



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology Sermon 31

“Prayer and the Decrees”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures again. We thank Thee for the opportunity to come to Thee in prayer, and we acknowledge, Lord, that there are many things that we do not understand about this wonderful exercise. We thank Thee that Thou dost hear our prayers. We know that. And we pray that through our study tonight that we may learn more of Thee in the exercise of prayer. And may some of the difficulties which some of us may be having be solved as we consider the problems of approaching Thee. We commit the hour to Thee now.

In Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

[Message] Now, the reason I have put this outline on the board is because it became quite obvious that I had misled some of you, at least, last week. And therefore, I want to correct an error. It's very difficult for me to ever admit that I'm wrong. I don't think I have ever been wrong but about three times in my life. [Laughter] But last Tuesday night, I believe, after listening to my critics that I was wrong and so the only thing to do is to correct it. And it concerns the point B under Roman III. Remember I had said we're dealing here with a special answer to the problem of immutability in

prayer, and prayer affects God’s actions, not his person and principles. God himself is unchangeable, but his actions may change.

And then second, prayer affects means not ends. And I went on to say that God’s eternal and immutable purposes involve the means and the ends, and that, consequently, it may be God’s will for a creature to ask in order that immutable ends may be accomplished. Now, it is obvious in such an illustration as that, that prayer does not affect means, but is the means to an immutable end. And so, really, that second point should read something like immutable ends may be accomplished through finite prayer, or finite prayers may be the means to immutable ends.

Now, the reason I know I was wrong is because there was a young man that came up afterwards and said -- I don’t think he is here tonight; and he said that he was a lawyer -- and that he didn’t think my second point made sense. [Laughter] And, of course, that sort of snowed me, because I was expected to believe that since he was a lawyer, he was always logical. And I must confess I get a little fearful when someone says to me, “I’m a lawyer and therefore this is true.” Except that I do remember some lawyers are not always reasonable and logical. And I know some of them sitting on the Supreme Court that don’t seem to me to be too logical at times, so I didn’t accept that as final proof that I was wrong, although I was shaken a little bit.

And then Mr. Prier came up, who is my favorite elder, and he came up and said that he was an engineer and that I was wrong. [Laughter] And so another man chimed in and said, “I’ve studied engineering, too.” And then I was really shaken because two engineers against you, you really do appear to be illogical and irrational when they agree against you. But when I walked out in the hall, it was my wife who jumped on me [laughter] and said I did not make any sense at all on that third point -- on the second point of that third question. So then I knew I was wrong. And so I’m sorry that he is not here tonight; in fact, all of my enemies are not here except Mr. Prier, but he is here. So,

Howard, I want you to take official note of the fact that I have corrected that error. It really was misleading, and I hope you will change your notes.

Now, tonight we are studying “Why Should Weak and Willful Man Struggle with Decreed Events and the Laws of Nature? or Prayer and the Decrees.” I think I put that wrong up there, didn’t I? That should be “Prayer and the Decrees” not “Prayer and the Attributes.” “Why Should Weak and Willful Man Struggle with Decreed Events and The Laws of Nature” or “Prayer and The Decrees.” And I wrote that wrong in my notes, too, but it should be decrees, “Prayer and the Decrees.”

Now, for our Scripture reading tonight, will you turn with me to the book of Jeremiah? Jeremiah. And I am going to read chapter 7, verse 16 and a few more passages, too. But turn first to Jeremiah chapter 7 in verse 16. I’m reading this portion because I want you to notice that there are some occasions in which prayer is incompatible with God’s purposes and ends. Jeremiah chapter 7 in verse 16, we read, “As for you, do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me: For I do not hear you.”

Now, turn over to chapter 11, verses 11 and 12, Jeremiah chapter 11, verses 11 and 12.

“Therefore thus says the Lord, ‘Behold I am bringing disaster on them which they will not be able to escape; though they will cry to Me, yet I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they surely will not save them in the time of their disaster.’ (And verse 14) Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, for I will not listen when they call to me because of their disaster.”

Now, chapter 14, verses 11 and 12. Chapter 14, verses 11 and 12,

“So the Lord said to me, ‘Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence.’” And chapter 15 in verse 1 is the last passage, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Even though Moses and Samuel were to stand before Me, My heart would not be with this people: Send them away from My presence and let them go!’”

“Why Should Weak and Willful Man Struggle with Decreed Events and The Laws of Nature? or Prayer and The Decrees.”

Prayer was once described by William James, who was not an outstanding Christian, as intercourse with an ideal companion. “If it is really true that prayer is intercourse with an ideal companion, then it must be our primary concern, our best resource, our most skilled art, and our greatest joy. If it is not the blessing that is suggested by that remark, then prayer is self-deceit. If God is not and if when we pray we do not really pray to anyone, then surely we are self-deceived.”

So, I think, it is true that in the key city of prayer, two irreconcilable worldviews come into conflict, those who believe that there is a God who exists above, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom we may bring our petitions; and those who feel that there is not a God, that prayer is a useless exercise, is nothing more than speaking a few words in the air and consequently, self-deceit.

Why is skepticism so impatient with prayer? Prayer is an almost universal function. As I mentioned in one of the earliest lectures on this series, it is strikingly true that even those who do not know the true God pray. Men who do not know Jesus Christ pray. Men who do not know Christianity pray. Men who do not make any profession of Christianity speak about prayer. Many of your friends say, “I’m going to pray about it” when they are just as far from God as a stick or a stone, and I’m sure that you know it,

but they speak about prayer because it is one of those things that is inherent in man.

Almost against himself he lifts up petitions skyward.

Is it due to the fact, that is, that skepticism is so impatient with prayer? Is it due to its own deep misgiving like that of the tyrant in the Browning poem, “Do you see just my vengeance complete? The man sprang to his feet, stood erect, caught at God’s skirts and prayed so I was afraid.”

Francis Thompson said, “Prayer is the very sword of the saints. I am inclined to think that one of the reasons that skepticism does not like the exercise of prayer is just this: skeptics are afraid of the man who prays because they are afraid of the God to whom he prays.”

Well, we are considering objections to prayer, and we considered those that touched the attributes and now we are turning to consider those that touch the decrees. And our first problem is the problem of foreordination. Popularly we call it predestination. But foreordination is the broader term. And while predestination is the proper term for volitional agents, this covers also the non-volitional things as well as volitional agents, and so let’s call it the problem of foreordination.

And, simply stated, the problem is this. If God has foreordained all events, prayer cannot alter his will. If he has really determined that everything shall come to pass as he wills, then prayer cannot possibly alter God’s will. Now, there are texts of Scripture that say that, that is, that say that all things will come to pass according to his will. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11, the passage we have quoted a half a dozen times at least in our series on the attributes and prayer. There we read that it is God who works all things according to the counsel of his own will. In Acts chapter 15 in verse 18, it is stated there, “Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the age” or as our text has, “Saith the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.” And so his foreknowledge is certain and complete and his foreordination is certain and complete. And He foreknows because he has foreordained. So if he has foreordained everything, then why should we pray?

Now, first the answer of revelation. Now, we must bear in mind the distinction between the decretive will of God and preceptive will of God. Remember when we were studying the attributes and, particularly, the will of God, I pointed out that there were a number of different distinctions that were made between the aspects of the will of God. And perhaps the most common one and one that you must be well acquainted with if you are to understand the Bible is this one, there is the decretive will of God and there is the preceptive will of God. And the decretive will of God is that will of God by which he determines that all things either causatively or permissively shall come to pass in accordance with his desires.

So his decretive will is his will of determining everything that is to come to pass, either causatively or permissively, whatever he does himself directly or permits to be done, that is his decretive will. His preceptive will, remember, is the rule of life that he desires for men -- the rule of life. Now his preceptive will is not necessarily the same as his decretive will. He may permit some things to come to pass that are not in accord with his preceptive will. He may allow some things to come to pass that he does not take pleasure in. He may even allow some things to come to pass that he hates. For he hates sin and he has permitted sin. He does not like acts of sin. He hates acts of sin, but he permits sin. One is his decretive will; the other is his preceptive will. Now, the problem that we are dealing with deals with his decretive will. And so let's keep our minds on his will by which he determines everything that is going to come to pass.

And so, the answer of revelation. Well, let me say, first of all, in answering this according to the Bible, prayer is sometimes incompatible with the known determinations of God. Now we saw that in our Scripture reading. God told Jeremiah not to pray for this people that he was not going to answer their prayers. He said, as a matter of fact, that he was going to judge them. And so prayer is incompatible, in that case, with the foreordained events that God is going to bring to pass in connection with Israel. He has already made up his mind. He has determined what he is going to do with them and he publishes it to

Jeremiah and says not even prayer will change my mind; I’m going to do it. So there are circumstances under which it is proper to say that prayer is incompatible with the determinations of God. There are times when prayer is utterly useless.

But now, let me say something secondly in answer to this question. Prayer is compatible with some unrevealed determinations of God. That is, undetermined as to outcome so far as we are concerned. Now, I want you to look with me at Deuteronomy chapter 9. Deuteronomy chapter 9 and we’re going to look at verses 18 through 20. Deuteronomy 9 verses 18 through 20.

Now Moses is recounting things that happened in the past history of Israel and he says in verse 17 as he is telling the story of the two tablets of the law. “And I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes.” Chapter 9 verse 18 now of Deuteronomy: “And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the Lord was wrathful against you, in order to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also. And the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at that time.

Now, look at verse 25,

“So I fell down before the Lord, forty days and nights, which I did because the Lord had said He would destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord and said: ‘O Lord God, do not destroy Thy people even Thine inheritance whom Thou hast redeemed through Thy greatness, whom thou hast brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember Thy servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; do not look at the stubbornness of this people, or at their wickedness or their sin, otherwise the land from which Thou didst bring us may say, “Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which He had promised them,

and because He hated them, He has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness.”
Yet they are Thy people even Thine inheritance, whom Thou hast brought out by Thy
great power and Thine outstretched arm.”

Now, it is evident from this that Moses did receive some answers to his prayers in which God had made certain threats to destroy or judge Israel. And Moses, you’ll remember, fell down in prayer before the Lord and did prevail in prayer. And as a result of his prevailing in prayer, what appeared to be a change of mind in God took place. So it is possible that on occasion prayer may be incompatible with the determinations of God. They may be known. He may reveal His determinations and it is no use for us to pray. On the other hand, at times prayer is compatible with some unrevealed, that is to the outcome, determinations of God. And in such cases, we are justified, it would seem to me, if the Holy Spirit guides in bringing our petitions to the Lord, believing that it is just possible that the prayer that we pray may be the means by which he will himself avert something that he has given as a conditional threat.

Well now, let’s answer this from the standpoint of reason. It is obvious that we could turn to many passages in the word of God where prayer has prevailed and yet at the same time, the Bible says that all things are determined by God. The answer of reason, it would seem reasonable, of course, that if men are asked to pray that prayers must have been foreordained to be the means for the accomplishment of the purposes of God.

If God may be said to be reasonable in our sanctified minds, then if He tells us on the one hand that he has ordained all things that are going to come to pass and on the other he tells us to pray, then putting these two together we would inevitably come to the conclusion that he must have determined that those prayers which he is asking that we pray be the means to the accomplishment of these ends which he has determined. I think we would realize that if we just pondered those two alternatives under the Holy Spirit’s

teaching and allowed him to harmonize them for us. Let’s turn, for example, let’s turn to the passage that I could not find last time and the reason I could not find it was because I was looking in the Book of Jeremiah and it’s in the Book of Ezekiel and it’s very difficult to find texts when they are not in the book in which you are looking.

Now, this one is in Ezekiel chapter 36 in verse 37 and I want you to notice here how God asks Israel to ask him for something. Verse 37 of Ezekiel chapter 36, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘This also I will let the house of Israel ask Me to do this for them: I will increase their men like a flock. Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so will the waste cities be filled with flocks of men. Then they will know that I am the Lord.’” Notice the statement “this also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them.” And so here the prayer is to precede his gifts so that what he has determined to give, for it is all in accordance with his decretive will, he has determined should become theirs by means of prayer. Now, that is the teaching of James 4:2, we will not bother to look up that text.

Let’s turn to Matthew chapter 9 in verse 38, Matthew chapter 9 verse 38. Now in this passage as Jesus was going about the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, he saw the multitudes and he felt compassion over them. And he said to his disciples in verse 37, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.”

Now, the injunction of our Lord, directed toward the disciples to pray to the Lord to send out workers into the harvest is with a view to the accomplishment of his predetermined, foreordained ends of bringing the elect to the knowledge of himself. And so it is here, it is obvious here that our Lord requests that men pray in order that God’s foreordained goals may be accomplished. We could turn back to the Old Testament, and you may want to put it in your notes, to the instance in which Joshua asks God to allow the sun to go back a few degrees in order that they may be able to accomplish the

slaughter of the enemies of Israel, and God caused the sun to go back in order that that might be accomplished. And so, God’s decreative will was accomplished by the prayer of Joshua.

So the answer then to the question, if everything is foreordained, why pray?, is that our prayers may be the means to the accomplishment of the divine foreordained ends. Now, this is paralleled with the objection that we considered a long time ago when we were talking about predestination because, you know, there are people who will say the moment you start speaking about predestination, “Well, predestination is true; it makes no difference what a person does.”

I mentioned last week that I’d been in Borger about two weeks ago preaching on the work of the Trinity in salvation, and I spoke on the work of the Father in election, the work of the Son in his substitutionary sacrifice, and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, and the work of man in the gift of faith. And I got all kinds of questions at Borger. That first night, in which I spoke on Friday night, it was hot and heavy for a little while.

And so this past weekend, not learning my lesson, I went down to Austin. And to a group composed of some who attend Believers Chapel and others who attend the University and who also work in the city of Austin, and I spoke on the subject of the work of the Trinity in salvation, and on Friday night the work of the Father in election and so on right through the whole thing. Well, after the message on Friday night I said, “If you have any questions, well come up and ask me.” And immediately I think there were about fifteen people rushed forward to the front and we had another meeting there for about 45 minutes over all of these objections. And they brought them all up again because they inevitably come to the natural mind.

Now many of them, Paul, he has known that we were going to ask them and so he, himself, has given these questions in Romans chapter 9. So if you’re interested in the questions that people ask, read Romans chapter 9 because Paul anticipates most all of the

objections. But this is one you always get, “If predestination or foreordination is true then it doesn’t make a bit of difference what we do. We can just sit back and God is going to accomplish his purposes.”

Now, we just need to change that just slightly for prayer because it’s the same thing. If God is going to accomplish everything according to his will, why pray because it is going to be accomplished? Now, let’s go over something again in connection with predestination and all we have to do is substitute prayer for it, we will understand. The doctrine of predestination does not teach that certain events will come to pass regardless of whether certain other events take place.

Rather, one foreordained event is to issue from another foreordained event. Foreordination does not refer to the ends only. It also refers to the means by which the ends are accomplished. It is simply not true that Judas would have been damned whether he betrayed Jesus Christ or not. It is not true. Judas was condemned because he was condemned as one who would betray Jesus Christ. It simply is not true that Peter would have been saved whether he repented or not. Foreordination covers Peter’s repentance as well as his salvation. And so his foreordination is to salvation by means of his faith and repentance.

One thing predestination does not rule out is the connection between ends and means. And that pertains to every objection raised against predestination. It’s the same kind of thing when a person comes up and says, as I did have several last weekend say to me, “If predestination is true there is no incentive to preach the gospel.” But remember, a man is predestinated or elected to be saved, but he is elected to be saved through the preaching of the gospel. He is not elected to be saved whether the gospel is preached to him or not. He is elected to be saved through the preaching of the gospel. And so, election instead of being an obstacle to the preaching of the word of God should be an incentive to us because some are elect and they are elect through the preaching of the gospel. They will not be saved if we do not preach the gospel. But we know that the

foreordination covers not only the goal but also the means to that goal, the preaching of the gospel.

Let me read something from a fellow theologian. “The doctrine of predestination, or here more specifically of election to everlasting life, teaches that some are chosen to be saved, it being understood to be saved through Jesus Christ.” In other words, election means that some persons are predestinated to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. Now this question is raised with reference to the matter of predestination, why preach the gospel? It’s the same thing as asking, why, since people are predestinated, elected to be saved by the preaching of the gospel, why preach the gospel? It’s just as foolish as that. If some are elected to be saved through the preaching of the gospel, why preach the gospel? Well, we can say that’s stupid. In that light, is this question not really rather foolish? Why preach the gospel since some people are predestined to be saved by the preaching of the gospel?

You see where the error lies, don’t you? The objector is unconsciously thinking that predestination to life is independent of the gospel. I’m going to skip a few sentences. On the contrary, predestination operates by means of that. That is to say, since some persons are predestined to eternal life through the gospel, it is an integral part of predestination that the gospel be presented. Predestination cannot be carried out unless the gospel is presented. Or to put it in another way, the preaching of the gospel itself is predestinated as much as the believing of the gospel and the salvation of the elect are predestinated. Or again to put it still another way, in a somewhat more technical phrasing, God predestinates not only the end but the means.”

Now, we do not escape the stumbling block of the fact that God chooses some and does not choose others to be saved through the preaching of the gospel. But at least let’s bring it down to the real question and that is, can God exercise distinguishing grace? Can he do with his creation what he, an omniscient, wise, eternal, good God, desires to do? And if you say he cannot, well then you’ll never understand this great teaching. But

if you say he can, and if you really believe that you could be lost and God would be perfectly just in passing you by and never saving you although he saved others, if you can bring yourself to believe that he is absolutely just in doing that and loving, then you’re on your way to enjoying the Christian life.

Now I want you see how this tension between ends and means is set forth in Scripture. I want you to turn with me if you will to Acts chapter 27, Acts chapter 27. Verse 22, you remember it’s the storm at the sea. Verse 21,

“When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, ‘Men, you ought to have followed my advice’ (He’s saying, “I told you so.”) ‘And not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. And yet now, I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.’ (Now, Paul standing up and giving them as a messenger of God, God’s word.) ‘For’ (He said, verse 23) ‘For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you. (There it is, the promise Paul is) you are going to be the means of the salvation of everyone on this boat.’ And so he says in verse 22, ‘There shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.’”

Now, Paul, who was the greatest believer in foreordination that I’ve ever known except the Lord Jesus who invented the doctrine, in verse 31, now mind you, Paul who has just said this just before says, verse 31, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.” There it is. “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.”

Now how can Paul say that when he’s just been told by God everybody’s going to be saved? Why didn’t he say, just go ahead, dive off in the midst of the storm, do anything you like, you’re bound to be saved? No, you see their election to safety was

means of staying on the boat. And consequently, they had to stay on that boat in order to be saved. And yet, they were promised that all would be saved. So this tension you see between the end, the goal, and the means is a biblical tension. They were elected to be saved physically by means of staying on the boat, not in doing what they pleased, not in sitting back and doing nothing, diving off, having a swimming party or anything else they might be thinking about having.

Now, if my explanation is acceptable, I hope it is, I’m not saying I know it is after last week, if my explanation is acceptable then predestination is no obstacle to prayer. It is the sure ground of confidence in prayer. Without this, the prayers of men would make the universe a chaos. One man would be praying one thing and somebody else would be coming along and praying something else and we wouldn’t have anything but chaos in this universe in which we live. Somebody would be praying for rain and somebody would be praying for sunshine. What could God do if he was dependent upon the foolish requests of men?

I am so happy that he has worked out a perfect plan and he is proceeding according to that perfect plan. Otherwise, we should have total chaos and the ends are determined by God and the means to the end are determined by God and one of those means to the end is prayer. And so I pray with a great deal of confidence because I know that my prayer may be the divine means to the accomplishment of the divine ends. And I am truly working the works of God when I pray.

So instead of being a discouragement to prayer, foreordination is an incentive to prayer. God is interested in my prayers. Think of that. He is interested in my prayers. And they belong to his great overall decretive will of God. Now, that is tremendous. You think about it. Every time you get down on your knees by your bed, I’m now participating in the decretive will of God. Accomplishing something he has foreordained in the eternity past out of his great wisdom.

Now, let’s come to a second problem, the problem of natural law. Now, I don’t know enough to answer this too well, so I’m going to be brief on this, I hope. The problem of natural law. The problem may be stated in this way, if God governs the universe by fixed laws, what place is there for prayer? If he governs everything according to the laws of nature, why should we pray? One interesting text in the light of this is the text in 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 3 and 4 where Peter, remember, says that in the last days scoffers shall come. And when we say to them, “Jesus Christ is coming again,” they’re going to laugh because they’re going to use this old natural law objection to it. 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 3 and 4 says, and Peter the apostle is writing,

“Know this first of all, that in the last day mockers will come with their mocking following after their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? You talk about the second coming of Jesus Christ, but where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of the creation.’”

In other words, God has never interfered in natural processes down through the years. And everything has just continued as it has been all along. So how can Jesus Christ come again and interfere with the natural processes which we see at work about us? So, you see this question is a rather contemporary one and if you have read any of those who are scientific in mind and at the same time who are also irreligious, fortunately there are many, many scientific people who are very, very godly men, but if you meet the other combination, you will sooner or later run across this objection to the things of God, the problem of natural law.

Now, I want to say that my responsibility as a teacher of the word of God is not to explain the how of divine government and prayer because that may be beyond my finite mind and in fact is. But my responsibility is to try to paralyze the claim that prayer can have no place. As the Scots when a man is tried, they frequently will say that the charge

is “not proven.” Now that’s what we want to try to do. We want to try to show that this charge that natural law is contrary to the exercise of prayer. I want to try to show that this is not proven, not try to explain how they interrelate. When I get to Heaven, I’ll give you a much more significant lecture then.

First, the answer of revelation. Now, again it is clear from the Bible that he may alter the laws of nature. For example, Jesus Christ cast out demons; he restored the dead to life. Now, we need not speak about the miracles. There are many miracles in which our Lord apparently, so far as we can tell, altered the laws of nature as we know them. Now, of course, if we understood what God understands, we might discover that these were not alterations at all. Now, so far as we can tell then he may alter the laws of nature. He may alter the time of a purely natural occurrence so that it takes place at a particular point in his program. For example, when Elijah went up to pray for rain, the coming of the rain was surely just a natural occurrence. But the fact that it came at that time in answer to the seven-fold petition of the prophet Elijah is surely significant. And I think that we are to understand by that that there is some interference, at least so far as we can tell, with what we normally see in nature itself.

Now, there is a text in the Book of the Acts which seems to state this, definitely with reference to our Lord. For we read in Acts chapter 2 verse 22, Peter is describing the ministry of Jesus, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know.” Now, if we were to discuss the question of miracle that would take us far astray, and so we’re just going to assume the fact of miracle. It should be evident to us that there is such a thing, but the nature of it that is another problem we shall consider some other time. But you’ll notice that it is with miracles, wonders, and signs which God performed through him. So I think we can say that from the standpoint of the Bible itself, there is clear evidence that God has apparently interfered in what appears to be the normal and natural kind of life about us.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said, “It is absurd and presumptuous to ask favors of God.” What that means, in effect, is that God is a kind of prisoner within his own universe which he has created. We’ll say something about that in a moment. But he is like a fabulous inventor that someone wrote about who invented a machine which he could not control. He got on the machine and he did not know how to stop it. And so he got on his machine and since he could not get off and did not know how to stop it, he stayed on the machine until he perished from famine and hunger. I think of the story, I don’t know how true it is, but I think it is told of Robert Fulton who was not the inventor of the steamboat but was the first to commercialize the steamboat in the United States. And when the *Clermont* began, it is said that someone was standing on the bank, a farmer, he looked out and saw that boat for the first time, a steamboat, he saw the steam begin to rise or the smoke begin to rise and he said, “It will never move.” And so as it began to move off, he said, “They’ll never stop her.” [Laughter] So I think there are some who feel that this universe is very much like that. God has started it and he cannot stop it, and consequently, the laws of nature have paralyzed him.

Well, the answer of revelation is clear. What about the answer of reason? Is it true that natural law is contrary to prayer? Now, the ghost of David Hume arises here. And if you see any ghosts about the Hume, about the room, it is the Scot David Hume, who is probably most famous for the fact that he wrote a book in which he effectively refuted the Christian claims to miracle for a number of generations. But his sophism has been slain for decades now but we are still seeing the same objections arise. “How do we know that the operations of nature are always uniform? Well, our limited observations are surely not enough to prove it. Our assurance comes from the testimony of others as well as what we see.” So we come to the same exploded argument that Hume himself used to explode Christianity. He argued against such testimony because it was the testimony of human experience and contrary to what he thought was mathematical probability.

