

Prayer and The Purpose of God

(With a Special Emphasis on Suffering)

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Shortly after Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost came to the point of bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at noon on a particular day. That morning they met in the president's office with Dr. Chafer for prayer that God would provide. In that prayer meeting was a man by the name of Harry Ironside. When it was his turn to pray, he prayed in his characteristic manner: "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money."

While they were praying, a tall Texan with boots on and an open collar stepped up to the business office and said, "I just sold two carloads of cattle in Ft. Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal but it fell through, and I feel compelled to give the money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's the check!" A little secretary took the check and, knowing how critical things were financially, went to the door of the prayer meeting and timidly tapped. When she finally got a response, Dr. Chafer took the check out of her hand. It was exactly the amount of the debt! When he looked at the name, he recognized the cattleman in Ft. Worth, and turning to Dr. Ironside said, "Harry, God sold the cattle!"

What does the Bible teach concerning God's sovereign purpose and the prayers of His people? If God ordained everything then why pray? How do the prayers of God's people interact with God's decreed and ordained purposes for our lives? This is what we want to discover in our present study. Many Christians struggle with the significance of prayer in light of God's sovereignty and His eternal purposes for our lives. It's my prayer that this study will help us to put things in balance. More often than not an unbalanced and unbiblical approach to God's sovereignty causes confusion and can also put out the fire of our prayer lives. So, let's keep the fire of our prayer lives burning and remember that God's purpose will never minimize the need to continue in fervent and persistent prayer (Col. 4:2) so that we might receive God's blessing and help.

The Purpose of God

Fatalism says all things are controlled by an impersonal force and generally speaking is a pessimistic philosophy. Fatalism has no part with the providence of God or with the people of God. God is in control of the events of everything, but this truth does not promote a fatalistic philosophy of the universe and time. The sovereignty of God means that God is the principle, chief, or supreme being in relation to position and power. As the sovereign God He exercises this power by creating a perfect plan (Acts 15:18) or purpose (Eph. 1:11; 3:11; Isa. 14:24) that is all-inclusive or comprehensively includes everything that happens or occurs in the universe – even evil (Prov. 16:4).

“God’s in His Heaven -
All’s right with the world.”

Ultimately this means that God is in complete control of all things that occur. God was even in control of the introduction of evil into the world. This does not mean that God created evil or is the author of evil for if this were true God could no longer be holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). Since God is eternally holy (Malachi 3:6) He would never create anything that is morally wrong (Isa. 48:11).

On the other hand, the presence of evil does not mean that evil was an afterthought with God, or that evil was not designed to be part of the outworking of His sovereign purpose in the universe. If this were the case, God would no longer be sovereign and in control of the events of His universal kingdom (Ps. 93:1-2). What the presence of evil means is that in the outworking of God’s eternal purpose He permitted evil to enter the world and gave mankind the freedom to choose his own evil path. As a result, sin and evil could enter the human race. Sin was in God’s eternal purpose or plan and was introduced into the world by His sovereign permission and yet man was the author of sin/evil when Adam plunged the world into sin (Rom. 5:12). And yet let us remember that even sin and evil in the world can bring praise to God (Ps. 76:10; Ex. 11:9; Numb. 14:21) by magnifying the greatness of God (Rom. 9:19) and His love and grace (Eph. 1:6).

The Scriptures reveal that the sovereign God or supreme being in the universe chooses to direct the affairs of this world according to His own plan and purpose (1 Chronicles 29:10-11; Psalm 103:19-22; 145:13-18). The sovereign outworking of God's purpose or plan can be further defined as the providence of God. God's providence speaks of His continuous activity and control in guiding and directing the events and affairs of the world and His people to their intended goal or purpose (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:35). The providence of God brings to fruition the decrees of God which are actually God's all-inclusive eternal purpose (past, present, future) being worked out in connection with everything that occurs (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:9, 11; 3:11) and which is based upon God's wise and holy counsel (Eph. 3:10; 1 Cor. 1:24).

These decrees are God's counsel (purpose) or what He intends to bring to pass in regards to the universe and even our own personal lives (Isa. 14:24 – "Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand"; Isa. 46:10 – "declaring the end from the beginning"; Ps. 33:11 – "The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever"; Rom. 8:28 – "to them who are the called according to his purpose"). There is no change within God's decrees and eternal purpose (Prov. 16:33; 1 Kings 22:34) even though some decrees are permissive (tolerant) in the sense that God indirectly allows them to take place at the hands of wicked people in the midst of a fallen world (Matt. 18:7; Acts 2:23).

Such things as sin, disease, death, war, rape, abortion, child pornography and molestation, starvation, aids, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes that claim the lives of thousands of people, and which are looked upon as evil and frightening by man are all part of the permissive decrees of God (Isa. 45:7), which He allows to occur in the midst of a fallen society. All of these things are the acts of God. No matter which way you cut the pie God is still in control of the events of the universe and our own personal lives. God is still on the throne!

Psalm 103:19

"The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all."

Psalm 93:1-2

“The LORD reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the LORD is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved. Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting.”

I remember when an insurance agent was in my home. He said to me, “You need to be prepared financially for we all know that things just happen.” Of course, this is a secular or humanistic viewpoint that dismisses God’s sovereignty and providence from the events of our lives. I shared with Him by belief in the providence and purpose of God over our lives or how God has a working providential plan that He is bringing to pass for each one of our lives. Praise the Lord that things just don’t happen! God is providentially working and He never moves without purpose or plan (Job 23:10).

“God never moves without purpose or plan
When trying His servant and molding a man.
Give thanks to the Lord though your testing seems long;
In darkness He giveth a song.

O rejoice in the Lord, He makes no mistakes.
He knoweth the end of the each path that I take.
For when I am tried and purified,
I shall come forth as gold.”

