

Prayer and Prudence: God's Sovereignty and Our Responsibility

Nehemiah 4:9 *Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of [our enemies] we set a watch against them day and night.*

Thus far in our Summer Sermon Series, we've been considering God's sovereignty in the affairs of people. We've seen that God is trustworthy because he is sovereign over people, nations, and nature. As with most doctrines in the Bible, there is a ditch on either side of the road that we must avoid. I.e., we want to avoid the extremes on either side of the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

The ditch on one side of the road is that some people push God's sovereignty to the extent that they deny human responsibility. Since God is sovereign, they claim that we are not responsible for ourselves or our actions. God does it all. Success or failure, achievement or accident are all because of God's activity and we can't do anything about it. We are little more than puppets on strings or computers running the program fed into us. It's a fatalistic approach to life in which we have no control of anything.

In the ditch on the other side of the road are those who emphasize human responsibility to the extent that they deny God's sovereignty. They claim that God depends on us; he's waiting around and hoping that we will act so he can fulfill his plans. God's hands are tied until we give him permission to act. On this view, God depends on man.

A balanced view on this topic affirms both God's sovereignty and human responsibility. We want to stay out of both ditches, both extremes. I don't claim to understand how God's sovereignty and human responsibility work together, but they do. God is sovereign, and man is responsible; we must affirm both and stay out of both ditches.

Let's consider what the Bible says about God's sovereignty and our responsibility. And particularly, I want to focus on the concepts of prayer and prudence.

I. God is sovereign and we are responsible to pray.

Phil 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

A. God's sovereignty encourages us to pray. We pray that God will do something because we believe that he can. God can do whatever he wants—in answer to our prayers, in spite of our prayers, even without our prayers. We pray because we believe in God's power.

But our prayers do not limit or permit God to do anything. The creation cannot prohibit the Creator from any action. The Creator does not need man's approval or consent to act. We need God; he does not need us. If you think that God depends on us, your concept of God is too low and your estimation of man is too high.

- B. We pray because we believe that God is sovereign. In Acts 4, when the Jewish religious leaders threaten Peter and John, commanding them to stop speaking about Jesus, the two apostles begin their prayer by affirming the sovereignty of God.

Acts 4:24, 27-29 [The apostles] ... said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, ... For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. And now, Lord, ... grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word,

They appeal to God as creator and sovereign over human events. God's plan required that Herod, Pilate, and the Gentiles act in a certain way, which they did. Based on God's sovereignty over all of that, they ask God to allow them to continue to proclaim the Gospel boldly. Since God is sovereign, they prayed. Since God is sovereign, they appealed to him to grant them boldness to speak.

- C. Prayer *assumes* the sovereignty of God. If God were not sovereign, we would not have confidence that he could answer our prayers. One reason we pray is that we believe God can change things. God has the power to control anything, even the thoughts and feelings of pagan unbelievers. God has control over people, nations, and nature.

Prayer is an expression of trust in God. We don't know how God is going to answer our prayers, but we express our trust in God when we pray. We ask, "Thy will be done."

- D. Philemon 22 *[Paul asked Philemon to] prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.*

Paul asked Philemon to prepare a guest room because he hoped that God would allow him to be released from prison. God would do this in answer to Philemon's prayers. Note the language: "through your prayers I shall be granted to you." God fulfills his sovereign plan in coordination with our prayers. God is not dependent on our prayers, as if he could not accomplish his will without them. But God may fulfill his promises through our prayers.

- E. Phil 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*

God knows all about us. He knows even the most intimate details of our lives. He knows our thoughts. Before a word is on our tongues, he knows it altogether.

So we are not informing God about anything when we pray. We are worshipping God and communing with him when we pray. We are presenting our requests to him, knowing that he can fulfill them if it is his will because he is sovereign.

1Jo 5:14 *And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:*

Trans: We pray because we have confidence in God's ability to act. In fact, the more confident we are in God's sovereignty, the more fervently we pray. But we also affirm that God is not limited by our prayers. God can do whatever he wants, whether we pray or not. He is the Creator; we are mere creatures. God does not depend on us; we depend on him. We submit ourselves to his will; he does not submit himself to us.

Thus, God is sovereign and we are responsible to pray.

- II. God is sovereign and we are responsible to be prudent.

