *American Dictionary of the English Language*. 1828. <http://www.webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sovereign> (January 25, 2022)

<sup>ii</sup> The Jordan Times. (2012, October 25). *Rain and snow to come but Jordan officially cancels winter in the Kingdom*. Albawaba. <https://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/jordan-cancel-winter-448253>

## Prayer: How Praying Shapes the Church

Written by John Onwuchekwa

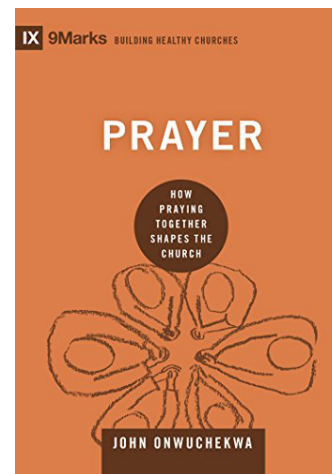
Churches do many things together. Mingled throughout their gatherings and activities is prayer. Without a doubt, prayer is a frequently worn garment of a church's attire. There is, however, a problem John Onwuchekwa, pastor of Cornerstone Church in Atlanta, rightly identifies: "It seems many churches simply don't realize how little they pray together, or how little their prayers reflect the bigheartedness of God" (14). *Prayer: How Praying Shapes the Church* is about "learning how to pray better and more as a church. Just as our private prayer lives can be improved by God's grace, so too can our corporate prayer lives...Of all the books that have been written on prayer, this one has a very specific purpose: examining how prayer shapes the life of the church" (15).

In the first couple of chapters, Onwuchekwa lays the foundation for prayer in the church's life. Prayer should be like "breathing"—it's "basic and vital" (17). Prayer is "calling on God to come through on his promises" (35). Those promises provide gospel hope, and hope leads the church to pray (35). He writes, "If prayer clings to the hope we share in Christ, then prayer should reflect our togetherness in Christ. If prayer has a gospel shape, then by implication it must have a church shape" (37).

Just because prayer is vital doesn't mean it's natural. We need to be taught how to pray. Onwuchekwa walks through the Lord's Prayer in chapters 3-4, drawing out implications for corporate prayer and relationships in the church. Chapter 5, "Roots: A Family Bred," was the most helpful and insightful. He says, "Prayers are our roots. The roots do the hard work of strengthening the tree, but this hard work is hidden work...Praying together is both our strength and our heritage as those who suffer a great deal for faithfulness to God" (67).

*Prayer* was written primarily for church leaders. It explains the importance and practical steps for corporate prayers and for leading prayer meetings. Consider giving a copy to friends or family in ministry. This book is also for you, MVBC member. It will help you better understand how and why we pray different types of prayers on Sunday mornings. Chapters 7–8 may be most instructive for understanding our Sunday evening prayer gatherings. So if you need help understanding and appreciating the necessity of corporate prayer, then you will be helped by *Prayer*.

– RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER



### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"We don't treat prayer like breathing. We treat it like prescription medication meant to rid us of an infection. Once the infection is gone, so is the frequency and fervency of our prayers."  
– Introduction, p. 19

## 2

"Prayer was never meant to be a merely personal exercise with personal benefits, but a discipline that reminds us how we're personally responsible for others. This means that every time we pray, we should actively reject an individualistic mindset. We're not just individuals in relationship with God, but we are part of a community of people who have the same access to God. Prayer is a collective exercise."  
– The World is Yours: A Family Led, p. 41

## 3

"Prayers are our roots. The roots do the hard work of strengthening the tree, but this hard work is hidden work...Praying together is both our strength and our heritage as those who suffer a great deal for faithfulness to God."  
– Roots: A Family Bred, p. 67

## *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*

Written by D.A. Carson

The church faces moral, political, theological, polemical, and missional problems. But one problem that transcends time and culture is the church's ignorance of God. It's strange to say—the church, the religious institution specializing in theology, has a problem knowing God. But think about it. How many so-called problems could be resolved if the church had a deeper knowledge of God?