God’s providence (the outworking of His decrees) extends to demoting people (Ps. 75:7), the death of people (Job 14:5), and even making people rich or poor (1 Sam. 2:6-8; Prov. 22:1). In His providence, we do know that God provides for the needs of His people (Phil. 4:19), cares for them (1 Pet. 5:7), gives them safety (Ps. 4:8), strength (Isa. 40:29), protection (Ps. 121:3), provides good things for them (Ps. 5:12; James 1:17), and even allows affliction to enter their lives (Ps. 119:75; Job 13:15). In general, God makes all things work together for our good (Rom. 8:28). Even the things that seem tragic were meant for our ultimate good (Gen. 50:20). In fact, in the same context of God’s eternal saving purpose for our lives, as His people, is our conformity to His Son (Rom. 8:28-29 – “conformed to the image of his son”). This should be true even in our daily living. To

be more like Jesus Christ becomes a key focal point in God's purpose or decrees being worked out in connection with our lives.

“Be like Jesus this my song,
In the home and in the throng;
Be like Jesus all day long!
I would be like Jesus.”

So we can conclude by our introductory study that God's purpose or the decrees of God refer to His sovereign plan that He intends to bring to fruition in our lives. Thus, God's providence and purpose work together. They are two sides of the same coin. God works providentially in our lives to bring His purpose to fruition. But what about prayer? Where does prayer fit into the picture? If God has an ordained purpose for our lives and in His providence is going to bring this purpose to pass, then why pray? This is good question that we need to answer.

Prayer and Providence

Some hold that prayer can have no real effect upon God or change things (salvation of souls, sickness, serious circumstances), since He has already decreed just what He will do in every instance. But that is an extreme position (hyper-Calvinism) that misunderstands the sovereign workings of an all-wise God with human responsibility. Paul prayed for the salvation of lost people (Rom. 10:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:20) believing God could save them and he prayed for his own healing believing God could heal him (2 Cor. 12:7-8). God can still be sovereign and in control of the events of the universe, the salvation of people, and our own personal lives, even when He allows mankind to exercise His own freedom of choice and privilege to pray. God can still be in control of the salvation of souls and the events of time even when He introduces a “whosoever will” Gospel (John 3:16; Rev. 22:17) or a “prayer plan” (James 5:16) that can bring about His intended goal or purpose for a person's life.

Consider the matter of prayer. The Bible says, “ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2). If we want something that we do not have, then we should ask God for it. This verse among many others must not be overlooked or ignored. Jesus said in John 16:24 says “... ask,

and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” 1 John 3:22 says, “And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.” This is the promise of answered prayer. More on these verses later. The point is this. If we don’t pray, we won’t receive what God wants us to have in relationship to our everyday living. No matter what conclusion we come to in regards to God’s sovereignty we cannot overlook the importance of prayer as the means to fulfilling God’s intended goal or purpose for our lives. It can be explained in this way.

We can summarize in this way. God does some things only in answer to prayer (James 5:17-18; Jer. 33:3); He does some other things without anyone praying (Matt. 5:45; Prov. 21:1); and He does some things contrary to the prayers made (2 Samuel 12:15-18; 2 Cor. 12:8-9). In this way God remains perfectly sovereign, and yes, in control of the events of the universe and our own personal lives as believers.

Because God is omniscient He knows everything that will occur in our lives. This is because God has ordained it to come to pass based upon His eternal purpose or counsel (Acts 15:18; Rom. 8:28). Nothing is a surprise to God. In fact, God knows all about our lives even before we are born (Ps. 139:16) and the purpose He wants to fulfill in our lives (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15). This means that God never leaves the future open to change and He never alters His eternal plans based upon future human responses (open theism). God always fulfills His plans according to His purpose, which He has purposed in eternity past, in relationship to mankind (closed theism).

God has everything planned out in His past eternal counsel (Isa. 46:10-11). However, the question we need to ask is this: “What has occurred in God’s past eternal counsel that allows Him to give an open invitation of salvation to all people without exception or an open invitation to His own people to pray and expect answers to prayer?” How we answer this question will help us to understand the mystery of God’s eternal purpose coming to fruition, through a man’s faith and prayers, as mankind exhibits his freedom to act as a responsible being and agent toward God’s proposals, which will ultimately bring to pass God’s decreed purpose for everything that occurs.

In answering this question one must conclude that God has originally set a sovereign plan in motion, whereby He chooses in some way to interweave mankind's responses within His eternal decrees. In other words, God chooses to make His decrees work without violating the free will of man. For instance, if God wanted to raise up a man to do a certain task He would specifically choose an Abraham, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, or Paul (among many others) who would make a personal decision to respond to His proposals.

In other words, God chooses people for specific purposes that would obviously want to respond to His ordained plan and purpose, so that all will come to pass as prearranged by God in eternity past. In this way God would allow His eternal purpose to be brought to fruition in the lives of specific people that He originally chose to perform certain tasks even when their response was prefigured into God's original choice. God purposes what He wants a man to do and then makes sure he does it, not forcibly or by overriding man's choice, but by interweaving a person's favorable response to His ordained purpose.

The plan of God includes both the end and the means. Thus, God can create a specific plan for the lives of people in eternity past while at the same time interweaving or linking this plan with people's choices which will ultimately fulfill God's intended purpose for their lives, whether it's for salvation or some particular service. Then, in eternity present God's eternal decrees would come to pass as He originally planned for these people. This occurs when they actually believe and enter into His calling and service (1 Cor. 1:26; Eph. 4:1; 1 Tim. 1:12).

In God's omniscience and the outworking of His purpose, which includes man's freedom to respond to His overtures (moves or proposals), He has allowed mankind to exhibit freedom, so that he can believe, pray, and receive answers to prayer (John 6:47; John 15:7). On some grand scale, man's response is intricately interwoven into the fabric of God's past eternal purpose, whether it's His saving purpose to elect a company of people (the Church) who respond favorably to His offer of salvation, or whether it's His daily purpose to answer prayer that is done in accordance with His will. Allow me to repeat something for emphasis. The plan of God includes both the ends and the means. God chooses to fulfill His decrees without

violating the free will of man. In other words, God has allowed mankind to freely act and move in such a way to fulfill His purpose for their lives, which was ordained to take place in the past according to God's sovereign plan. Mankind's free acts can bring to fruition God's ordained purpose for the lives of people, whether it's God's general electing purpose to save a company of people (the corporate Church), or a specific purpose in relationship to a prayer request we make before God.

