

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and the means of grace God provides to us as we work out our sanctification. Last week we started a discussion on prayer. Dr. Spencer, you pointed out that we are commanded by God to pray. And we also that prayer is a means God has ordained for accomplishing his purposes, so that even though God knows in advance what we will pray, nevertheless, prayer has real power, which is what the Lord's brother, James, tells us in James 5:16, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I want to reinforce the fact that prayer is really and truly powerful. This is not a fiction or a logical contradiction. It is true that God knows exactly what we need and want and that he knows in advance what we will pray for and even how he will answer those prayers. But prayer is, nonetheless, *truly* powerful and effective.

God is the first cause behind everything since he created, sustains and rules everything. But we can't conclude from that observation that secondary causes are unimportant. It is still true, for example, that the force of gravity is what holds us on the ground and what holds the earth in orbit around the sun and so on. God created gravity. He sustains it. He can overrule it if he so desires. All of these things are true, but none of them argue against gravity being a real force. In the same way, prayer is truly powerful.

Marc Roby: And that should cause us all to be more faithful and fervent in our prayers.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should. But now I want to go back to something I said last time.

Marc Roby: And what is that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, you had asked, on behalf of many believers throughout the ages I might add, why it is we should pray given that God knows all things. And I had responded with two reasons. The second one, which we have now finished discussing, was that prayer is truly powerful as a secondary means, or cause, ordained by God. But I put off discussing the first reason because I knew it would take longer. The first reason is given by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as I quoted last time. He wrote that those who argue that it is superfluous to pray because God already knows whatever we are going to pray, "attend not to the end for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not so much for his sake as for ours."<sup>2</sup> And I noted that Calvin is certainly correct here, because we derive great benefit from prayer. So, now I would now like to move on to discuss that point.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, Book III, Chapter 20, Paragraph 3, pg. 564

**Marc Roby: Very well. What benefits do we receive from prayer?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me go back to Calvin himself to answer the question. He lists three benefits that we derive from prayer. First, he writes, “that our heart may always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving, and serving [God], while we accustom ourselves to have recourse to him as a sacred anchor in every necessity”.<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: And if we have a serious and ardent desire of seeking him, God has a wonderful promise for us. He tells us in Jeremiah 29:13, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a glorious promise and, like all of God’s promises, it is true. But we can also point out the Bible’s consistent teaching about God’s divine election. No one will seek God unless and until God first moves to change his heart. That is why God also tells us through the prophet Isaiah, as we read in Isaiah 65:1, “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’” And so both are true, God must first seek us, but anyone who seeks God with his whole heart will find him, and if we find ourselves seeking God, we must truly praise and thank him for first seeking us.

**Marc Roby: We must praise God for his electing love. In the quote you gave, Calvin also said that in prayer we accustom ourselves to have recourse to God as a sacred anchor in every necessity, which is a wonderful way of expressing the firm foundation that we have in union with Jesus Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: It is a good way of expressing it. A good strong anchor properly set will hold a ship fast in a storm, and the promises of God are a firm anchor. In Hebrews Chapter Six the author speaks about this. He talks about God’s promise to Abraham, which was that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. God later reiterated this promise to Abraham’s son Isaac, who was the child of promise miraculously given to Abraham and Sarah when they were well past the age of childbearing. In Genesis 26:4 God said to Isaac, “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed”.

**Marc Roby: And that blessing, first and foremost, is speaking about salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is speaking about salvation. And we are told by Paul in Romans Chapter Four that all true believers are Abraham’s descendants.

**Marc Roby: Which was a shock to the Jews at that time. They believed that they were the chosen people of God simply by virtue of being Jewish. In other words, they thought that election was based on their physical descent from Abraham through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, whom God renamed Israel.**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Dr. Spencer: The Jews did have that misunderstanding. Although, it is true that they are God's chosen people and that salvation comes through the Jews, but salvation doesn't come to any *individual* simply because he or she is Jewish. Paul makes this fact explicit in Romans 9:6-8 where we read that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."

**Marc Roby: And all of us who are non-Jewish believers give a hearty thank you to God for this great promise!**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must thank God. But getting back to Hebrews, we read in Hebrews 6:17-19 that "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." In other words, through God's promise and oath, which are the two unchangeable things that guarantee it is impossible for him to lie, those of us who trust in his promise have a firm hope – not a hope-so, but a certainty. And this certainty, based on God's unchangeable nature and promise, is an anchor for our soul. And, as Calvin says, when we participate in the great privilege of believing prayer, we "accustom ourselves to have recourse to him as a sacred anchor in every necessity".

**Marc Roby: And there is no better anchor. What is the second benefit that Calvin says we receive through prayer?**

Dr. Spencer: He wrote that the second benefit to prayer is that when we pray, "no desires, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make him the witness, may enter our minds"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, when we pray we are made especially mindful of the fact that God is witness to our every thought, imagination and desire. And that will, if we are born again, cause us to be all the more careful to cast out impure thoughts, imaginations and desires. People usually hide in the dark when they are doing things they know they shouldn't do, so prayer is like God shining a light into the dark recesses of our minds. It exposes things we don't want exposed, so we throw them out.

