



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“Prayer: Does Prayer Change and Unchanging God?”

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures. We are thankful that we have a confidence implanted by the Holy Spirit to call upon Thee in prayer. And to know that Thou doth hear us.

And we pray again as we study the subject of prayer that the Spirit may enlighten us and give us understanding in the things of God. Enable us Lord to appreciate and then to practice the things that we learn. We commit the hour to Thee. We commit each one present to Thee. May the spiritual needs of each one of us be meet through the Scriptures and through Thyself. We pray in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.

[Message] Tonight our subject is: Does Prayer Change an Unchanging God? or Prayer and the Attributes. And for those of you who were here last week, you remember that this is the second in our series on the subject of prayer and the attributes. In fact, it is the last in the series of two. Our last subject was: Why Bother an Infinite Omniscient God of Love? or Prayer and the Attributes. And so this is the continuation and conclusion of that little segment on our series of study on prayer.

In order to locate our thoughts tonight for what we are going to look at, I want to read one passage from the Old Testament on the immutability or unchangeability of God

and then one passage on the unlimited privilege of prayer. So will you turn in your Bibles to Malachi chapter 3, verse 6. That’s the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi chapter 3, verse 6. And when we finish reading this we’ll turn over to John 15, verse 7 for a text there. Malachi chapter 3, verse 6 and I want you to notice again the familiar passage. We studied it when we were studying the attributes, which has to do with the immutability of God. Verse 6, “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.” Particularly the first clause for I the Lord do not change.

Now, John chapter 15, verse 7. John chapter 15, verse 7. In the upper room discourse, Jesus addresses these words to the disciples, John 15:7, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Notice the unlimited nature of this petition as expressed here. I want to say in case there is some misunderstanding and in case we do not attend the session when I try to point this out. While this is unlimited, it is limited by other texts of Scripture such as our prayer is to be in the will of God. “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” That suggests that perhaps we may ask something that might change God.

Now first a few words of introduction tonight as we look at our subject: Does prayer change an unchanging God? In the introductions to the messages that have preceded this one, we have discussed briefly the nature of prayer and we have referred to its duty. I am not sure that we said a whole lot about its reasonableness but in introduction tonight, I want to say just a few words about those aspects of prayer, and first its nature. Let me review something that we have studied before.

You may remember that I commented upon the fact that some have suggested that prayer is nothing but petition. Claiming that the word to pray means simply to ask. And that we should not think of prayer as communion, we should not think of prayer as confession of sin or prayer as thanksgiving, but we should think of prayer simply as petition. But I pointed out that when we turn to the Bible and look at the prayers of the

Bible, those prayers that are called prayers in the word of God, we discover that they are often made up of petition and confession and thanksgiving and praise.

In other words, there are other elements in the prayers that are called prayers in the Bible. And while it might seem by some a very neat statement, it is insisted upon by some that prayer is simply asking. It does not really agree with the facts of the usage of Scripture. The Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian church has defined prayer, therefore, quite accurately as prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

Now you’ll notice the key phrases are it is an offering up of our desires unto God. It is an offering up of things that are agreeable to his will. It is in the name of Christ; we have discussed that. It also includes a confession of sins and thanksgiving, thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

Now let me say a word about the duty of prayer. We -- a couple of nights before -- on about two weeks ago alluded to the passage in 1 Timothy 2, verse 8 where Paul says, “Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.” I suggested that that little simple statement, “Therefore I want the men in every place to pray,” is an expressed statement of the duty of prayer. Prayer is grounded in the nature of man. This instinct of devotion upon the sense of one’s need, or upon the sense of sin, immediately prompts one to cry, lead me to the rock that is higher than I. In other words, to pray is something that is just as natural to man as to breath. And a man has to restrain himself if he restrains himself from prayer.

To pray is the essential evidence of the fear of God, for remember the Lord said to Ananias after the conversion of Paul, “I want you to go to the house of Judas in this street called straight in Damascus, and I want you to go there to a man by the name of Saul,” and behold, as if it were something unusual for this man, and behold he prayeth. In other words, the fact that Paul is now a praying man is evidence of the fear of God that has

come to him as a result of his Damascus road experience. Paul, now for the first time becoming a true man, I think it is humorous in the Bible too that when things get really bad even the unbelievers, the ungodly unbelievers, pray.

