

## Does Prayer Change God?

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### Introduction: The Puzzling Aspects of Prayer

When my wife Ming, my baby son John, and I went to Los Angeles for Christmas to visit my parents, I prayed for my dad. I said, 'Lord, be working in my dad's heart; he doesn't know You, and he makes fun of Christians, but I know that You want him to know You. So do something. Anything, to draw him to Jesus. Use me in that process.' Near the end of that prayer, I felt like God give me a picture of some very small fruit, like a small bunch of grapes. A few days later, while he and I were alone in the car, he suddenly started talking about abortion, saying, 'How could Roman Catholics believe [this and that]. Abortion is okay all the way up till birth.' I challenged him to think about that by asking, 'So abortion is okay one day before a baby is born?', and he wound up having to wrestle more with his ethics, his assumptions about life, and how all ethics actually have spiritual foundations. Three days later, we were in the car again, and he said, 'I've been thinking about what you said,' and we had another conversation about it. It was great! Those episodes were related, I think, to my prayer. But how?

One understanding of prayer suggests that my prayer was actually irrelevant. God was doing something in my dad regardless of my prayer. Another understanding is that God foreordained my prayer and then used it. God did use my prayer, but He set up the conditions in my life perfectly so that I would pray. Another understanding is that God leaves the future either somewhat or completely open, so that when I prayed, He responded. But which was it?

And depending on our views on these issues, should we pray in a certain way? Is there a 'wrong way to pray'? One author, a professor of systematic theology named Terrance Tiessen, says that there is a right and a wrong way to pray. He has written a book called *Providence and Prayer*. In this book, he outlines eleven different views on this question of 'Does prayer change God?' He even says that the way you pray has to be consistent with how you understand God's will. I am going to interact with him on this. I do so because the book is fairly good, and I recommend it to you if you haven't read it already. I do this also because if you are likely to read it, then there are a few things I want you to know beforehand.

### Pastoral Note

Now because this is so controversial, and because some of you are likely to have some emotions attached to this, let me say from the outset that you need to be very careful how you ask this question and how you let people respond. I asked a Pentecostal friend of mine whether prayer changes God's mind, and he said, 'No, I don't think so.' This is not how Tiessen assesses that, but for the sake of interacting with Tiessen, I'll stick to his assessment. Whether or not it's accurate to say that Presbyterians believe in the sovereignty of God and Pentecostals do not, you'll have to be very careful how you phrase those questions. At the end of our time together, I will give you my view on this, BUT, as I'm sure you know, different viewpoints are often valuable, even if you don't share them.

I want to do two things tonight. First, I want to try to answer your question to the best of my ability. Your student leadership asked me to speak on the question, 'Does Prayer Change God?' and I'm going to address that. But second, I want to answer a question that you are not asking. I want leave you with a different understanding of prayer that will put you on a whole new playing field. As much as I appreciate Professor Tiessen's book, and as much as I appreciate the question you're asking, I think there is a danger in this field of study. Most Christians, including Professor Tiessen, and perhaps yourselves, make a critical presupposition that is very hard to identify. Ooooooh, what is it?!?! Stick around and you'll find out!

### Overview of the Frameworks

Tiessen gives eleven different views of prayer, and I've added my own proposal, which I submit to you for your consideration, and they're illustrated here in this [table](#) (below). He puts it in an order. The columns on the left are the views where God is less involved, and the columns on the right are the views where God is more involved. At the far left is the Semi-Deist model, where God is seen as completely hands-off; you cannot influence Him because He has decided not to

intervene in this world. This is a way of explaining human suffering and evil as completely human. It tries to make God's love very clear, but He's not very sovereign. Only at the very end of history does He step in again. At the far right is the Fatalist model, where God is seen as the only entity who makes decisions. This is a way of making God's sovereignty absolute, but it makes God's love very foggy. It has difficulty explaining human suffering and evil, because it attributes those things completely to God.