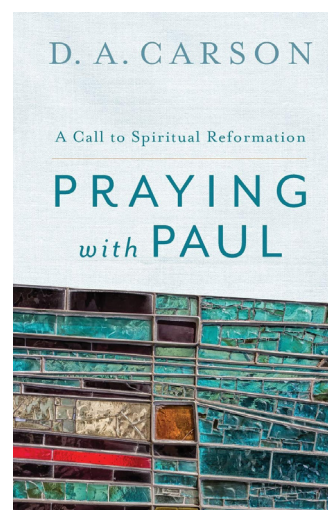
In *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, D. A. Carson says all the church's "urgent needs are symptomatic of [the] far more serious lack" of knowing God. The remedy is spiritual reformation of knowing God better in prayer—"spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer" (xiii). Carson's goal is to "think through some of Paul's prayers, so that we might align our prayer habits with his" (xv). He explains and applies eight of Paul's prayers for the early church recorded in Scripture.

I first read *Praying with Paul* in the early 2000s while in Bible college preparing for ministry. Someone recommended I read Carson's book to help me grow in knowing how to pray Scripture. There are two things from my experience in reading Carson's book for why I encourage you to do the same:

First, Carson's clear and insightful explanation of the Paul's prayers will help you grow. My knowledge of God grew as my knowledge of his Word grew. *Praying with Paul* is basically a Bible study with application on praying. It's a common study resource I use in preparing to teach if one of Paul's prayers is relevant to the lesson.

Second, I learned how to better pray Scripture for others, particularly members I did not know well. I read it when I was having a Copernicium revolution in my understanding of the local church. I was involved in a small church revitalization with growing relationships. But there were many older members who I did not know well, and frankly, they were hard to love. *Praying with Paul* taught me how to pray for them personally as I better as I understood and prayed passages like Ephesians 3:19. That they may "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." I encourage you to do the same for other MVBC members, and Carson's instruction can help.

— RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER



### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"Shall we not agree with J. I. Packer when he writes, 'I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face?'"

— Introduction, p. xiv

## 2

"It is in this sense that Christians must be constantly asking what is best for the people of God. Our allegiance to Jesus Christ, our confession of him as Lord, entails a profound commitment to further his interests... Moreover, if we joyfully confess the lordship of Christ, then when we ask what is best for people, our answers will be cast in terms of what he thinks is best for people, not necessarily what people think is best for themselves."

— Praying for Others, p. 48

## 3

"God is absolutely sovereign, yet his sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility and accountability; human beings are morally responsible creatures, yet this fact in no way jeopardizes the sovereignty of God. At Calvary, all Christians have to concede the truth of these two statements, or they give up their claim to be Christians."

— A Sovereign and Personal God, p. 134



# FEBRUARY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

February 1	2 Kings 22	February 17	Ephesians 2:11-22
February 2	2 Kings 23	February 18	Psalms 136
February 3	2 Kings 24	February 19	Ephesians 3:1-13
February 4	Mark 1:1-20	<b>February 20</b>	<b>Ephesians 3:14-19</b>
February 5	Isaiah 6:1-13	February 21	Jeremiah 8:18-9:11
<b>February 6</b>	<b>Jeremiah 1</b>	February 22	Jeremiah 7
February 7	Jeremiah 2:1-13	February 23	Jeremiah 8
February 8	Jeremiah 2	February 24	Jeremiah 9
February 9	Jeremiah 3-4	February 25	Acts 17:16-33
February 10	Jeremiah 5	February 26	Jeremiah 10
February 11	John 20:1-19	<b>February 27</b>	<b>Jeremiah 8:18-9:11</b>
February 12	Jeremiah 6	February 28	Matthew 4:12-25
<b>February 13</b>	<b>Jeremiah 2:1-13</b>		<b>*Sermons in bold</b>
February 14	Ephesians 3:14-19		
February 15	Ephesians 1:1-23		
February 16	Ephesians 2:1-10		

# TAKE UP & READ

# NEW MEMBERS

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**Nourredine  
Benzid**



**Cherifa  
Benzid**



**Zack  
DiPrima**



**Erin  
DiPrima**



**Hannah  
Hair**



**William  
Manirakiza**



**Sarah  
Reed**



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH