



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.12 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Relationship between Prayer and God's Preservation

The relationship between our prayers and God's control and authority over everything that happens is a topic that is far beyond our understanding. According to our human thinking, if God has everything already planned out and He knows what is going to happen in the future, how can our prayers to Him make any difference? On the other hand, if our prayers move Him to change His actions, how then can He be in control of all things in advance? As with many things that God's Word teaches, we teach only what the Bible says without any alterations. Only God knows how it all fits together. If we could understand all the ways of God, we would be equal with God rather than being His dependent creatures.

God says that He hears and answers the prayers and petitions of His children. God's prophet Zechariah declared: **"They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; and each one will say, 'The LORD is my God'"** (Zechariah 13:9). David taught that God hears the prayers of His people. David experienced this many times in his own life. He said: **"The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles"** (Psalm 34:17). **"He hears the prayer of the righteous"** (Proverbs 15:29). In His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus talked about prayer at length – both the false prayers of the hypocrites and the genuine prayers of those who trust in Him. He taught His disciples a prayer that they could use as a model for their prayers: the so-called Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:8-13). Jesus also encouraged His disciples to pray by promising that His Father would hear their prayers and answer them. **"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"** (Matthew 7:7).

Since God hears and answers prayer, the prayers of His people have a great influence on God's government of the world. When the apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote to his friend Philemon: **"Prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you"** (Philemon 1:22). Paul says that Philemon's prayers for him would influence God to have Paul released from prison so that he would be able to visit him. Similarly, Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **"I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ"** (Philippians 1:19).

Jesus' brother James wrote about the effects and results of prayer. He said: **"The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up"** (James 5:15). Also: **"Pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit"** (James 5:16-18).

From God's perspective, everything happens according to His will. God has a plan for our lives, and He will see to it that this plan is fulfilled. From our point of view, however, our prayers do make a difference. Things happen differently when we pray about them from what would have happened if we had not prayed about them. God from eternity has woven the prayers of His children into His plan for the world. Since God foreknows what His children are going to pray, He has His answers to their prayers already in mind before they pray. As Jesus said: **"Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him"** (Matthew 6:8). At the same time God wants us to pray to him. Like a loving

Father, He wants to hear from His beloved children, but God does not force His children to pray; we pray of our own free will; we pray because we want to pray. This is beyond our full understanding.

Through Isaiah, God assures us: **“It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear”** (Isaiah 65:24). God hears and answers every prayer, but not necessarily in the way we would like it to be answered. God may answer our prayers by denying what we ask for, because what we want is not the best for us. Jesus taught us to pray to our heavenly Father: **“Your will be done”** (Matthew 6:10). John explains: **“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”** (1 John 5:14). God knows what is best for us and He will answer our prayers in the best way.

Usually our God wants that **“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men”** (1 Timothy 2:1), but there was a time when God said to His prophet Jeremiah: **“Do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you”** (Jeremiah 7:16; also Jeremiah 11:14). In the same way Jesus’ apostle John wrote: **“There is sin leading to death. I do not say he should pray about that”** (1 John 5:16). When we do not know God’s will, we need to leave the answer entirely to Him and say: “If it is Your will.”

We should not let thoughts of God’s providence and preservation prevent us or hinder us from praying. We should pray to our God fervently and believe that He will answer our prayers in the way that best benefits His Church. For **“we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). Jesus, the holy Son of God, found it spiritually necessary to spend great amounts of His time praying to His Father. If Jesus felt this need to pray, how much more should we feel the need for prayer to God in all circumstances!

Questions

1. Why does the doctrine of God’s providence lead some to believe that prayer is futile?
2. Why do we know that prayer to God by a believer is not futile?
3. What did Jesus say about prayer in His Sermon on the Mount?
4. How did Paul express his belief that prayer influences God?
5. How did James express his belief that prayer influences God?
6. How can God answer prayers and at the same time have all things planned out from the beginning?
7. Why does God answer some prayers by denying us what we are asking for?
8. What should we add to our prayers if we do not know what God’s will is?
9. For whom should we make intercession, according to Paul’s words to Timothy?
10. Why did God tell Jeremiah to not pray for the people?
11. What confidence should we have in God when we pray to Him?
12. To what extent is prayer practiced by the Christians in your locale?
13. What is the difference between the prayers of Christians and the prayers of non-Christians?