Thinking Deeper: Remember that God not only knows everything that will actually occur but all things that could possibly occur in relationship to man's response to Him through faith and praying. Yes, God knows all things that could possibly take place in people's lives based upon the right circumstances that He chooses to present to them (1 Sam. 23:11; Matt. 11:21, 23; Isa. 48:18). Therefore, God can in eternity past base some of His decisions and choices on how people react to His proposals knowing beforehand their responses to His offers. This means that an omniscient and all-wise God makes the first move to declare His purpose and choice for the lives of people (John 15:16). At the same time God allows human responsibility to enter into His eternal purpose and decision, knowing what mankind will do in response to His revelation to them. God makes a plan and includes those who want to follow His plan. This does not make God less sovereign but magnifies His sovereignty over time, eternity, people, and their personal lives.

To think that God can create a perfect plan that includes man's choices is a marvel of His sovereignty and proves that God is the supreme power and ruler who can do whatever He chooses. Thus, in God's ordaining purpose He takes into account the responses of people toward His overtures (proposals to them). In His perfect sovereignty and omniscience, God knew all the possible blessings that He wants to give to mankind and all the possible responses that man can have toward His proposals. With this perfect knowledge God has interwoven man's faith and personal prayers into the outworking of His eternal decrees, and in His all-wise providence He works out His sovereign and ordained purpose in response to man's faith and prayers (Eph. 1:11-13; Acts 12:12-17; Mark 11:24; James 4:3; Col. 4:3). In other words, God has chosen to fulfill many of His decrees only as God's people pray. This has been God's plan from the

beginning. Blessing can only come as we pray and this must mean that God's purpose is fulfilled only as we pray.

2 Chronicles 7:14

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

The decrees of God include all the means essential to arriving at the ends and these means are as essential as the ends. Certain means and procedures, such as the free will of man, personal faith, the sharing of God's Word (evangelism), or the prayers of His own people, allows human responsibility to enter the arena of God's purpose, program, or counsel in that through responsible human actions (witnessing, praying, believing) God's decrees actually come to pass. When it comes to prayer we must remember this. Prayer moves the hand that moves the world!

Several illustrations might help us to see how God's decreed purpose and man's own response moves the hand of God. Does God know the day we are going to die? The answer is yes, He does. But could we die a day sooner? The answer is no. Then why do we eat? The answer is this. We eat to live. The means that a person's eating is essential to their living and if they don't eat they will die. At this point the illustration can very easily and uselessly move into the realm of the hypothetical. Suppose I do not eat? Then I will die. Would that be the day God planned that I should die? These are questions that do not even need to be asked or answered.

The point is this. Just eat! Let's change the illustration. Does God know who is going to respond to salvation and be saved? Yes. Then why must a person repent and believe on Christ for salvation? It's because this is the only way a person can be saved and become part of God's sovereign plan (2 Pet. 3:9; Acts 16:31). Let's change the illustration one more time. Has God already pre-planned the answers to my prayers? Yes. Then why pray? Because those answers will only come to pass when I pray. We should not concentrate on hypothetical questions but simply become responsible and concentrate on doing God's will, which is to pray and ask for God's

salvation and blessing. As we pray and receive answers to prayer we can know that these answers were all prefigured into God's eternal purpose for our lives (Rom. 8:28).

In short, God has allowed enough flexibility in His sovereign program so that people can pray and make a difference in their own personal lives and the lives of others. Through the prayers of His people, God has chosen to fulfill His eternally decreed purpose, which He has mapped out in eternity past. God in His infinite knowledge and wisdom knows everything that will occur, even before it takes place, and yet God has chosen to include man's response to His salvation offer and commandments to pray as part of His intricate eternal purpose. God does not mock men. He gives men the power of choice, which will determine their fate and blessings.

Joshua 24:15, "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve..." Thus, man's choice to serve Him or pray to Him and receive answers to prayer is remarkably woven together with God's purpose. This means that through responsible prayer God has intricately woven together His eternal sovereign purpose and the way His eternal purpose is brought to fruition in our lives. The God who ordained the end also ordained the means to the end! The God who ordained His purpose from the beginning also ordained prayer as the means to bringing about His purpose. In God's plan the means are just as important as the end and cannot be separated. Only a sovereign God, who is infinitely wise and full of knowledge, could create such a plan as this.

We must pause and worship God at this point! This is what Paul did in Romans 11:33 when saying: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

Only God could ordain a sovereign purpose for our lives in eternity past and see that it is brought to pass in our present lives in response to faith and prayer. The point is this. If we do not pray for the things that we might receive by prayer, we do not get them (James 4:3). It's not God's fault but our own fault. We cannot put the fault on election, predestination, foreordination, or any other determinative purpose of God for dying and going to hell or not receiving God's blessings in our

life. The problem lies in us who need to become responsible to what God tells us to do.

John 5:40

“And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

James 4:2

“... ye have not, because ye ask not.”

If you don't believe on Christ for salvation or pray you won't receive the spiritual blessings (James 1:6-7; Phil. 4:6). God has allowed within His purpose and program to refuse salvation to those who do not believe but also refuse to grant His personal blessing to those Christians who fail to pray. We might add once again that if God wants some things done for which no one prays, He will do them without anyone praying (Dan. 4:35). In addition, if we pray for things contrary to God's will, He refuses to grant them (James 4:3; 1 John 5:14-15). Thus, there is a perfect harmony between God's purpose and providence, and man's freedom to pray and receive answers to prayer within the scope of God's sovereign plan. More often than not the fulfillment of God's eternal decrees are worked out through the ministry of prayer! God has chosen to fulfill His decrees or purpose through the ministry of prayer.