We'll briefly touch on the more meaningful models in between. But first I want to glance at the questions down the column. First, how does God experience time? Temporal means that He is somehow affected by time. Timeless means that He is not affected by time because He is completely outside it. Second, does God know the future completely? Is there a destination God knows about? In some of these models, like the Process model, God Himself is learning as He goes. In other models, like the Openness model, God is not changing, but the future is entirely open. If there is a destination God knows about, can God take different paths to get there? I believe He can, and I'll talk about why in a moment. Other models on the right say that God is driving down one particular path towards that one particular future. Third, does God know of any alternative futures? In other words, does God who is outside of time look into time and see different possibilities? Or is there only 1 future? Fourth, does God take a risk in creation? Is there anything that has gone awry, that He did not foresee? Fifth, what is the relation between God and evil? General permission means that He allows Satan and human evil to run unchecked because of the fall. Specific permission means that He is still filtering and influencing the evil as it comes. The fatalist can really only believe that God actively causes evil, but it may not really be evil because it serves God. Sixth, do human beings have free will? If so, what kind? There are two types of free will, and they are also defined at the bottom of the page. *Libertarian Freedom* is the view that a person could make at least 2 different choices in exactly the same circumstances. If you rewind time, people could make a different choice than they did before. *Volitional Freedom* is the view that a person acts spontaneously and willingly, but absolutely predictably from God's perspective. There is only 1 possible choice in any particular circumstance, so if you rewind time, you'll get the same thing. Seventh, does prayer affect the outcome? Yes or no. This goes together with the eighth question, does prayer change God's mind? It may seem like a contradiction that the Calvinist says yes to question 7 and no to question 8. But what the Calvinist says is that God has foreordained our prayers, and chooses to use them after we pray them. So in that sense, prayer affects the outcome, but it didn't change God's mind.

### **My Journey, Stage One: Church Dominion**

I'm going to tell you how my own journey of understanding prayer has happened. I started with the 'church dominion' model. It is mostly (though not entirely) what Dutch Sheets talks about in his book *Intercessory Prayer*. Tiessen says you can summarize it simply by saying that God is only released through our prayers.

The first thing I noticed was how God made the creation. How? Through His word. He says, 'Let there be light,' and there is. How does God consistently act in His creation? Primarily through His word. He says, 'I will bring a flood,' and it happens. He says, 'Abraham, you will have a son,' and it happens. He says, 'Moses, I will deliver My people,' and it happens. He says, 'David will be king of Israel,' and it happens. Every major thing God does, He says first. In fact, Amos comments on this in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the LORD God does nothing except that which He reveals to His servants the prophets.'

And that gets us into the relationship between God's word speaking through a human being. In the OT, that person is then called a prophet or is said to have prophetic authority because he or she is speaking God's word. In fact, because God chooses to release Himself through a human being speaking, that human person can in some sense be said to speak God's will into being.

I'll touch on one example in the NT. In Matthew 18:15 – 20, Jesus says to the disciples, 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound

in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

However we interpret that today, clearly God has delegated His authority to us in some way. So what we say – in prayer – in some sense unleashes God's will. This is especially important when we think about what it means to be in Christ. Jesus Christ is the one through whom we pray, and that's the reason our prayers have power.

So what happened when I prayed for my dad? The 'church dominion' model would say that I, through Jesus Christ, probably helped pray that reality into being. God has delegated some of His authority to me, and I used it to do battle in the spiritual realm on behalf of my dad.

Now there are weaknesses to that model. What if I pray for a long time and nothing seems to happen? How do I explain what is God doing or not doing? Or you could ask, 'What if it's not so much what you did in prayer, but what God was already doing in your dad?' Maybe the picture of small fruit wasn't about my prayer being fruitful, but about what God was already doing in my dad being fruitful, and God was just letting me know. That is possible. What if God is working before we pray, or even if we don't pray? In general, I agree with this. So I think that 'church dominion' has **some** validity. God **often** seems to use our prayers in this way. But it can't be the whole story. God is working before we pray, and He works beyond what we pray. As Jesus himself said in John 5:19, 'My Father is always working, and the Son cannot do anything except what he sees the Father doing.' The Father is always doing something to redeem us, regardless of what human beings are doing, or praying.

### **My Journey, Stage Two: Middle Knowledge Calvinism**

From there I considered Calvinism. It is hard to say exactly what Calvin believed about what happens when we pray, and the Calvinist, Presbyterian stream divides into a few rivers of thought. Generally what Calvinists claim is that God arranges our circumstances so that we are moved to pray of our own free will, but God knew we would pray if we had the right circumstances. The Calvinist believes in volitional freedom and not libertarian freedom. So He provides the right circumstances, we pray just as He knew we would, and He responds to our prayer.

Professor Tiessen adds a twist. He introduces 'middle knowledge' into the Calvinist framework, which I like. 'Middle knowledge' is a way of describing how God knows the future. It says that God doesn't just know ONE future, He knows MANY possible futures that accounts for the MANY choices He could make that would make us choose the way He wants. So He takes into account our choices and our prayers because He knows the one thing we would do in any given situation. We have the choice to do that, and our prayers really change God in the sense that when we pray, God may bring about a different future than if we hadn't prayed. I was impressed with this view because it puts God in the place of having one future and working towards it.

My difficulty with this is that I'm uncomfortable with 'volitional freedom.' Look at the definition given by Professor Tiessen on the bottom of the page: Volitional freedom is the view that we will make one and only one decision under a specific set of circumstances. This seems to have some basis in Scripture. For instance, Jesus predicts that Simon Peter will betray him three times. How does he know that? Maybe it's because Jesus knows that given the circumstances Simon Peter is in, he will fail. 'If this, then that.' But just because one person's choices are certain given certain circumstances doesn't mean that everyone's choices are certain.

The problem is like this: If I wake you up at 4 am, don't give you breakfast, and give you a test immediately, I know you won't do well. Would you have tried your best? Sure. But am I not partly responsible for your poor test score? I think so. So just because God sets up the conditions where we make choices, that still seems to make Him responsible for our choices. If I pray for God to arrange the circumstances of my dad's life so that my dad would accept Jesus, and it

doesn't happen, then it necessarily means that God bears the primary responsibility for my dad not choosing Jesus. There is still not enough room for human choices in that framework. I don't think volitional freedom is enough.

Professor Tiessen says that the only other view of human free will is libertarian freedom. He defines that technically as us having an infinite range of choices to make, so that God then cannot know in advance and deal with coherently. I don't agree with either aspect of that definition. Do we have an infinite range of choices? I don't think so. It seems to me that sometimes I will make always a predictable choice. For instance, I will always risk my life to save my wife or son if you put me in that situation. Sometimes I have more choices that seem equally good to me, like when I interact with my dad, I can only say a few things that would really be meaningful. I don't think my range of choices is always infinite, but even if they were, I don't think God would be hindered by this. If He can foresee all the possible forks we take, He can still plan for each one and respond accordingly without losing sight of the goal He's working toward.

The best biblical example of this is the story of how a shepherd boy named David becomes king of Israel. God says through Samuel the prophet, 'David, you will be the king.' At that point, everyone goes into action. Saul is motivated by fear and anger. Jonathan is motivated by friendship with David. Michal is motivated by love for David. On and on the list goes. Everyone is making choices on their own, everyone has their own motivations, and then suddenly, David is crowned the king of Israel. What did God do exactly? We don't know. If you read from 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 3, it's hard to say what exactly God did. We know He did something, since what He said would happen happened as He said. David became the king. And we know that He responded to prayer. We have a lot of David's own prayers in the Psalms, and we can say with some confidence that Samuel and others probably prayed for David. But we don't know exactly how. We know God was driving at a certain kind of future where David would be king because that was what He said in His word, but he allowed for all kinds of human choices to factor in. The outcome was a unique combination of human actions, human prayers, and God's actions. In fact, God gives many biblical prophecies in such a way that He leaves room for human choices. I think that's why the book of Revelation looks the way it does. There is both precision and vagueness there. God is driving towards a certain kind of future, but He is constantly factoring in our prayers and our actions, and He leaves room for Himself to take various routes to get there.

### **My Journey, Stage Three: My Proposal**

So if I rule out the models based on volitional freedom, that cuts out the four columns on the right. What about the columns on the left? Well, I believe God really does know the future because prophecy worked and because the Bible says a lot about God's foreknowledge. So if I rule out the models where God does not know the future, I cut out the five columns on the left. That leaves the middle three. I don't agree with the Molinist view that God is taking a risk in creation because that would mean that God loses control of creation and then has to step in suddenly at the end time. I don't agree with the Thomist view because I find it self-contradictory. How can God know the ONE future, we have infinite libertarian freedom, and God not know any alternative futures? – He only knows the ONE future? It seems like one of those would have to change. So that's how I've developed my current view of God and prayer. Let's look at the column that says Mako's PROPOSAL. I'll read down the column.

What is God's experience of time? I'm not entirely sure, but it's probably temporal. Tiessen's explanation of temporal is fairly compelling. There was a point in time at which the Son of God took human nature to himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That had not been true before. But it is forever true afterwards. That means that God has subjected Himself to time, out of love for us. He did this from the start of creation, because of His love. Does God know the future? Yes, God knows how He wants human history to end. I do not believe the future is wide open, as Clark Pinnock and other people who believe in the openness of God or the openness of history argue. The future is set by God's word, but we take our place within it.

I believe how that history unfolds is a combination of God's Word and human libertarian freedom in the modified sense that I've defined it. God is okay with a number of possible routes of getting there. He is not okay with many other possible routes, which He prevents. Does God take a risk in creation? No, because He can foresee so many different futures and work towards the one (or the ones) He wants, and intervene at strategic times. So He is constantly at work, whether

or not we pray. Does He permit specific evil? Actually, no. This may surprise you, but I do not believe that God ‘permits’ evil. If you had a friend who wanted to date someone you did not like, and you made it known, saying, ‘I just want you to know that I am totally against this,’ and then your friend dated that person anyway, are you ‘permitting’ that? No: ‘permit’ is not an appropriate word to describe your relationship, because it assumes that God can override your free will and basically turn you into a robot. He cannot do that. So God does not ‘permit’ evil; He is totally against evil; He makes it known to us; and He is personally involved in healing human evil at its source – in human nature – through Jesus’ new human nature. God can send an angel to defend Israel from their enemies, He can send angels to tell Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt, He can send an earthquake to open prison doors in Acts, so He knows about specific suffering and evil, and tempers them, but He cannot fundamentally eradicate human choice. He is always curbing the influence of evil, and though September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Holocaust were bad, they would have been much worse had God not been involved behind the scenes. But God is totally against evil; He does not ‘permit’ evil, and He has given Himself personally to defeat evil. Next row: I think human freedom is libertarian, as I’ve discussed. Does prayer affect the outcome? Yes, because it is a genuine choice that God responds to by taking one fork and not the other. Does prayer change God’s mind? Not on the level of His objectives. God has purposes that He has stated in His Word that He is not changing. However, we might change God’s mind in terms of what route He takes. What the intermediate steps are. Often He will wait to act until we pray.

So let me answer the question you asked, ‘Does prayer change God?’ Yes, I believe prayer does change God’s activity, but not His heart. If we pray, our prayers often, though not always, release God to act more powerfully than if we didn’t pray. It doesn’t change His ultimate purpose. It cannot change a particular outcome if He has committed Himself to it by His word. And it cannot change God’s end goal for humanity, which is to conform us to the image of Christ (Rom.8:28 – 30) and defeat evil in all its forms. But it could change some intermediate steps. Prayer can shape human history.

In my scenario, if I hadn’t prayed for my dad, what would have happened differently? Maybe nothing; maybe my dad would have said the same things to me. If that were so, then I wouldn’t have received the picture of the fruit and enjoyed that as coming from God, and I would have lost something. Maybe my dad would have been pondering those questions inside himself, and not told me about it. Maybe my dad would have gotten sick so that he had to stay home and we couldn’t hang out. Maybe my dad wouldn’t have been interested in that conversation at all. In this Proposal, any one of those is possible. I’m not sure exactly what my prayer did, but it probably did something. God responded in some way. It’s as if He took a fork in the road. Because I prayed, it is very possible that God brought our history to the right fork instead of the left.

### **The Problem Text**

But let me finally look at a very troublesome text that none of these models can explain. Turn to Acts 21:1 – 14. Here in this section, we are following the adventures of the apostle Paul in the eastern Mediterranean world. He and his friend, Luke, are traveling with some other Christians planting and visiting churches: ‘1 When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; 2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. 4 After looking up the disciples [they took out their Palm Pilots and cell phones to contact them!], we stayed there seven days; and **they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.**’ (Acts 21:1 – 4)

Here is the PROBLEM, verse 4. The disciples tell Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. Why is that a problem? Because **Paul goes to Jerusalem**, and it is his conviction that God wants him to go to Jerusalem. Let’s read the rest of the story: ‘5 When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. 6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again. 7 When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. 8 On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. 10 As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, This is what the Holy Spirit says:

'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' 12 When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'" (Acts 21:5 – 14)

Several questions come to mind here:

1. Did the disciples not hear the Spirit correctly? For example, one popular way of getting around this goes like this: They heard the Spirit say that Paul would be in danger, and they are the ones who told him not to go. That would make it nice and easy, but that's not what the text says. The text says that they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem. The Spirit was saying this.
2. Did Luke say that the Holy Spirit was active to cover up the disciples being scared? Not likely. That would make Luke misrepresent God and His Spirit, and I doubt he would do that.
3. Is Paul disobedient in this? Doesn't seem like it. Seems like God wanted Paul to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. Paul had asked the Romans to pray for him about this in Romans 15:30 – 31: 'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.'
4. Maybe Paul is not disobedient in a radical way, but God has to redeem his mistake? No, literarily, Luke affirms this decision of Paul in the narrative. It fulfills Jesus' prophecy over Paul when he converted on the Damascus Road, 'He will bear my name to Gentiles and rulers, and the Jewish people, and I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.' This is a genuine fulfillment of that statement.

So we have before us what seems to be a genuine CONTRADICTION.

1. The disciples hear the Spirit tell Paul not to go.
2. Paul apparently hears the Spirit telling him to go.
3. Thus, God expresses two desires at the same time. Everyone was praying, prayer is intimately involved in this, and yet God seems to say two different things. Even though God eventually resolved it by having Paul go to Jerusalem, that doesn't mitigate the problem. For a while, God expressed two different desires. But how?

And what does this mean for us? I'll tell you what it means for us. Can we talk about prayer changing God when we have crazy incidents like this? Does God have more than one will? Can people compete with each other in prayer to see which will of God wins out?

Now if there are any of you here who are saying, 'Aha! This just confirms what I've long thought about the Bible: It's full of contradictions,' I want to say, 'Hold on. We'll get to a solution, and it will deepen your appreciation of the God of this Book.' And for those of you who are confused, I say, 'Hold on. We'll get there.'

### **The Larger Framework: Not Just God's Providence, But His Passion**

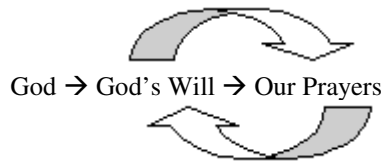
But for a little while, let me make the problem worse. Consider Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane the night before he was hung on the cross. He said, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Jesus prayed this prayer for several hours, wrestling with God, asking God to change the course of history. Does Jesus want to go to the cross or not? Part of him genuinely did not want to go, another part of him did. Now the Father wants him to go, and Jesus is obedient to the Father because he loves the Father, but Jesus himself prayed not to go to the cross. In some very real sense, he prays *against* the Father's will. How could he do this? Obviously he is not in sin, but how could he pray this prayer?

Here is another incident like this. When God was right about to send Israel into exile at the hands of the Babylonians, Jeremiah the prophet prayed for them. God said to him, ‘As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you’ (7:16). That happens in chapter 7 of Jeremiah. There are 52 chapters in Jeremiah. Did Jeremiah stop praying? No. Jeremiah prayed for Israel again and again even after God had told him not to. Was he praying against God’s will? In some sense, yes. But was Jeremiah disobedient? Well, if he was anointed by the Spirit and his prayers have now become Scripture, he must not have been in sin; he must not have been disobedient, but how could he pray *when God told him not to?*

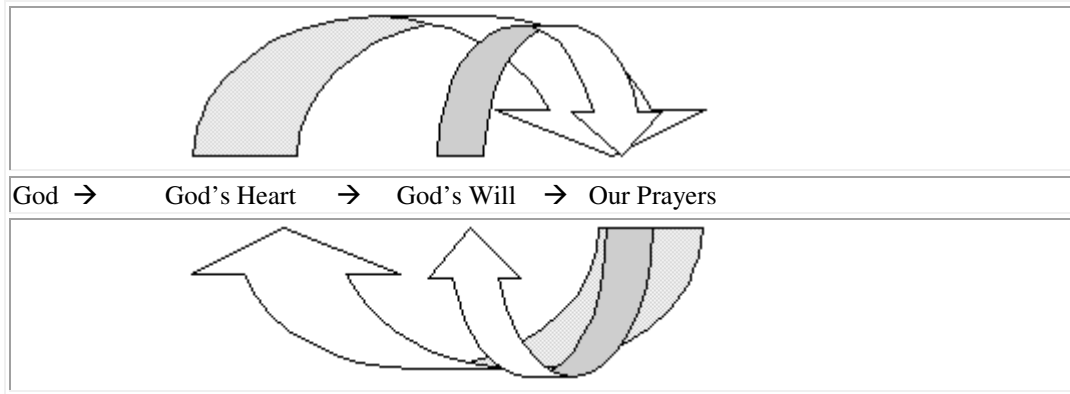
All of these incidents cannot be dismissed. You cannot say, ‘Well, God was just testing Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, and the Christians at Tyre and Caesaria.’ It is not as simple as that. In each of these cases, God declared His will, and then God’s Spirit led people to pray against God’s stated will. How can this be? Nor can you say, ‘Well, it may be in Scripture, but it just reflects being honest with God. It’s descriptive, not prescriptive.’ That’s not true because God affirms these prayers as reflecting a part of His heart. God did love Israel even right before the captivity and He expressed that in Jeremiah’s prayers. God did not like the cross and He expressed that through Jesus’ prayer. And God did not like endangering Paul and He expressed that through the disciples’ prayers.