Now they don’t know a whole lot about prayer and they’re inclined to pray to strange objects but nevertheless, they do pray. They may pray to their images. They may pray to their particular idols. They may even pray to the rocks and the caves of the earth, for that is the statement of Revelation chapter 6, verse 15 in the last days of the tribulation period when the judgments become extremely heavy upon men. John writes in chapter 6, verse 15 of the Book of Revelation, “Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” -- in other words ungodly men when they are in difficulty pray even, as here, to the mountains and to the rocks asking them to fall upon them. So the duty of prayer is something that is incumbent upon us because we are men. It rises up just as naturally as our breath to pray.

Now, finally, a word about the reasonableness of prayer. The natural instinct for prayer rests upon three things. It rests upon the perfections of God. The fact that God is omniscient leads us to pray. The fact that he is omnipotent suggests that we should pray. The fact that he is infinitely good suggests that we should pray. That he is infinitely righteous, that suggests prayer. In fact, all of the attributes that we have been studying suggest the fact of man’s prayer, his perfections.

The second thing that suggests that prayer is reasonable is man’s dependence and his needs. We are by nature men. We are not God. And as a matter of fact, when we get to heaven we shall discover that we are still men and we shall be eternally dependent upon our creator God. Do not think for one moment that when you get to heaven that

you will cease your need for your dependence upon God and that you will become a free spirit then. You will not. You will always be dependent upon your Creator. And because you are dependent upon your Creator, it is only natural that you should pray.

And finally, the other thing, the third thing that suggests that prayer is eminently reasonable for us is man’s active emotional nature. We cannot be inactive. We are necessarily active and our emotions go out to God in his greatness and that arises from our sense of need. To tell a man who believes in God that he is not to pray is to command him to cease to be a man, for this is part of his humanity.

Dabney -- one of our fine theologians -- and in my opinion one of the greatest because he was a Southerner, Dabney has this to say, “Conceived of God as bestowing all the forms of good on man, which his dependent nature needs.” I didn’t say this but I’ve said it before you know. He’s especially a great theologian because he was Stonewall Jackson’s chief of staff in the Civil War. But let me begin again, “Conceive of God as bestowing all forms of good on man, which his dependent nature needs, without requiring any homage of prayer from man as the means of its bestowal, and you will immediately have man being, such as he is, an active being. A system of practical atheism, religion, relation between man and God will be at an end. True, God would be related to man but not man to God. Anomalous and guilty condition; no feeling of dependence, reverence, gratitude, wholesome fear would find expression from the creature.” So to pray is imminently reasonable.

Let me also say a word again about the importance of prayer. Prayer is supremely important because it is the means by which God realizes spiritual blessing. It is his ordained means. For example, in Matthew chapter 7, verses 7 and 8, in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord expresses an important principle. He says, verse 7 of chapter 7 of Matthew, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him

who knocks it will be opened.” In other words, God has ordained that our spiritual blessings should come to us through the means of prayer.

Now I don’t mean by prayer necessarily that everything comes to us because we get on our knees. Man often prays without getting on his knees. But there is no spiritual blessing that comes to us, that does not come to us through the conversation that means communion or prayer with God. It is his ordained means of conveying to men the spiritual blessings that he promises to them. Through prayer, the two great hindrances to spiritual life are combated. First, arrogant self-confidence, you cannot be arrogantly self-confident and pray at the same time. If you are one who prays a prayer, you are not arrogantly self-confident. It is the way by which God weans us from that natural self-confidence which we have because we are the sons of Adam. In fact, you know you’ve listened to me long enough, some of you at least, that one of the hated doctrines of the devil is the doctrine of Pelagianism, which is in effect that we can some way or other earn our salvation.

Now Pelagius doctrine was, of course, that we do not need Jesus Christ at all; we can come to God on our own and find acceptance with him on the basis of our good works. We do not need any saving work of Jesus Christ through the cross. He did not recognize that men were sinners. He did not recognize that they were lost. He did not recognize that they were under condemnation. Augustine fought the great battle with Pelagius, which settled the destiny of the Christian church for many centuries and fortunately he won it. And it was through Augustine’s defense of the grace of God that that grace was preached, and it was perhaps through that the Reformers themselves, Luther and Calvin, came to understand the grace of God. But we have been infected by semi-Pelagianism often ever since.

And even in the Christian church today -- I’m speaking of the evangelical wing of which you are representative. Probably -- we are infected by semi-Pelagianism. That is we do need Jesus Christ but all we need is Jesus Christ’s saving work plus my faith, which

I exercise, or my human volition, which I exercise. And thus, we take from God part of the glory of salvation. For you see, it is by the work of God that Jesus Christ dies for sinners, that redemption is accomplished and it is by the work of God that faith is brought into the hearts of the redeemed. And so to be a semi-Pelagian is just in the same way by the same principle to steal some of the glory of God’s salvation and keep it for ourselves.

Now the man who seeks to live the Christian life without prayer is a semi-Pelagian in his own Christian life. He thinks that he is saved by the saving work of Jesus Christ but he thinks that he can pretty well live his life by his own activity and so he becomes a practical pelagian. He does not really understand that it is not by might, or by power, but by my Spirit, sayeth the Lord. So the man who does not pray but expects to live a fruitful Christian life is a semi-Pelagian or Pelagian in his practical Christian living.

Now I’m not going to ask you what you are, but as you have examined your life it is true that you really do think that you could live the Christian life by your own activity without lifting your heart in prayer to God for his help and for his strength and for his wisdom and for his guidance and for his power. Well if you think you could get by without that, then that’s what you are. You are a practical Pelagian.

Now the other thing that prayer combats is lethargic passivity. You know, well if everything depends on God I’ll just sit back and let him do all the work entirely, not realizing that naturally we are an active enemy against God. That is as silly as the man who says, “If God chooses some then I’ll just sit back and if he chooses me fine and if he doesn’t choose me fine. I’ll just be neutral and discover what he’s going to do.” Little realizing that our hearts are actively an enemy against God and there is no such thing as neutrality. You are an active enemy of God until Jesus Christ becomes your Savior.

Now this quietism is something that is also combated by prayer for no man can be a passivist -- not pacifist -- passivist, that’s a word I think I coined on the spur of the moment, a passivist by praying. So, if he prays, he will not be a quietist in the Christian life. And if he prays, he will not be proudly arrogant in his self-confidence. One final

thing, prayer then is grounded in the very natures of God and of man and of the relations between the two.

And it is from the nature of God that objections by rationalists have been brought against prayer. For example, as we have already discovered, God’s goodness, which is so wonderful in the word of God, is by rationalist made the basis for an argument against prayer. If God is so good, they say, he already feels every impulse to make us happy and to meet our wants. So why do we have to pray? Let us just trust a God of love to do what he knows that we need and what he wants to do. And so we need not pray at all just believe that this God of love will meet all of our needs. And then we learn in the Bible that God is omniscient, and on the basis of omniscience, rationalists said, “Well if God is omniscient, if he really knows everything, then there is no real meaning in telling him our wants because he knows them better than we do, and he’s known them long before we have known them. So why call God’s attention to anything that we have to, something he has already information about.”

And then God’s immutability, if God is unchanging, what’s the point of prayer? How could we expect to change an unchanging God? So that brings us to Roman I: The problem of the immutability of God. And let’s first summarize the doctrine of immutability briefly and then we are going to state the problem. What is the doctrine of immutability?

Now immutability means unchangeability. To be immutable is to be unchangeable like the seasons. They are immutable. Like the law of gravity, it is immutable. Like inflation, it is immutable. Like a wife’s nagging, it is unchangeable. Like the State Department’s ineptness, it is unchangeable. For the golfers who are in the audience tonight, like three putt greens at crucial points in your rounds, like missed putts when everything seems to be hinged upon it, immutable, unchanging. So what is the doctrine of God’s immutability, for I the Lord change not?

Now we said that immutability results from God’s eternity because he is eternal in his nature, he is immutable. He cannot change, and we pointed out about two months ago or so that his immutability is seen in five things. I’ll just list them, say only a brief word about them because there are some of you here tonight who were not here the night that we discussed immutability for one hour. First of all, he is immutable in his essence. God can have no new attributes. He cannot develop because he is eternal. He cannot self-evolve. He does not become better as the days go by, like the love of your life. The incarnation made no change in the Son’s essence.

This past week I had a call from a college student of the University of Texas and he had been listening to the tapes of the attributes. And in the course of it, he asked me the question. It would seem to me, he said, that if Jesus Christ was the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, and he took to himself another nature, human nature, in the incarnation, then he must have changed. And then I tried to point out to him that immutability pertains to the divine nature. It does not pertain to a human nature. It pertains to the divine nature. It is a property of divine nature, not human nature. Thank God we can change. Jesus said you must be born again, if we couldn’t change we couldn’t live spiritually. But our Lord was immutable. He did not change when he took to himself an additional nature. His divine nature was just as immutable after as it was before. So the incarnation does not affect the divine nature of our Lord. He is a divine person who took to himself an additional human nature, but his divine nature did not change, immutability.

Second, God is immutable in his attributes. He is infinitely wise. He cannot be wiser tomorrow than he is today, because if that were so, then today he is not omniscient. So he is not wiser tomorrow. He is not holier tomorrow. He is not more righteous tomorrow than he is today. He is immutable in his attributes.

Third, he is immutable in his will. He cannot change his plans and purposes. Now, I do not like to say it that way, because it seems to suggest that God is limited, but

it is a limitation that himself, by virtue of his nature possesses. He cannot change his plans and purposes. One of the reasons he cannot is because his plans and purposes are always infinitely wise. He does not after he has devised a plan said, “You know I think that can be done a better way,” for that might suggest that before he did not really know the best way to do it. So his plans and his purposes are immutable since he is infinite in wisdom there can be no error in their conception.

Since he is infinite in power there can be no failure in the accomplishment of them. He is not like our astronauts who when they make their way to the moon and get off course have to listen to Houston and look to Houston for some “adjustments.” God does not need to adjust his plan and purposes to the things that are happening on the earth. He knows every little detail. He even knows that little putt that dribbles up toward the cup that falls off to the side and with it all of our hopes and desires. Every little thing he knows. I hope that’s comforting to the men who are getting ready to play the Byron Nelson tournament here.

Fourth, he is immutable in his consciousness because he has an infinite experience that is a fixed quantity and so he does not have deeper consciousness tomorrow than he does today. And fifth, he is immutable in his place. He cannot be change in place. He cannot move from one place to the other, because remember we said he possesses ubiquity. That is, he is omnipresent and if he is omnipresent he cannot be moved from one place to another. So to sum up then, God cannot change, for if he were to change that would be either from better to worse or from worse to better. Or if we granted moral stability it would be from immaturity to maturity. So our God is immutable; he cannot change.

Now, Capital B: The problem of immutability in prayer. Simply stated, you probably can already state it yourself now, if God is immutable, let’s put it even more positively. Since God is immutable, to hope to change him by importunate prayer is worse than useless. If God is immutable, isn’t it foolish to think that we can change him

by prayer? As a matter of fact, is it not a misunderstanding of him? Is it not an insult to him to suggest that he can change? All we need do is what the rationalists suggest that we should do. Just receive his blessings, whatever he gives us, submissively. And since there is no need to pray just honor him by trying to imitate his perfections. Why not just let that be our life?

Well that brings us to Roman II: A general answer to the problem of immutability and prayer. The answer is for those who have some reverence for Scripture, obviously if you had no reverence for Scripture than we should stop and we should seek to show you, as best we can, the significance, of the word of God, in order to induce a reverence for it in your heart. Only the Holy Spirit can give us certainty in the final analysis and so what we’re doing now is saying some things that will be of application to those who do have an appreciation for the Scriptures as the word of God seeking to answer this problem that may arise in a Christian’s mind.

Capital A: The assertions of Scripture. Since God has appointed as the means for receiving his purpose, blessings, then this is the best proof prayer is reasonable. If we do have reverence for Scripture, if we do believe the things that the Bible has to say, then when we read in Matthew chapter 7, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” Well that should mean to us then that we should pray in spite of what we may know about the immutability of God. In other words, the statements of Scripture make it very evident that the things that we receive from God are received by prayer.

And so there can be no ultimate contradiction. John chapter 15, verse 7 says, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” And then 1 John chapter 5, verse 14 states, “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” And so to answer the question from the standpoint of Scripture, we look at the passages of Scripture

and they say to pray. And so if this should be a problem to us, it should be a problem only to us. We should recognize that it is not a problem with God. By the way, there is of great practical benefit in approaching something like this in that way, for remember as a Christian, it is impossible for us to understand everything the moment we become a Christian.

I can remember many years ago when I was first brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ by Donald Gray Barnhouse. He told me that I ought to start reading the word of God. And he said I want to give you a little help when you start reading the word of God. He said I want you to read it in this way. He said begin at the Gospel of John and read through the Book of Revelation; then go back and read Matthew, Mark and Luke. And then go back to Genesis and read Genesis to Revelation. And since he had led me to the Lord, I obeyed him implicitly. That was the first reading of the Bible I ever did. I read John through Revelation. I read Matthew, Mark and Luke. Then I went back to Genesis and I read completely through Genesis to Malachi, but after the end of Malachi, finished the first reading of the Bible -- 1941 or 2. I think it was '41.

And then he went on to say, I want you to read it in this way. I want you to remember you're not going to understand everything in the Bible. You're going to read along and you're going to come to a verse that you cannot understand. Don't stop there. Don't stop your reading there. Just make a mental note of it, think about it for a moment but go on. Get the things that you can understand leaving behind the things you cannot understand for you will find that the more you know of the word of God the more light it will throw on the word of God. And the next time through, you will be amazed that many of those texts of Scripture which were puzzles to you now are clear because of other things that you have come to know; and further, perhaps now the Holy Spirit wished you to know those things and he will give you illumination at that point where he did not give you illumination before.

I’ve been reading the Bible for over twenty-five -- well over thirty years now in that same way. There are still a few texts, about four, I do not understand. [Laughter] I hoped you -- I wanted you to die laughing because you should have known, of course, that there are many many texts that I do not understand. There are many texts that I do not understand, but I have discovered that this principle holds true, that as I read the Scripture, the more I know about it the more light it throws upon itself. And often the only thing that I can do because I do know it is the word of God is to believe it, and to attempt to act upon it even when I don’t thoroughly understand it. And God honors obedience to his word. And often it is through the obedience to the Scripture induced by God, of course, that we come to a knowledge of what it means.

So when we look at the question here, is God immutable, unchangeable; on the other hand, here are injunctions to pray. Shall we pray in the light of that, for can we affect an unchanging God? Well if the Bible plainly states that we should pray, then pray. That itself is justification for it because we do not have the mind of God. So the assertions of Scripture it would seem to me give us a general answer to the problem of immutability and prayer.

Second or B: The assertions of reason. The fact that he is omniscient is not a hindrance to prayer. It is actually an incentive to prayer. I don’t want to pray to someone who is not omniscient. I don’t want to pray to someone who doesn’t understand what is going to happen tomorrow, because he might do something for me today that would turn out to be bad tomorrow. So I want to pray to an omniscient God. I don’t want to pray to a God that is not good. If God is good, that’s the kind of God I want to pray to. I don’t want to pray to a God who’s bad, because he might take a little fun out of giving me an answer that wasn’t good for me just to please him who is evil. So the fact that God is good does not mean I do not want to pray. It means I should pray. The fact that he is omniscient is not a hindrance to prayer. It’s an incentive to prayer. The fact that he is

immutable is not a hindrance to prayer. It is an incentive to prayer because suppose his promises were mutable, suppose they were changeable.

Suppose I went to him and I said to him, “Now Lord, you said you were going to do this, and so I pray that you’ll do it.” And he’d say, “Ah, but that’s what I said yesterday. Today I’m saying this.” How would you like a God like that? I wouldn’t like one like that. Suppose his nature was mutable. Suppose you said, “Oh God, Thy loving kindness is wonderful and surely thy wilt do this for me.” “Well I was loving and kind yesterday, but today I’m feeling under the weather. I’m bad, evil.” We don’t want that kind of a God. So these things the rationalists say to us are hindrance to prayer, actually to me they are incentives to prayer. But nevertheless, I recognize the point of the question and I feel we should answer that particularly.

So finally, we’re coming to Roman III: A special answer to the problem of immutability and prayer. A special answer. And I would suggest the following things. I put them up here for you. Prayer affects God’s actions, not his person or principles. Prayer affects the means not the ends. Prayer affects men not God. And Capital A: Prayer affects God’s actions not his person and principles.

Now we have read the statements of Scripture. God himself is unchangeable. “I am the LORD, I change not.” That is Malachi chapter 3, verse 6. The same thing is stated in Psalm 102, verse 27, “Thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.” A passage quoted in Hebrews chapter 1. Then James chapter 1, verse 17 gives us, in addition, another text on God’s unchangeability. He says, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” God is unchangeable. That does not mean, however, that his actions are unchangeable. His actions may change when circumstances warrant it.

Now that is evident -- we saw from the fact that when Jonah went to preach to the city of Nineveh. He preached remember yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed. He went up and down the streets of Nineveh shouting a simple message, yet forty days

and Nineveh shall be destroyed. Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed, that was God’s message. It was the word of the Lord.

Now we know that when the Ninevites repented, that we read in Jonah chapter 3, verse 10, “When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented.” My text has repented; yours has, “God repented concerning the color and the day which he declared he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.” In other words, he changed his actions toward them.

Now, at first glance, does not that mean that God himself changed? No. Does that mean that God himself changed? Now the circumstances were changed and consequently the unchanging God acted in a way from the human standpoint that seemed different. We talked about this so I won’t go into great detail over it. But I suggested to you, remember, that God acted upon unchanging principles. And his unchanging principles were that he blesses men who are penitent or who repent, and he judges men who do not repent. And the change that occurred was the change that occurred in the Ninevites. And the change that occurred in the Ninevites made necessary a change in the conditional message that Jonah had delivered them.

Now, I said conditional message. I suggested to you that in Jonah’s own words there is evidence of the condition for he said, yet forty days. If God had determined to destroy Nineveh, he wouldn’t have said, “I’m going to wait forty days.” The very fact that he said, yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed, is evidence of the fact that there was a condition involved. That is, Nineveh persists in her impenitence, and they do not respond to the message of my prophet when he comes through the streets. I’m going to destroy Nineveh. So the condition was there. By the way, that principle is expressed in the Old Testament in Jeremiah chapter 18, about verse 7 through 10 when God says he’s going to judge nations that way. That is if they repent he will be so and so. If they do not, he will do such and such. That is his mind, and so in the case of the Ninevites, they repented.

And God in his unchangeableness in punishing sin and rewarding repentance blessed the Ninevites. So it was not God who changed. It was the Ninevites who changed but it was put in human language so that we may express it as we saw it. It seemed to men as if God had changed his mind, but what really happened was that Ninevites had changed. And I suggested to you that the thermometer is an illustration of this, a simple one. No doubt you can never have a perfect illustration of God in any human material thing. God is not really a thermometer but nevertheless, a thermometer is outwardly a very changeable thing. You get up in the morning and it reads forty-eight. In the middle of the day, it reads ninety-two. At sundown, it reads sixty-four. It looks as if it’s a very changeable thing when actually we know the mercury acts according to a fixed law and invariably responds to the temperature. So we can say that the thermometer is an unchangeable instrument. It always acts according to the principles of its construction and yet to us it’s very changeable.

Now God is an unchanging person, but his actions are not unchanging. So prayer affects his actions. It does not affect his person. It does not affect his principles. Let me read you a statement by John Bertherton, which has to do with this. He says, “It cannot be that God is incapable of modifying his plans if he so desires, for if that be the case, he is enslaved while we are free. If divine immutability be a rigid, cast iron, undeviable quality leaving no scope for choosing between alternative processes, then this attribute is jailor instead of his slave. If he is driven by an inevitable, unavoidable compulsion, he’s merely a machine.

Shedd has this to say, “Repentance in God is not a change of will but a will to change.” If God had treated the Ninevites after their repentance as he had threatened to treat them before their repentance, this would have proved him to be mutable. It would have showed him to be at the one time displeased with impenitence and another time with penitence. And so if he had done what he said in Jonah’s message he would do, under the conditions, then actually God would be immutable. So it should be evident to

us then that prayer does not affect God’s nature. He is unchangeable, but it may affect his actions.

Second, prayer affects the means not the ends. God’s eternal and immutable purposes involve the means and the ends. As Dabney points out, “Wherever it was his eternal purpose that any creature should receive grace, it was his purpose equally that he should ask. So the grace that God promises is grace that he promises in response to prayer. So that God purposes the means as well as the end.