Well, let me say these things. If we say that because of natural law, prayer does not make sense, first of all, this view if consistently urged leads to atheism, is not creation itself a miracle? Are we to believe that the omnipotence responsible for nature is too feeble now to interfere with its work? If no miracle then no nature and its supposed uniformities. But nature suggests a first cause as well as its second causes. So if we want to go the whole way and become atheists then fine. Then the question is something else. The question is the question of atheism not the question of the reasonableness of prayer. But second, this view denies God’s liberty. In other words, we are to assume that the divine will, which is responsible for everything, is now shut out of his willed universe. He has willed everything into existence and has created everything but now he cannot interfere. He who creates cannot sustain and govern.

One of my good theologians has a little illustration. He says, “In conclusion, we argue that the perfect adjustment of this machinery of nature gives us the clearest proof at once of the existence and skill of the creative mind.” The more complete the machine, the more cunning the maker. Do they tell us of the unvarying regularity with which the forces of nature act through all recorded time and over all known space amidst their almost boundless complexity? Well, just so much do they exalt our conception of the resources and wisdom of the divine architect. And shall they then tell us that the machinery of nature is so complete that the very maker of it cannot intervene without violating its structure?

This is precisely as though one should say there was a clockmaker of extraordinary skill who made so perfect a clock that he himself could not regulate its motions. He was forsooth so thoroughly successful that the result of his very success in clock making was to banish him in impotency from the control of his own handiwork. And yet that success in the construction is the practical evidence that he possessed boundless skill and power as to such machines. Such is the simple residuum of this much vaunted scientific skepticism.

Now, we, of course, have attended the movies and we know that now since the 20th Century, we do have monsters that we are able to construct who just seem to, after they have been constructed, be beyond our control, Frankenstein. But Frankensteins are only in our flickers. They are not in fact. At least I hope there are no Frankensteins wandering around.

Now, listen. Actually, this objection is an incentive to prayer, too. I find, you know, the more I think about these things, the more that their objections cause me to pray because if there is such a God who is able to create such a universe as this, which is able to work in such beautiful harmony when everything is so complex, well even light of course is refracted into many, many colors and all of the little incidental things that we never even think about and everything works in perfect harmony, well you know that encourages me to prayer because if there is such a being as that, I believe that he can answer all of my petty little needs and meet them very well.

But thirdly, this view denies the law of man’s inherent impulse to pray. This is as much a law of nature as that of electricity or the laws of the electricity. The fact that man gets down upon his knee and prays, and if he doesn’t do that he wants to pray. Well, that’s a law of nature, too.

And, finally, this view denies the evident power of the creature to affect the laws of nature. We even have, I’m not so confident of them, but we even have rainmakers. We have people who can fly planes and counteract the law of gravity. We have people who can do simple things like catch a baseball or throw a baseball up in the air and counteract the law of gravity. Now, this does not prove, but it does at least suggest to us this concatenation of things, that this objection is really a not proven objection to prayer.

And finally, I want to come to this third problem, the problem of man. Now, there are two problems that concern man and they demand just brief consideration and first is the problem of the freedom of man. Does not answered prayer for the conversion of others mean a subversion of their will? Let’s suppose we have a friend. Let’s suppose

that we wish that they were saved. Let’s suppose that we feel that God is leading us to pray for their salvation. And so we get down upon our knees and we pray for them and they are totally indifferent to the gospel. But as a result of our prayer, they who were unwilling become willing and are beautifully converted.

Now, have we not violated their freedom of will in praying for them and God is now worked in their will so that contrary to what they apparently desired before, they now desire to be saved? Of course, I wouldn’t think that would be so bad anyway even if we did that. But, what about that? Is that a subversion of their will? Can God save a man who apart from prayer would not have willed to be saved? Prayer does not bind the will. Prayer frees the will. The poor fellow was bound in sin. Our prayer is the thing that God used as a means to the freedom of his will from sin. Oh now it’s true that as a result of our prayer, God worked. That is, it was the means to what he had determined to be the end that he would be saved through the prayers of others and through the gospel. Those were foreordained means to the end.