This is why the believer is told to pray (Matt. 6:9; Col. 4:2) and ask persistently (Luke 11:5-10) for his benefit. Prayer expresses our confidence in God for help and prepares our heart for answers as we wait on God. God knows what we truly have need of even before we ask (Matt. 6:8) and yet God encourages us to pray promising to answer our prayers (Matt. 21:22; John 14:13-14) as they line up with His will (1 John 5:14-15) and are in accordance with our needs (Phil. 4:19). The promise of answered prayer comes when we abide in Christ and His Word abides in us (John 15:7; Col. 3:16) so that we pray according to His will and get answers to our prayers. When our desires line up with God's desires, He will answer our prayers in relationship to our requests. In return, answered prayer glorifies God (John 14:13). We are told to ask for definite requests (James 1:5) and by faith (nothing wavering) believe that God will grant the request (Matt. 21:21-22; 1 Cor. 13:2) that lines up with His sovereign purpose and will.

Of course, the disciples with their supernatural gifts from the Lord were to possess a faith that could do the supernatural (move mountains) to prove their credentials as God's messengers (2 Cor. 12:12). But faith does not always include moving mountains. It may involve walking over the mountain or through the valley (Psalm 23:4). We might have the kind of faith it takes to move mountains and subdue kingdoms (Heb. 11:33-34) but do we possess the kind of faith that is needed for trials and testing (Heb. 11:33-37 – note "and others"). It takes even greater faith to walk through the valley of testing and trial and God is pleased with this kind of faith as well as a mountain type of faith (Heb. 11:6). Nevertheless, the prayers that we make to God which are in keeping with His will are assured of being answered as we pray in faith.

Why Unanswered Prayer?

One reason for unanswered prayer may be due to man's spiritual deviation in his Christian life. Unanswered prayer may be due to sin in the Christian life (Ps. 66:18) or marital trouble (1 Pet. 3:7). Another cause for unanswered prayer is praying with a selfish motive (James 4:3) or asking for something that is not for our good or best interest (Matt. 7:11). God will only give us things in keeping with His will (Rom. 12:2) and that contribute to our well-being (Jas. 1:17; 1 Tim. 6:17). Failure to receive answered prayer may also be due to not meeting the conditions of God's prayer promises – lacking faith (James 1:7), not abiding in Christ and being filled with the Word of God (John 15:7), not obeying God's commands (John 14:15; 1 John 3:22). But this is not always the case! Sometimes we might pray in faith for healing, as we abide in Christ, and yet God wants us to pray in a different way and answer in a different way (2 Cor. 12:9).

Like Paul, the believer can abide in Christ (John 15:7) and pray through the many promises of God's Word and receive answers to His prayers – sometimes healing answers, sometimes answers for grace, strength, patience, contentment, peace, etc. One thing is for sure, when we abide in Christ our prayers will not be selfish or one-directional but multifaceted, and as we pray through God's truth and promises, we will receive answers to our prayers that will enable us to be delivered from trials or pass through trials. One way or another God answers prayer. The abiding believer prays through many

portions of Scripture. He takes to heart what God says in all the Word of God realizing that God can answer prayer in many ways. More will be said on this later in another section.

Sometimes God answers directly (Acts 12:12-13). Other times He delays His answer (Ps. 37:7, 34). This is another reason why prayer is not answered in the way we petition. It may be due to God's delay. Let God work in His own time. God's delays do not mean God's denials. God may choose to answer your prayer for something specific but has reason for you to wait (Isa. 40:31). We may not be ready for the answer or the people we are praying for may not be ready for answer. Then too, God may choose to answer our prayer in a different manner or in a way we do not recognize (2 Cor. 12:7-9; Rom. 15:30-32 with Acts 27:1 and 28:16; see also Phil. 1:12-13). In the case of Paul, He prayed for healing but received grace; he prayed for deliverance but was put in bonds.

Once upon a time there was a man who went hunting. He was hunting bears. As he trudged through the forest looking for bears, he came upon a large and steep hill. He climbed the hill and, just as he was pulling himself up over the last outcropping of rocks, a huge bear met him nose to nose. The bear roared fiercely. The man was so scared that he lost his balance and fell down the hill with the bear not far behind. On the trip down the hill the man lost his gun. When he finally stopped tumbling, he found that he had a broken leg. Escape was impossible and so the man, who had never been particularly religious (in fact he was hunting on Sunday morning), prayed: "God, if you will make this bear a Christian I will be happy with whatever lot you give me for the rest of my life." The bear was no more than three feet away from the man when it stopped dead in its tracks, looked up to the heavens quizzically, and then fell to its knees and prayed as a good Christian would do: "Lord bless this food of which I am about to partake. Amen."

I know this is a rather silly illustration but any way you look at it God does answer our prayers. In fact, denial is an answer to prayer (1 Kings 19:4). Sometimes God says "No." I have thanked God on several occasions for not answering my prayer in the exact way I prayed. But this too is for our benefit and we must rest in the providence of God over our lives when a prayer is not answered in

the way we think it should be answered. With this in mind Adoniram Judson said: "I have lived to thank God that all my prayers have not been answered."

Let us remember that the prayer promises of Jesus given in the Gospel accounts (Matt. 21:22; John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23-24) cannot be misconstrued to mean that we will receive every petition that we ask for without considering God's will and program for our lives. Furthermore, no prayer promise that Jesus gave would ever contradict His other prayer promises (1 John 5:14-15). The point and principle behind these verses in the gospel accounts is that we must pray in faith and know that God is willing and ready to answer our prayers and will answer our prayers in relationship to whatever ("all things") we pray for when they line up with God's will and sovereign decree for our lives. This is because praying in faith and receiving answers to prayer is how many of God's decrees are worked out in our lives.

When we pray and receive answers to our prayers, or do not receive an answer in the specific way we have prayed, we can know that God's sovereign will is always working together for our good in our lives (Rom. 8:28). In His sovereign program, which contains a certain amount of flexibility with man's choices, God has allowed the prayers of His saints to accomplish His sovereign purpose for their lives. From man's perspective God has left the future partially open to interact with man's prayers. But from God's perspective, who knows the end from the beginning, the future is already determined. This is because God's purpose and man's choice were already intricately conceived in the omniscient mind of God and woven together in the past counsel or purpose of God.

So let us reiterate an important point. The God who ordains the end also ordains the means to the end – effective, Biblical, and faithful praying. God wants us to be part of His sovereign work on earth as we pray about our own lives and the lives of others (Eph. 6:18). God weaves our prayers into the completion or bringing to pass of His sovereign purpose.

