

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, more particularly, the means of grace. We are in the midst of discussing prayer and in previous sessions we have looked at the first five requisites of acceptable prayer according to Charles Hodge: first, sincerity, second reverence, third humility, fourth importunity – or we could say persistence and urgency, and fifth submission to the will of God. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let's move on to discuss the sixth prerequisite according to Hodge, which is faith.<sup>1</sup>

Marc Roby: I have to say that this one sounds so obvious one could reasonably question whether or not it needs to be listed. Why would anyone pray to a God he doesn't believe in?

Dr. Spencer: Hodge means more than just a basic belief in the existence of God. But even that probably needs to be stated. In Hebrews 11:6 we are told that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: I remember that you cited that verse last week.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I did. I used it in the context of discussing humility and I noted that it refers to faith in the *real, living* God of the Bible, not a god of our imagination. But that same point is important here. I think it is all too common for people to say "Oh, I believe in God." But then, when you start talking to them, you find out that their conception of god is anything but biblical. And many of those people pray. But they have no rational basis for believing that their prayers have any good effect. Imaginary gods can't answer prayer.

Marc Roby: Alright, I'll grant you that. So, what specifically does Hodge say we must believe?

Dr. Spencer: He lists four things. He says we must first believe that God is; in other words, that he exists. And, of course, as I just noted, that must refer to the only true and living God, the God of the Bible. Which means that he is the God who created all things out of nothing. The Bible begins by saying, in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Many people who say they believe in God don't believe that. They believe in some kind of power or force in the universe that they call God. But some impersonal force or power can't hear and answer prayers. In order to hear and answer prayers, God must be a volitional, personal being. And this goes along with the second thing Hodge say we must believe, which is that God is *able* to hear and answer our prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pp 703-704

<sup>2</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

Marc Roby: Obviously, God must be a personal being for us to speak with him. He can't be some impersonal force. And, he must have the power necessary to answer prayer or there wouldn't be any rational basis for prayer.

Dr. Spencer: That's obviously true. And the good news is that God *does* have all the power necessary to answer our prayers. You can argue from the greater to the lesser here. If Genesis 1:1 is true, then why would we doubt God's ability to accomplish whatever he desires to accomplish in his created universe? The apostle Paul used this exact argument when he appeared before King Agrippa. We read in Acts 26:8 that Paul asked the rhetorical question, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" His point is absolutely clear. God created the entire universe. He created all living beings. Therefore, he obviously has the power to raise one of his creatures who has died back to life.

Marc Roby: That is a powerful argument.

Dr. Spencer: It is an irrefutable argument I would say. But moving on, the third thing Hodge says we must believe is that God is disposed to answer our prayers.

Marc Roby: And what an amazing thought that is. That the Creator of all things should be disposed to answer the prayers of rebellious, sinful creatures!

Dr. Spencer: It is an amazing thought. And it isn't something that we should assume to be true, but, praise God, he has told us that he is attentive to the prayers of his people, which obviously doesn't just mean that he hears them and then ignores them. He answers them. There is no need for us to assume that he is disposed to answer our prayers, the Bible tells us this is true.

Marc Roby: For one thing, we have God's famous words to Solomon. After Solomon had finished dedicating the temple, God appeared to him at night and we are told in 2 Chronicles 7:14 that God said, "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Dr. Spencer: That is, perhaps, the most famous and comforting statement in the Old Testament about prayer. And it confirms one of the requisites of acceptable prayer according to Hodge, which we have already covered; namely, humility. God says that *if* we will humble ourselves, pray, seek him and turn from wickedness, *then* he will hear, forgive and heal. And in the very next line, in 2 Chronicles 7:15, God told Solomon, "Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place."

But it is important to note that it isn't just prayers offered in the temple in Jerusalem to which God is attentive. In Psalm 34:15 we read, "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry", and there is nothing in the context of the psalm to indicate that these prayers must be offered at the temple in Jerusalem or in any other special place for that matter.

Marc Roby: That shoots down the idea some people have that prayers offered at the wailing wall in Jerusalem are somehow more effective.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that idea has no biblical support at all, although there is certainly nothing wrong with praying at the wailing wall. It is a marvelous piece of evidence for the truth of the Scriptures and it can be a very moving experience to be there. But getting back to the topic at hand, it isn't just the Old Testament that speaks of God being attentive to the prayers of his people.

In 1 Peter 3:12, the apostle quotes from Psalm 34 and writes that "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer". In addition, there are many times in the New Testament when we are told about the effectiveness of prayer. Perhaps most famously we are told in James 5:16 that "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

**Marc Roby: And, of course, Jesus said in Matthew 21:22 that "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."**

Dr. Spencer: That is a very well-known saying, and it is one that has been greatly abused, unfortunately. Jesus didn't list any caveats when he made that statement, but when you put it in the context of the whole of the Bible's teaching, it is clear that he was not saying our faith confers some magic power to our prayers. God isn't a genie in a bottle who is somehow duty-bound to give us whatever we ask for if we have sufficient faith.

**Marc Roby: And yet, Jesus' statement is not just hyperbole or empty rhetoric either.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it most certainly is not. Prayer has power way beyond what we can imagine. And the fourth thing that Hodge says we must believe will lead into a good discussion of this point. He says that we must believe that God certainly will answer our prayers, "if they are consistent with his own wise purposes and with our best good."<sup>3</sup> In other words, our prayers are effective when we pray in God's will.

**Marc Roby: I can imagine some people objecting here and saying that Hodge is eviscerating Jesus' promise. How can my prayers be said to be powerful if they depend on God's will?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, as we noted in an earlier session, prayers are one of the secondary means, or causes, that God has ordained to use. So they truly *are* powerful. But at the same time, God is not giving us a blank check that somehow overrules his sovereignty. If I pray for something that is in opposition to his will, he is not going to answer my prayer in the affirmative. We need to remember one of the rules discussed when we went over biblical hermeneutics; we must use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

**Marc Roby: Yes, in fact, that is the first rule of hermeneutics and is sometimes called the analogy of faith.**

Dr. Spencer: Quite true. And it is important. When one passage is not completely clear or definitive, we need to look at the rest of Scripture to help us understand it. And we must never pit one verse of the Bible against another. God's Word is truth and never contradicts itself. Sometimes we have to work hard to correctly understand what it means. When it comes to

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<sup>3</sup> Hodge, op. cit., pg. 704

prayer, we have some outstanding examples to show us that it does not have absolute power and we have clear teaching about what it is that limits the power of prayer.

**Marc Roby: I think we are going to need to go through some examples to make this point clear.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. To see that the power of believing prayer is not unlimited we can look at the great apostle Paul himself. Surely his prayers were believing prayers. And yet, we are told in 2 Corinthians 12:8 that he pleaded with God three times to take away what Paul called a thorn in his flesh and God said, “No!” The thorn in his flesh referred to some physical ailment that Paul had. We aren’t told exactly what it was, but there is circumstantial evidence that leads many to conclude it was some serious problem with his eyes. In any event, in 2 Corinthians 12:9 we read that God’s response to Paul’s request was ““My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.””

**Marc Roby: I’m confident that that was not the response Paul wanted.**

Dr. Spencer: I’m confident that you’re right about that. But Paul’s response to God was proper, he deduced that God had a good reason for saying “No” and he goes on in that verse to tell us, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” In other words, Paul saw that God was teaching him a lesson in humility and of the power of God’s grace to enable us to not just endure hardship but to prosper and grow as a result of it.

**Marc Roby: Which is an important, but often unpleasant lesson.**

Dr. Spencer: It is almost always unpleasant. But my point right now is that we need to look at the whole of the Bible’s teaching in order to understand it correctly. For example, in James 5:14-15 we are told, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” Now, some people have taken this as an absolute promise from God and have said that when someone isn’t healed as a result of prayer it is an indication that their faith isn’t strong enough. But if that were a correct understanding, then how can you explain Paul’s thorn in the flesh? Are we to believe that his faith was insufficient?