**Marc Roby: And, if we are truly God's children and desire to please him and to strive to be transformed into the image of Christ, we will see that it is good for us to throw out thoughts and desires that don't please God.**

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is good for us. And the third benefit that Calvin says we derive from prayer is, "that we may be prepared to receive all [God's] benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 565

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Marc Roby: Being truly thankful for God's blessings is a great benefit as well as the proper response of a creature who has received those blessings. This also makes me think of the old hymn, "When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord has done."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is very true. If we honestly sit down and list all the blessings God has given to us, it will shame us for ever feeling as though we are put upon or treated unfairly. But before we finish with Calvin's three benefits derived from prayer, I want to point out that he says it is much in our interest to be *constantly* in prayer<sup>7</sup>. In other words, he isn't just thinking about our praying once in a while, he is thinking about benefits that derive from a life of prayer. In other words, a life that is lived in constant awareness of our dependence on God and his gracious goodness in providing for us.

Marc Roby: And that would be a life well lived. Calvin listed three great benefits that we receive from a life of prayer, are there others you would like to mention?

Dr. Spencer: In a sense, yes. Wayne Grudem lists three reasons that God wants us to pray. So, given the fact that we are to glorify God in all that we do, it is certainly beneficial for us to do what God wants us to do. Therefore, you could, I suppose, call these benefits of prayer as well. In any event, no matter what you call them, there are three good reasons to pray.

Marc Roby: Alright. What are the three reasons that Grudem lists?

Dr. Spencer: First, he says that "God wants us to pray because prayer expresses our trust in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase. In fact, perhaps the primary emphasis of the Bible's teaching on prayer is that we are to pray with faith, which means trust or dependence on God."<sup>8</sup> Grudem points out that God's desire to have us trust in him is analogous to a human father's desire for his children to trust in him. He cites Luke 11:13, where Christ said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Marc Roby: And the Holy Spirit is a great gift indeed.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, he is, and the Holy Spirit helps us to pray. There are times in our lives where we may be very discouraged, or distraught over some trouble and we may not know how to pray properly. But we are told in Romans 8:26-27, that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

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<sup>6</sup> *Count Your Blessings*, by Johnson Oatman, Jr., 1897, first verse

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, pg. 564

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 376

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful comfort. We may at times be reduced to mere groaning, but the Holy Spirit dwells in us and intercedes for us in accordance with God's will. What is the second reason Grudem says that God wants us to pray?

Dr. Spencer: He notes that, "God does not only want us to trust him. He also wants us to love him and pray: Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with god, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him."<sup>9</sup>

Marc Roby: That fits perfectly with what we have been saying. We are to have a real relationship with God and all good relationships include two-way communication. So even though God knows our needs and desires, we must spend time speaking with him to maintain that relationship.

Dr. Spencer: Charles Hodge has a great quote I'd like to read about prayer and our relationship with God. He wrote that "As religion, in the subjective sense of the word, is the state of mind induced by the due apprehension of the character of God and of our relation to Him as our Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer; so prayer is the expression, uttered or unuttered, of all the feelings and desires which that state of mind produces or excites. A prayerless man is of necessity, and thoroughly irreligious. There can be no life without activity. As the body is dead when it ceases to act, so the soul that goes not forth in its actions towards God, that lives as though there were no God, is spiritually dead."<sup>10</sup>

Marc Roby: Yes, Hodge makes good sense here. A man who doesn't pray is, in fact, a man without any meaningful religion. He has no relationship with God and is spiritually dead. What is the third reason Grudem gives for God wanting us to pray?

Dr. Spencer: He writes that "God wants us to pray [because] in prayer God allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important. When we pray, the work of the kingdom is advanced. In this way, prayer gives us opportunity to be involved in a significant way in the work of the kingdom and thus gives expression to our greatness as creatures made in God's image."<sup>11</sup>

Marc Roby: That fits perfectly with what you said earlier about prayer being a secondary means, or cause, that God has ordained to use. And Grudem's point is good. We certainly do receive benefit from being allowed by God to participate in his good work.

Dr. Spencer: And the greatest work we should be praying for is that God would use us to save others. He has ordained that salvation usually comes through someone sharing the gospel, which may be in the public preaching of the word or in private witnessing. In Romans 10:13-14 we read that "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 377

<sup>10</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pg. 692

<sup>11</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pg. 377

heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” So, God uses our preaching and our prayers to bring others to faith.

**Marc Roby:** And the opportunities we have to do that come from God. In the very next verse, Romans 10:15, Paul adds, “And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”

Dr. Spencer: And even if we aren’t the ones who personally preach the gospel to a person, our prayers can be part of the cause of their coming to a faith. Paul commanded the believers in Thessalonica, as we are told in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.” And he wrote in Romans 15:30, “I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.”

So, we need to pray for the preacher and for the people who are being preached to. Evangelism is the work of the entire community of believers, not just individuals. We should all be living lives that adorn the gospel and make it attractive, we should all be ready to speak of Christ and give him the glory that is due his name, and we should all be praying for opportunities and the success of the gospel message whenever it goes out.

**Marc Roby:** And there is no greater joy than seeing someone come to Jesus Christ in faith.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great joy. And is often accompanied by significant positive changes in the person’s life as well. Sometimes very dramatic changes. But whatever the circumstances, it also always builds up our faith. We see answers to prayer and we see a clear demonstration of God’s great power.

**Marc Roby:** I agree. And I look forward to continuing this discussion, but this is probably a good place to end for today. Before we sign off, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). And we’ll do our best to answer.