Facts are stubborn things. If we want God to work, we must pray. We decide how involved we want to become in the outworking of God's

purpose, which is a purpose that comes to fruition through God answering the prayers of His people. The God who ordained the end also ordained the means to the end. The end is God's purpose but the means to that end is the ministry of prayer. God's plan works in connection with God's people praying!

So why pray?

- So we can worship God (Psalm 5:3).
- So we can express thanksgiving to God (Phil. 4:6; 2 Cor. 2:14).
- So we can praise God (Acts 2:47).
- So we can confess our sins (1 John 1:9).
- So we can petition God (Phil. 4:6; Rom. 1:9-10).
- So we can rely or depend upon God in a greater way (2 Chron. 14:11; Psalms 18:6; 57:2; 61:1-2; 62:8; Mark 10:47-51; Heb. 4:16; 1 Pet. 5:7).
- So we can fellowship with God (Luke 6:12; 1 John 1:7).
- So we can get answer to our prayers (Jer. 33:3).
- So our faith can increase (Mr. 9:24).
- So we can intercede for others (Eph. 6:18).
- So people will be saved (Rom. 10:1; 1 Tim. 2, 1, 4; Luke 10:2).
- So we can know God's will through the specific way that He answers our prayer (1 John 5:14-15).

Robert law has said:

“Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in Heaven, but for getting God's will done on earth.”

We conclude this section by reiterating once again that the sovereign will of God comes to fruition through the decrees of God (His plans or counsel He has determined to happen – Isa. 46:10; Ps. 33:11; Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:11; Heb. 6:17). However, the working out of many decrees involves man's prayers and getting answers to specific prayers and petitions sent up to God. This is the mystery of prayer and the sovereignty of God working together. God's decrees are formed in eternity past but they are worked out or executed in the present through prayer. This is why prayer is so vital to the Christian life and church ministry.

John Newton

“Thou art coming to a King
Large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much.”

Abiding in Christ and Prayer

Because of the importance of this subject matter I've decided to put it in a separate heading and discuss it further. Abiding in Christ means to remain in fellowship and communion with the Lord and experience a close intimacy with the Lord as a result of our union with Christ. But remember that the abiding life is also the purging life (John 15:2). As we experience God's pruning program and purpose for our lives we will increase our fruitfulness (faith, joy, peace). The purging process comes through the cleaning process of His Word (John 15:3). As we walk with the Lord in close communion He reveals things in our lives that need to be changed and we are pruned in a way to develop greater fruit for the Lord. Many Christians today don't want to read the Bible or attend a church where they experience God's pruning process. They choose to rather stunt their growth process by refusing the pruning process. Feel-good church ministries do not prune God's children.

As we come to John 15:7, we discover that when we pray abiding in Christ and having His truth abiding in our hearts, we can pray and receive answers to prayer (“have what ye will”). If His word is in our hearts, we will not pray lopsided or only one- dimensional (“Lord heal me”) since God does not always choose to heal (Ex. 4:11; 2 Cor. 12:9; 2 Tim. 4:20). Instead, we will broaden our Biblical praying, pray more intelligently, and ask God not only for healing but also to help us learn what He wants to teach us in the time of suffering. We can pray for greater growth in grace, faith, patience, and maturity. In other words, we will have what we ask for only as we pray in accordance with the truth of His Word. We will pray allowing all the Scriptures to guide our thinking and praying. The abiding believer fellowships with God and meditates in God's law day and night (Psalm 1:2).

As a result, the abiding believer knows God's mind in relationship to sickness and the sorrows of life. He will pray in faith realizing that God may choose to answer his prayer in many different ways and with many possible scenarios – complete healing, partial healing, greater strength, greater faith, maturity or deepening inner joy or peace. Furthermore, the abiding believer knows that God will choose to answer one of these prayers in the way he has prayed since He has asked in respect to all that is revealed in God's divine revelation concerning illness. It's here we see the relationship between prevailing prayer and the Word of God. We abide in Christ by allowing the Scriptures to guide our thinking (John 15:7). The Bible is the Christian's prayer book. For example, when an abiding believer prays "what ye will" he will not pray selfishly or with tunnel vision (only one way) but pray in accordance with God's over-all plan and purpose for suffering, as revealed in Scripture, and will receive answers to his praying in one or more areas.

Dr. Lehman Strauss has said:

"The Word must be implanted in the heart, meditated upon, and obeyed. It is then, and only then, that our prayers are formed in accordance with the will of God. It is easy to deceive ourselves in this."

We must learn to pray the Bible way (Matt. 4:4). When we pray forth God's truth and promises the Lord will answer His saint's prayers. For instance, while we abide in Christ and the truth, we can pray for healing and thank God for His ability to heal us (Psalm 103:1-3). We can pray knowing that if anybody is going to heal us it will be God. On the other hand, since God does not always choose to heal, we must also pray claiming His many promises concerning abiding grace, strength, inner rest, and peace (John 14:27).

In any case, we can pray through all of God's truth and claim the promises of God's Word as we pray, and as we pray according to God's will and Word, we will ask "what we will" and receive answers to our prayers. This is because our desires are God's desires and our prayers line up with God's Word. Remember that the abiding believer is sensitive to God's truth and will for his life in every situation. It may not be healing in every instance but there are other ways God can answer our prayers. Knowing the truth will enable us to pray

intelligently, according to God's Word and purpose for our lives, so that we can expect answers to our prayers.

This is exciting and thrilling to think about! Many times we feel God does not answer our prayers but this is because we pray selfishly and with tunnel vision (James 4:3). We must learn to pray specifically but at the same time make sure our prayers line up with God's Word. None of us can claim to know the exact manner God will answer our prayers in relationship to suffering or some other request. So the believer, who has God's Word abiding in him, will always pray recognizing various reasons for suffering and trials.