Nehemiah 4:9 *we made our prayer to our God, and because of [our enemies] we set a watch against them day and night.*

- A. Nehemiah prayed and set a watch. He did both; he trusted in God, yet he also took precautions. He hoped for the best and prepared for the worst. In a word, he was prudent.
- B. God's sovereignty does not reduce our responsibility to pray, nor does it reduce our responsibility to act prudently.
- C. What is prudence?

1. Prudent/Prudence is a biblical word; it's used in the KJV many times. It means "insight, understanding, good sense; shrewdness; discernment."
2. Prudence is thinking ahead and using wisdom to deal with the circumstances at hand. It's using common sense and good judgment to deal with the problems we face.

Quote: To act prudently ... means to use all legitimate, biblical means at our disposal to avoid harm to ourselves or others and to bring about what we believe to be the right course of events.¹

D. Let's look at three biblical examples of people who were prudent—in fact, they employed both prayer and prudence.

1. When Nehemiah was busy building the walls of Jerusalem, the enemies of God threatened to attack (4:7-8). Nehemiah responded by praying for God's protection *and* posting a guard. Some of the people kept up the work on the walls, while others took up spears, shields, and bows to deal with any attacks.

Neh 4:9 Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

Neh 4:17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

2. We find another example of the importance of both prayer and prudence demonstrated in a rather obscure passage:

1 Chron 5:18–20 The sons of Reuben, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh had forty-four thousand seven hundred and sixty valiant men, men able to bear shield and sword, to shoot with the bow, and skillful in war, who went to war. 19 They made war with the Hagarites, Jetur, Naphish, and Nodab. 20 And they were helped against them, and the Hagarites were delivered into their hand, and all who were with them, for they cried out to God in the battle. He heeded their prayer, because they put their trust in Him.

¹ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 108.

These soldiers had prepared for battle; they were skilled in the use of their weapons. Yet they also “cried out to God in the battle,” and the Lord gave them the victory over their enemies. They did not just sit back and did nothing. They trained and fought, but God gave them the victory.

App: Like those soldiers, we have to be prepared to do our duty, and as we are in the midst of the battle, we pray and ask God for victory.

3. A third example of this is seen when Mordecai tells Esther to approach the king to plead for the Jewish people. Approaching the king is a potentially life-threatening action, but Esther is willing to risk her life for the benefit of her people.

And Mordecai says to Esther in this context:

Esther 4:14 For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

If Esther fails to do her duty, God will provide rescue from another place. His plan will not fail. He’s not dependent on Esther to save the Jews. God was not hostage to Haman’s schemes. But God put Esther in that place “for such a time as this,” and Mordecai expected Esther to do what she could—and she did. “If I perish, I perish.” Her actions saved the day.

App: Likewise, God put us in the position we are in, and he expects us to do what we should do. We must be active and intentional about pursuing our goals and also trust that God will act according to his will. We don’t just wait around for God to fulfill his plan. We actively engage and do our duty, trusting that God uses our efforts in fulfilling his plans.

God expects both prayer and effort from us. We use common sense, “insight, understanding, shrewdness, and discernment,” and we pray for God to help us. It’s not one or the other; it’s both prayer and prudence. We work, and we expect God to work. We pray as if all depends on God, and we work as if all depends on us.

4. Where do we get prudence?

a) Prudence comes from God.

1Sa 16:18 ... *[David was] prudent in speech, and ... the LORD is with him.*

2Ch 2:12 *[Solomon was] endowed with prudence and understanding, ...*

James 1:5 *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*

b) Prudence comes from listening to God's Word.

Ps 119:99-100 *I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies [are] my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts.*

Ps 119:130 *The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.*

We develop "insight, understanding, good sense; shrewdness; discernment" through reading and heeding God's word.

c) Prudence comes from listening to wise counsel.

Prov 11:14 *Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.*

Prov 15:22 *Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counselors they are established.*

Prov 20:18 *Every purpose is established by counsel...*

When facing a problem, it's prudent to ask counsel from prudent people.

Prov 13:20 *He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.*

d) Prudence comes from experience and study.

Pr 14:8 *The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, ...*

Pr 14:15 *... the prudent considers well his steps.*

Pr 18:15 *The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge,
And the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.*

Pr 22:3 *A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself,
But the simple pass on and are punished.*

We develop biblical prudence through experience and careful thought. Sometimes we learn it the hard way—through failure or bad experiences. Or we can learn it the easy way—through study and consideration, through acquiring knowledge.