This weekend I was in Borger, Texas. Boy, what a place. [Laughter] You know I really got to like that place, but I don’t think I’ve ever been to a little town that was on the way to nowhere. And they know it, too. I thought they had the best sense of humor in Borger. I asked one of them. I don’t think I’ve ever been to Borger. I was trying to look for some way of saying I had been there. I said, what is it on the way to? You know, like Oklahoma City. I thought maybe I’d passed through Borger or some other place you know. And they said, it’s on the way to nowhere.

But there is a little group of Christians that have started meeting. They call themselves Faith Covenant Church. And so I preached to them on a weekend Bible conference, Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday morning, Sunday night. And I was asked to speak on the subject on the work of the Father and salvation, the work of the Son and salvation, the work of the Spirit and salvation, the work of man and salvation.

And, of course, in the work of the Father and salvation, I alluded to the subject of election. [Laughter] And that stirred up the whole town. That stirred up the town so much that the preacher at the Baptist Church felt -- led at the six o’clock hour to say -- speak five minutes against the doctrine of election. He said it was nothing to it. And anyway during the course of the questions, I would speak one night for an hour and then afterwards we would open it up for questions for about forty-five minutes. And this is one of the questions that was asked, “If God has elected men then there’s no need to pray. Why should I pray for my lost friend next door?”

Now that’s a natural common question, which we all wrestle with as we read the Bible. If it is true there are some elect, why pray for them? Well the answer of the word of God is that while God has elected individuals, he also has determined the means by which the elect should come to Christ. So he has determined that Lewis Johnson should come to Jesus Christ. I was chosen in him before the foundation of the world, but he had also determined that I should come to the Lord through the preaching of Donald Gray Barnhouse and through the prayers of Sue [Indistinct] and through the prayers of my mother-in-law and through the prayers of my wife and through the prayers, no doubt, others beside them. And so they prayed earnestly, and Barnhouse preached earnestly, and God the Holy Spirit used the appointed means to accomplish the appointed end.

So prayer is imminently reasonable, for the purposes and plans of God encompass the means as well as the ends. If it were really true that prayer is unnecessary, if it were really true what the rationalist says and if he were really a rationalist who at least gave some lip service to the Bible and he really said God is immutable therefore there’s no need to pray, why then if he were a farmer then he shouldn’t bother to plow and then sow any seeds, or if he were sick he should not bother to call the doctor. In other words, if he were really honest in his objections, that’s the kind of life that he would live, but I don’t think I’ll ever run across such a man as that. Prayer affects the means. It does not affect the ends. It is possible for our prayers to touch the means by which things are accomplished.

And finally prayer affects men not God. This is a tricky little point, which I want to use in order to try to set this question in its proper perspective. Does prayer change an unchangeable God? No, it does not change his mind. It does not change his attributes. It does not change his will. It does not change his essence. It does not change his place. Any of the other things that pertain to the immutability of God, but it may be the means by which his actions are changed. Those things that he accomplishes in this earth because it may just be that it is your prayer that is the means by which he is to

accomplish something which demands a change in the events of human life. Prayer affects men finally, not God. It is not intended to produce a change in God. We do not pray in order to change God. Prayer actually is intended by God to change us. That is its real purpose and it does not draw God down to us. It is designed by God to be the means by which we are drawn up to God.

Now I close with a simple little illustration. Let’s suppose you are on a cruiser in the United States Navy. Let’s suppose that you are in one of their lifeboats and you are off the rear of the cruiser. And you have a line, which is attached to the cruiser. And so what do you do? You want to get on the boat. And so you start pulling on the line. Do you pull the cruiser to yourself? Or do you pull yourself to the cruiser. Well, of course, you pull yourself to the cruiser. Well prayer is a similar kind of thing. By prayer, I do not change God but by prayer I am changed by God. I become a dependent creature. I become a creature humble. In other words, prayer is designed by God to affect me.

Now let me close by saying this. If it is true that God has determined that all spiritual blessing come to men through prayer, if every spiritual advance that you and I make is through this relationship to God, then it should be obvious to us that it is of the utmost importance that we as Christians develop a prayer life. I cannot think of anything that should be a greater incentive to prayer than to realize that it is God’s appointed means for all of our spiritual blessings. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we ask Thy blessing upon us. We thank Thee for the word of God, for the clarity of its teaching. And Father we pray again may our studies in prayer cause us to become men and women characterize by prayer.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.