We can pray for the development Christian character (1 Pet. 1:7 - faith; James 1:3 - patience; Job 23:10), bringing forth more fruit (John 15:2), future reward (James 1:12), to dispose of self and pride (2 Cor. 1:4 12:7), to experience God's grace (2 Cor. 12:9) and peace (John 14:27), to learn of God's consolation or comfort (2 Cor. 1:7-10; Ps. 119:50), to lead us into a deeper prayer life (Ps. 119:107; 153), to help us cling to the promises of His Word (Ps. 119:71), to keep us from straying (Ps. 119:61; Jam. 5:15), to help us understand His providence (Ps. 119:75; Rom. 8:28), to give us opportunities to proclaim Christ (Phil. 1:12), to bring about God's will in our life (1 Pet. 4:19), to glorify God (John 11:4), and to teach us contentment (Phil. 4:11). When the abiding believer prays with God's purposes in mind he will pray according to His Word asking to grow in his patience, faith, contentment, and love for the Lord, knowing that God will answer his prayer in one or more ways that he prays. This is because his praying was done according to truth and not done selfishly and without consideration of God's will.

Eliza M. Hickok wrote:

"I know not by what methods rare,
But this I know: God answers prayer.
I know not if the blessing sought
Will come in just the guise I thought.
I leave my prayer to him alone
Whose will is wiser than my own."

When we pray abiding in Christ, and when we allow His Word to abide in our hearts (John 15:7), we will meditate on various ways that

God may choose to answer our prayer in any given situation. Sometimes we need to broaden our prayer lives as we pray. This comes by knowing the Word of God and all the possible ways God might answer our prayers. As we pray in this discerning manner God promises to answer our prayers since they measure up to His will as revealed in some portion of His Word. The abiding believer broadens his prayer life and casts Himself upon God's greater purposes for his life and the many promises that He gives to the believer (Col. 1:9). The abiding believer will pray through many portions of the Word of God and many promises (Ps. 119:76-78; 130, 133) knowing that God will answer him as he asks for greater wisdom, faith, patience, grace, and contentment to face life's trials and perplexities. Those things that we need are the very things God will give to us. He will supply our every need (Phil. 4:19).

Abiding is the secret of a successful prayer life. The closer we get to the Lord ("abide in me") the more we will get to know Him through His Word ("my words abide in you") and as a result the more we will understand His will. The more our will agrees with His, the more we can be sure of having our prayers answered. Effective prayer is based on His word remaining in believers. Christ's word condition should control a believer's mind so that his prayers conform to the Father's will. Since his prayer is in accord with God's will, the results are certain - it will be given you (John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15).

D. L. Moody once said:

"I'd rather be able to pray than be a great preacher; Jesus Christ never taught his disciples how to preach, but only how to pray."

Allow me to elaborate just a little more on the importance of the abiding life which promises answered prayer. Let's face it. Many times we do not get answers to our prayers simply because we are not abiding in Christ. The believer's prayer life can only grow and mature as they abide in Christ and know the truth of the Word of God, which reveals God's general will for the various situations they face in life, such as suffering and trial. The Spirit-filled believer will not only pray for healing but also for God's peace, contentment, strength, a growing faith, acquired Christlikeness during their time of suffering, greater love for the Lord, a closer walk with the Lord, and a new appreciation for God's blessings. These are equally valid prayer

requests that the Spirit-led and Spirit-taught believer will pray so that he might receive answers to his prayers. His prayers never become one-dimensional but Word-directed.

The Spirit-filled believer (Eph. 5:18-22) is the word-filled believer (Col. 3:16-18). A simple comparison of these two texts will indicate that this is true (note the similar results). The Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum but helps us pray according to the truth of God's Word. Thus, a Christian who is filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit will be under the whole authority of Scripture and will not pray selfishly and expect God to always answer his prayer in only one possible way. Rather, the Spirit-led and Spirit-taught believer will consider the broader picture of God's will as found in the entirety of His Word.

The Spirit-directed Christian will pray claiming all the promises of God's Word for the situation that he faces in life, while at the same time he understands that God might choose to work in many different ways. In other words, the Spirit-filled believer can pray through the truths of Scripture and then learn to rest in the sovereign way that God chooses to answer his prayers. He will realize that God answers prayer in many ways. The joy of answered prayer comes in many ways but only the Spirit filled believer can see the many ways that God answers prayer. We can be sure that God will always answer our prayers as we pray according to truth and that God will implant within our hearts the right desires in our prayer lives as we know God's nature and truth (Ps. 37:4).

For example, as we pray and plead the multifaceted promises of God (healing according to His will, sustaining strength, abiding peace, promised wisdom, acquired patience, daily contentment, spiritual growth in trial) we can do so praying in faith, like a persistent neighbor knocking at the door, believing that God answers prayer (Luke 11:9-10). We can also pray knowing that God has promised to bring His sovereign plan to fruition through the prayers of His people. The outworking of various portions of God's sovereign plan (Rom. 8:28) has been designed by God to operate through the ministry of fruitful, faithful, and fervent prayer (James 5:16-18).

We can be sure that God always hears the prayers of His children when their hearts are clean (Ps. 66:18). He also will always answer in

the exact way we pray when we pray in accordance with God's will and truth. Therefore, we are promised rich answers to prayer. God promises that He hears and answers the prayers that line up with His will (1 John 5:14-15). That is why we must always acknowledge the Father's will as Christ did (Luke 22:42). We are to always pray that His will might be done in our lives (Matt. 6:10). Furthermore, we can learn how to pray better (Luke 18:1) only as we know God's Word and mind better.

The promise of answered prayer is intended to be an encouragement to our hearts. But we must be ready to face the will of God and find that God's will is sometimes not in the best interest of our health or physical recovery. Sometimes grace is the answer and increasing realization of God's power and the Spirit's fruit operating in our lives (2 Cor. 12:9; Gal. 5:22-23). We need to pray for greater faith, patience, peace, courage (Joshua 1:6-7), and for a converted attitude and spiritual adjustment to the situations we face. We will find that God answers our specific prayer requests in these ways during times of illness even when He does not choose to heal us in the way that we would necessarily like or ask. Any way you look at it, God always does answer our prayers, as we pray in accordance with His Word and will. We repeat. God always answers prayer. The Spirit-filled believer will realize this as he prays according to God's truth.