5. We believe in God's providence and we act prudently. We know that God controls the weather, but we also carry an umbrella or snow scraper. God is sovereign over whether our house burns down, but we also take precautions to prevent our house from burning down.

So we trust in God and we also take precautions. That's biblical prudence/wisdom/discernment.

We can be as prudent as possible and carry out our responsibilities to the best of our abilities, but ultimately, it's in the Lord's hands. None of our efforts will have any effect against God's sovereign will. We must recognize our dependence on God. We must submit to his will.

Psalms 127:1 *Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the Lord guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.*

Pr 21:30-31 *There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD. The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the LORD.*

6. An example of *lack* of prudence is evident is the case of Joshua and the Gibeonites (Joshua 9). You may recall that the Gibeonites deceived the Israelites because Joshua and the leaders failed to inquire of the Lord regarding the situation. They failed to pray, and thus they were deceived.

When we lack prudence and fail to pray, we should not be surprised if things go badly for us.

Quote: We must depend upon God to do *for* us what we cannot do for ourselves. We must, to the same degree, depend on Him to *enable us* to do what we must do for ourselves.²

Trans: So we have to do both—pray and be prudent. We both trust God and take wise precautions. We believe in God’s sovereignty and in human responsibility.

III. Practical considerations

A. God’s sovereignty is no excuse of laziness, indifference, or neglect.

Ecclesiastes 10:18 *Because of laziness the building decays, And through idleness of hands the house leaks.*

Proverbs 20:4 *The lazy man will not plow because of winter; He will beg during harvest and have nothing.*

Quote: We are absolutely dependent upon God but, at the same time, we are responsible to diligently use whatever means are appropriate for the occasion.³

App: A practical application of this principle pertains to buying insurance. Is it prudent to buy insurance, or do you believe that God will prevent disasters from happening to you? Or if disaster strikes, you believe that God will provide? Perhaps it is prudent to buy insurance. Perhaps God’s means of providing for us after a disaster is insurance. Or you should save money for such potential disasters.

Or how about retirement—do you save up for retirement or just trust that God will provide everything you need. Is it prudent to save for the future, or do you spend whatever comes in and trust God to take care of you?

Is it prudent to lock the doors of your house and car, or do you leave it open and trust that God will prevent theft?

We can exercise prudence/common sense in all of these areas and still trust in God. It’s not an either-or situation; it’s both-and.

Proverbs 6:6–8 *Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: 7 Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, 8 Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.*

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 112.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 113–114.

B. God's sovereignty is no excuse for fatalism.

1. Fatalism is the attitude "whatever will be will be." I am the victim of circumstances; I can't do anything to change my life.

In the context of the sovereignty of God, fatalism is the belief that God is directly controlling everything so that we have no free will at all. Since God predetermines everything, we are just puppets on strings, pieces on God's chess board.

Fatalism says that if we succeed, it's because God gave us success. If we fail, it's because God caused us to fail. Preparation and prudence mean nothing. God directly controls everything; we have no agency; we are victims of God's will.

We must avoid a fatalistic attitude. If you fail the exam because you did not study, don't blame God. If you are lazy, don't blame God when you lose your job. If you fail to exercise and eat well, don't blame God when you suffer from poor health. If you are irresponsible and unreliable, don't blame God that you can't hold a good job.

We believe in the sovereignty and providence of God. But we also believe in human responsibility. We are responsible to act prudently; we must fulfill our responsibilities. And we also pray and ask God to fulfill his will in our lives.

2. And we must affirm that failure on our part does not frustrate the sovereign plan of God. God is infinitely wise; nothing we do can disrupt his eternal decrees.

Under the sovereignty of God, we strive to be both prudent and prayerful. We trust God and we take precautions. We affirm both God's sovereignty and human responsibility. We work as though everything depends on us, and we pray as if everything depends on God. We are both prayerful and careful.

I can't explain how these two things work together, but they do. I affirm them both. We must avoid both extremes, both ditches on the sides of the road. We don't emphasize God's sovereignty to the extent that it reduces our responsibility, and we don't emphasize human action to the point that it denies God's sovereignty. God is sovereign, *and* we are responsible. We work, and he works. We pray, and we act prudently. We plan for the future while recognizing that the future is in God's hands.

Let's be both prayerful and prudent.