**Marc Roby: I don’t think so. If his faith was insufficient, then the rest of us are really in trouble.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And so we look at these verses in James more carefully and we ask, “What is meant by a ‘prayer offered in faith’?” That is the kind of prayer that we are told will make the sick person well. And if we go back to the previous verse we were looking at, Matthew 21:22, we see that we have the same basic question. That verse says that “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” So, we must ask, “What is meant by ‘if you believe’?”

**Marc Roby: Well, I’m sure many Christians would want to say that it simply means you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord.**

Dr. Spencer: But again, if that were true, then we have the same problem with understanding Paul's situation. Paul certainly believed that Jesus Christ is Lord, so why didn't he receive what he asked for in prayer?

I think the answer lies in realizing that when the Bible says someone believes, or that a prayer is offered in faith, it may be referring to far more than the bare minimum statement that Jesus is Lord. Depending on the context, it may be referring to full-fledged faith, which includes understanding, to some extent, the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God. In other words, such faith includes within it an implicit desire for the perfect will of God to be done. Therefore, if my prayer is not something that I can know for certain is God's will, there is an implicit addition to my prayer that says, in essence, "Please do this *if* it is your will."

**Marc Roby: And that immediately brings to mind the prayer of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, which we discussed last week.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that obviously comes to mind.

**Marc Roby: In Matthew 26:39 we read that Jesus prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."**

Dr. Spencer: And that prayer is recorded for us for a very good reason. Remember that Hodge's fifth requisite for our prayers to be acceptable is our submission to the will of God. As we noted last week, Jesus sincerely desired to not go to the cross. But he desired even more to do the will of the Father because he knew that God's will is always best. And if we truly believe in the fullest sense of that term, we will also know that God's will is what is best and we will, therefore, *want* God to say "No" to any prayer we offer that would be outside of his perfect will.

I like what Hodge wrote here. He said, "It cannot be supposed that God has subjected Himself in the government of the world, or in the dispensation of his gifts, to the shortsighted wisdom of men, by promising, without condition, to do whatever they ask. No rational man could wish this to be the case. He would of his own accord supply the condition, which, from the nature of the case and from the Scriptures themselves, must be understood."<sup>4</sup> And he then cites 1 John 5:14, which says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."

**Marc Roby: And, of course, by saying "he hears us", John means that he does what we ask.**

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what he means. And we have further explicit confirmation of this principle in John 15:7, where Christ told his disciples, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." To understand Jesus' statement, we need to know what it means to "remain in" Christ and what it means for his words to "remain in" us. But when you look at the entire passage it is clear.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

**Marc Roby: And this passage is in the parable of the vine and the branches, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And, for example, later in the passage, in John 15:10 Jesus tells us, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." When you look at the whole passage it is clear that to remain in Jesus and to have his Word remain in us means that we are walking in obedience to his commands. It means that we love him and desire to do the Father's will as Jesus himself did the Father's will.

So, every verse in the Bible that tells us we will receive whatever we ask for in prayer must be interpreted in the light of these verses and others we have not discussed. Whether or not it is explicitly stated, it *always* is implicit that our prayers will be answered if, and only if, they agree with God's will.

**Marc Roby: And, of course, as you noted earlier, God's will is best and if we truly believe in him we will want his will to be done.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And God promised in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose, so I trust, as Paul did, that when God says "No" to one of my prayers, he is acting in my best interests. Any good father says "No" to a child when the child asks for something that isn't good for the child.

For example, if a four-year old sees you working with a dangerous power tool and asks to handle it, the answer is going to be "No!" The child won't like that answer of course, but the child simply doesn't understand what is truly best for him.

**Marc Roby: And it definitely wouldn't be in the best interests of a young child to put a dangerous power tool in his hands.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it obviously wouldn't. Therefore, Hodge is certainly right. Part of the faith we must have for our prayers to be acceptable to God is faith in God's ultimate goodness and wisdom, which means we will want him to deny our prayers whenever he has a plan that is even better.

**Marc Roby: Very well, are we done discussing the requisite of faith?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are.

**Marc Roby: And, if I remember correctly, that means we have one more requisite to cover, right?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the seventh requisite for acceptable prayer is that they be offered in the name of Christ.

**Marc Roby: And I look forward to covering that in our next session. Let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We would love to hear from you.**