But this brings us to the same old question of effectual grace. How is it that Holy Spirit may work on the heart of a man who is unwilling and bring him to the place where he is willing and turns to the Lord? Well, that is the story of every man’s salvation. If it were true that my prayer is responsible for the subverting of his will, then the same thing would be true of every man’s salvation, because every man does not want to be saved. Naturally, there is a period of life in every man in which he does not want to be saved. Listen. There is none that seeketh after God. No, not one. None that seeketh after God. No, not one. So if you see a man seeking after God, what’s happened? The Holy Spirit has worked. The Holy Spirit has worked in his heart and has transformed him so that his will which before was unwilling has now by the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit become willing and he loves it. And I need not go into the explanation again of efficacious grace or the effectual call for that’s precisely what we are talking about. And so the same objection to effectual call is the objection of the problem of the freedom of

man. I like to think of it as man being delivered from his slavery and we’re doing him a good turn when we get him saved.

So capital B the last problem, the problem of the sinfulness of man. How can a sinful creature approach God and move a holy God by prayer? If God is holy, how may we even approach him? And if he is holy, how may we move him so that he in his own plans and purposes accomplishes something as a result of the means of our prayer? Well, the answer, of course, is simple. You’re theologians by now, I hope and you should immediately reply to me, “Why Dr. Johnson that’s very simple because that brings us to the doctrine of sacrifice, that brings us to the doctrine of mediation. It is by virtue of the coming of Jesus Christ and his penal substitutionary sacrifice for us by which he stands as a representative for us and has born our judgment so that now having believed in Jesus Christ, we stand justified before God and in his sight, we are no longer unholy, we are holy. We are saints. We have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. I’m Saint Lewis. There is Saint Howard back there, Saint Kay [indistinct] and others in the audience.

So we are saints and we stand positionally holy before God. And so we come to him in our mediator. And further, we have a high priest at the right hand of the throne of God. His name is Jesus. He has passed through the heavens into the presence of God and as a result of that, God invites us to draw near with confidence. With confidence, why? Because of what he has done to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. He is God’s called and appointed high priest.

And you know, I never get over one thing in the 4th verse of the 5th chapter of this Book of Hebrews, “And no one thinks the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God even as Aaron was so Christ also did not glorify himself so as to become a high priest.” And did you notice? It says “no one takes the honor to himself.” It is an honor to be a high priest. It was an honor for Aaron to be the high priest of Israel. It was an honor for Eleazar to be the high priest, and my dear Christian friend, Jesus Christ regards it as an honor to be our high priest. Isn’t that amazing? Isn’t that amazing that he

would think it’s an honor to serve as my high priest? And so it is by virtue of the mediation of the priest who has offered the sacrifice, the penal substitutionary sacrifice. He is our representative. He is now at the right hand of the Father and he ministers the benefits of that once and for all sacrifice and he invites us to exercise our right and privilege and he takes a great deal of joy in it because it’s an honor for him to serve us.

Now we do not say that all the problems are solved, but prayer certainly seems reasonable. We’re often called upon to believe what transcends reason but we’re never expected to believe that which can be shown to be contrary to reason. The disciples came once to Jesus and said “Lord, teach us to pray.” I commented in our first study that they never said, “Teach us to preach.” They said, “Teach us to pray.”

It is probable that a great deal more is accomplished by praying than by preaching. Though we cannot say a great deal more is accomplished by prayer than the gospel accomplishes. Teach us to pray; intercourse with an ideal companion. What is more wonderful than to pray? It is the secret of life. It’s the secret of power. It’s the secret of fruitfulness. Teach. It is hard and difficult. It is not easy. Teach us to pray. This is like learning theology. It’s like learning a deep subject. Teach us to pray. You don’t learn it overnight. Lord, teach us to pray. None can teach like him and I think we ought to close on that pronoun. Lord, teach “us” to pray. Why don’t you go home tonight and make that your partition by the side of your bed? Lord, teach me to pray.

Next Tuesday night and the following Tuesday night, I will not be able to be here. I am going to Birmingham to give a commencement address, and we’re leaving Wednesday morning of next week and so it’s going to be necessary for me to miss next Tuesday night. And then I’m not coming back until the following Tuesday and I’m just afraid I might not going to get back in time because I’ll be driving from Nashville that day. And so, if you don’t mind, I’m going to miss the next two Tuesday nights but don’t miss the next study because that one is, “Does God Really Answer Prayer” or “The Problem of Unanswered Prayer.” Now, that is a great problem, and I hope that you’ll be here and

perhaps it will answer some of the problems that no doubt we all have about answers to prayer. Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of the study of the word.
Go with us as we part. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.