Praying in Jesus' Name

Praying in Jesus' name ("in my name" – John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 26) has come to mean that believers can wave the name of Jesus around like a magical wand to get what they want in life. The wealth-health movement of our day promotes this materialistic philosophy by abusing these Scriptures. Of course, this goes against the grain of Scripture since we are told that we only receive those things that line up with God's will (1 John 5:14-15). John would not contradict himself. The Bible does not contradict itself. In John's writings praying "in Jesus' name" first of all means that the believer is to pray on the merits of Christ's person and work (John 16:23-24; Heb. 4:14-15) who makes access into God's presence possible. Every time we pray in Jesus' name it becomes a confirmation that we have been given complete acceptance into the Father's presence through the merits of Jesus Christ. Oswald Chambers said, "Beware of placing the

emphasis on what prayer costs us; it cost God everything to make it possible for us to pray.”

Praying in Jesus’ name also means praying on the basis of His sovereignty or control over all things (Phil. 2:10 – “name above every name” – 1 Cor. 1:10; 5:4) which means to pray according to His interests or God’s will (John 14:13-14; 15:16). Jesus will only “do” and “give” what is according to His will. Therefore, praying in Jesus’ name means praying in surrender to His will, program, or sovereign purpose for your life. John expanded this teaching in his first epistle (1 John 5:14-15). When we pray acknowledging His name we will not pray selfishly but pray for those things that line up with God’s will and sovereign purpose for our lives. It means we will ask for those things, which will glorify God, bless mankind, and be for our own spiritual good.

To ask anything of the Father, in the name of Jesus, simply means that we ask what Jesus would ask. Think of this. We should ask what Jesus would ask for if He were praying. Praying in Jesus’ name is praying in agreement with the desires of Christ. When a friend says to you, “You may use my name” he is handing you a great privilege as well as a tremendous responsibility! To pray in Jesus’ name is both a privilege and responsibility.

The promise is given by Jesus in these verses that “any thing” that we ask will be granted to us. However, the “any thing” is qualified by all that Jesus said about prayer and what the rest of the Bible says concerning prayer. The fruitfulness of answered prayer is connected with soul winning or service (John 14:12), loving the Lord through obedience to His commandments (John 14:14-15; 1 John 3:22), and abiding in Christ by allowing the Scriptures to guide our thinking (John 15:7).

When Christ’s word abides in us we abide in Christ and will pray with God’s greater picture in view about suffering, trial, and testing. In addition, answered prayer comes only as we pray according to His will (1 John 5:14-15). Answered prayer comes only as we pray morally clean (Ps. 66:18; Prov. 15:29) and have a right marital relationship (1 Pet. 3:7). Answered prayer comes as we pray persistently (Luke 11:5-10; Gen. 18:22-23) and in faith (James 1:5-7).

It's interesting that John 15:16 and praying in Jesus' name is set in the context of the abiding life. As we have already seen only an abiding word-filled believer can pray in Jesus' name and receive from the Lord. But we must understand that praying in Jesus' name does not mean to use Jesus' name as some kind of Jesus MasterCard to receive what we want in life but to pray being filled with the Word of God and understanding God's overall purposes for suffering and tragedy. We must reiterate. It is not always one specific prayer that we will pray and get an answer for in the exact way that we pray. Rather, we will pray through many portions of the Word of God and know that God will answer us as we ask for greater wisdom, faith, patience, grace, and contentment. Those things that we need (Phil. 4:19) are the very things God will give to us to help us in the time of suffering and trial.

Perhaps Phillips Brooks gives us some kind of idea how to pray multidimensional when saying:

“Do not pray for easy lives,
Pray to be stronger men.
Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers,
Pray for powers equal to your tasks.”

In other words, God's Word teaches us that there are various ways He may choose to answer our prayers. So as we pray intelligently and Scripturally we will plead forth and pray forth the promises of God's Word and understand that there are several possible ways God may choose to answer our prayer. This is why we can always pray according to His will since the Bible reveals many ways God may choose to answer our prayers. God may choose to answer our prayers in several ways instead of just one specific way. As we pray, allowing the Word to fill our hearts, we can be sure that Jesus wants us to pray in faith and continually realize that He is the great Lord who answers prayer, and that He wants to supply our every request that lines up with His truth and purpose for our life. As stated earlier, these verses in the gospel accounts, which give the promise of answered prayer, encourage His disciples to pray. Jesus gave them so we might learn to pray in faith and know that God is willing and ready to answer our prayers and will answer our prayers in

relationship to His sovereign decrees for our lives. Prayer is the way God's decrees are worked out in our lives and using Jesus' sovereign name assures us that God will always answer prayer and bring His ordained purpose to fruition in our lives.

The Holy Spirit and Prayer

We must also remember that the Holy Spirit prays for us in His groanings or sighs so that our prayers might conform to the will of God as they reach God's throne (Rom. 8:26-27). There is mystery here. We are peering into the unseen spiritual realm where a great Person and great forces are at work on our behalf. The "infirmities" that are being referred to are prayer infirmities ("for we know not what we should pray for as we ought"). This teaching concerning the Spirit's intercession may reference the time when we, as God's children, are too crushed and broken to pray. It's in these times that the Spirit intercepts our prayers and intercedes for us before the throne.

The emphasis indicates that the Spirit Himself prays for us when we are incapable of praying and cannot express ourselves before God. The Spirit presents the will of God for our lives before the Father's throne so that His will might be fulfilled or come to fruition in our lives. When we are broken, tired, weary, and when our mind seems blank, it's then that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf before the throne of God. When we groan and don't know how to express our prayer, as we want to before God, it's then that the Spirit groans for us. John Bunyan said, "The best prayers often have more groans than words." This is true of the believer's life and it certainly is true of the Spirit's intercession for us before God.

"When God inclines the heart to pray,
He hath an ear to hear;
To him there's music in a groan
And beauty in a tear."

Have you gone to God sometimes in prayer when you actually did not know how to express yourself to God? All you could do was just go to Him and say, "Father." You could not ask anything because you didn't know what to ask for. At times like this the Spirit "helpeth our

infirmities.” In times of distress, turmoil, and speechlessness the Spirit prays for us before the Father’s throne and in doing so presents God’s will for our lives before His divine presence. Sometimes we cannot pray because words cannot express the needs we feel. We don’t know how to express what we want to say. It’s then that the Spirit enters into the prayer picture. The Spirit responds before God on our behalf, with sighs too deep for words, presenting God’s will before the presence of the Father. This shows how God through his Spirit enters into our prayer experiences. How wonderful this is!

Then too, many times we don’t know exactly how to pray in particularly difficult situations because we do not know what God’s ultimate purpose is for our life (Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 12:7). We end up saying, “Thy will be done” and then the Spirit takes that prayer and begins to sigh before God presenting and pleading before the Father His ordained purpose, which He has made for our lives, so that His will might come to pass. The Spirit knows what God’s purpose is for our lives and prays to the Father that His purpose will come to fruition in our lives.

Always remember that what the Spirit prays for always happens! Therefore, we should never separate verses 26 and 27 from Romans 8:28. Romans 8:28 tells us what the Spirit is praying for God’s purpose to be fulfilled in our lives. The Spirit prays according to the mind of God, wanting God’s purpose to be fulfilled in our lives, and then God responds by sending into our lives His ordained purpose, even when that purpose might involve trials and tragedies. Everything that happens to us is an answer from the Father to the Spirit praying for us.

God has given His Holy Spirit to make intercession for us “with groanings which cannot be uttered” or with sighs too deep for words! Little is said about this ministry today. Even when we do not know what to say to God in the time of brokenness and despair, the Holy Spirit interprets our innermost feelings and intercedes on our behalf, presenting God’s will before the Father. Likewise, when we don’t know what God’s purpose is for our life in a given situation the Spirit intercepts our prayers and transforms them into the will of God before the throne so that God’s sovereign purpose might come to fruition in our lives. These inarticulate sounds are heard by God when

intercession is made for us by the Holy Spirit before the throne because God knows what the Spirit is thinking - “he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:27).

Even though the Spirit’s sighs are not expressed in words the Father knows what the Spirit is thinking. This is an interesting statement about the Father’s omniscience and the intimacy within the Trinity. So we can conclude that intercession is made for us not only by God the Son (Heb. 7:25), who sits at the right hand of God the Father (Heb. 1:3), but also by God the Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27) who dwells within the believer (1 Cor. 6:19). He takes our silence and speechlessness in our time of prayer and prays for us so that the Father sees us praying according to His will. Likewise, the Holy Spirit always prays for God’s purpose to come to pass in our lives even when that purpose involves difficulty and trial. We might pray for a specific ending while at the same time the Spirit is praying for a different ending.

The objection is sometimes raised, “If the Holy Spirit intercedes in the believer’s prayer life then why not permit the Holy Spirit to do all the praying? Why should we pray at all?” The answer would be: (a) a child of God needs to pour out his heart to God in prayer and thanksgiving (b) the Holy Spirit only prays or intercedes for those who pray (c) God has commanded his people to pray and has promised to grant all requests that are in harmony with his will (d) there are many prayers which do not need to be counteracted by the Holy Spirit when they are prayed in accordance with God’s will.

Prayer and Resting in God’s Sovereign Purpose

Let us remember that God has a sovereign purpose for our lives and that purpose will come to pass in our lives (Rom. 8:28). The believer can know that all events, circumstances, and trials are part of God’s ordained purpose. God is in control of the events of our lives. His providence is in both the ups and the downs of life – the painful and happy times (Job 23:10; Ps. 145:9; 119:75-76). Let us always remember that God has never promised we would have all the things that we think we need to survive (money, health, cars). However, God does promise to meet our needs (Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:33) but our needs and greeds are two different things. Likewise, what God identifies as

our needs can be vastly different than what we think our needs might actually be. Thus, we must walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and rest in God's sovereign purpose for our lives since He has decreed the events of our lives (Ps. 119:90-91). As we pray, we must learn to commit our way unto the Lord, rest in the Lord, and find our delight in Him instead of our circumstances (Psalm 37:4-7). Our faith in God's plan for our lives must not falter or fail (Luke 22:32). Through the ministry of prayer, we can surrender to God's sovereignty over our lives and find our sufficiency in Him (2 Cor. 3:5; 9:8).

Proverbs 3:5-6 states it in a clear fashion:

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart (possess faith in God's will or plan for your life); and lean not unto thine own understanding (human reasoning). In all thy ways acknowledge him (His right to work in your life in whatever way He pleases), and he shall direct thy paths” (reveal His will and help us to understand and accept His will for our lives).

God wants us to put our faith into action in the darkest night and trust Him at all times (Ps. 62:5-8) so we might avoid depression (2 Cor. 4:8-9) and experience His supernatural abundant grace (2 Cor. 4:7; 12:9). Dearly beloved, we can know that God is in control, that God has a purpose for our lives, and a reason for everything that comes into our lives (Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 4:15). We can also know experientially that God is our shepherd and will restore our soul, comfort us, and give us all that we need in the midst of trial, so that we can say as David, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies” and “my cup runneth over” (Ps. 23:1-5).

God may not always bring us away from the circumstances but bring us through them and deliver us from the pit of discouragement, self-pity, dismay, and put a new song in our mouth (Ps. 40:1-3). God is our refuge (Ps. 46:1; 91:1-2) and we must learn to lift up our eyes to the hills (Ps. 121:1) for God's help when we are in the valleys. God is faithful; His mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-24, 32). God will renew the inward man even when the outward man is moving in a different direction (2 Cor. 4:16-18). He will give us eagles wings so we can soar above the troubles of life (Isa. 40:31).

The promise of Isaiah 41:10 is sure:

“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”

The heavenly Father takes care of the flowers and the birds and He will surely take care of you (Matt. 6:25-34).

“I trust in God wherever I may be,
Upon the land or on the rolling sea;
For, come what may, from day to day,
My heav’nly Father watches over me.
I trust in God, I know He cares for me,
On mountain bleak or on the stormy sea;
Tho’ billows roll, He keeps my soul,
My heav’nly Father watches over me.”