So if Jeremiah, Jesus, and the Christian disciples telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem were reflecting God’s heart in their prayers, then that means that God is an emotionally complex Being. Even though He may have ONE will and eventually makes a choice about what to do, He has feelings on both sides of these issues. In the case of Paul, God wanted to spread the gospel. But at the same time, He was pained for the suffering Paul had to go through to do it. Paul was not just a pawn on a chessboard. God felt for Him, and thus God’s people through God’s Spirit feel for him and tell him not to go to Jerusalem. That was a genuine feeling God had for Paul. It wasn’t the end of the story, and it wasn’t the only feeling or passion God had. But God groans with His creation, no matter what. So when they pray, they pray in solidarity with God’s feelings, not just with God’s will. Let me say that again: *Prayer relates us to God’s feelings, not just to His will.*

Put in diagram form, here is what it looks like: We typically think of God, God’s will, and our prayers. And we think about prayer relating us to God’s will in some way. Either we change God’s will, or God’s will makes us pray, or whatever.



But this model is incomplete. We need to think about God, God's heart (perhaps even God's *feelings*), then God's will, and then our prayers.



(the size of the arrows do not reflect order or importance, merely links)

Our prayers, then, reflect God's feelings, which are many. They are infinitely more broad than God's will, which can only be singular at any given time towards any given person. We give voice to God's feelings, even if it is not what God's will is.

Illus: Here's an example of what I'm talking about. When my son John was born almost 16 months ago, Ming and I fell in love with him. We were absolutely in love with him. Well, we had to decide how to help him fall asleep. At about 5 months, we decided to try to let him cry himself to sleep. That evening was hard. Hearing little John cry turned all of my insides over. It hurt me so much to my own son cry, I felt sick, and I started crying. And it was as though John's baby cries were the outward expression of my own pain, and the worse it got for him, the worse it got for me. I think that is how God has linked His emotions to us. Prayer reflects our intimacy with God's own feelings. Our feelings even cause Him to feel things on our behalf, like when Mary fell at Jesus feet and wept because her brother Lazarus died. It was Mary's pain that caused him to weep in sorrow and groan in rage. For me at that moment, I had at least two desires. One was to care for John in the way he wanted me to. That would mean picking him up and letting him fall asleep in my arms as he was used to doing. The other was to teach him that I care about him, but not always in the way he thinks I should. I have one will, in that I had to choose to either pick him up or let him cry. But I have multiple feelings about it. I think that is how God is with us.

How come some of us feel like we pray to a non-emotional God? Ever since Christianity became anti-Semitic and was over-contextualized into Hellenistic and Roman culture, a certain ideal took hold: The Platonic ideal of the rational God at the expense of the God who feels things. That was reinforced by the Enlightenment, which again emphasized rationality over feelings. But this does not do justice to the Hebraic idea that a holy God binds Himself to His people through a covenant, and thus feels love for His people but feels pained by their sin, feels bound by His covenant but feels repulsed by their attitudes, feels passion for the future He has for them but feels like giving them over to the choices they make, all at the same time. Read Hosea and that comes across clearly!

Here is where I disagree most strongly with Professor Tiessen. He argues that you have to figure out God's will, and then modify the way you pray. So in my prayer for my dad, I should really think through what I say carefully, put all these disclaimers in like, 'If it is your will...', and be afraid that God is going to rate me first on whether I'm consistent with my own belief, then on whether I'm accurate. Frankly, that's paralyzing! **I don't want you to be paralyzed and self-conscious when you pray.**



**Let me illustrate it this way: Did you know how to pray on September 11th? NO. The situation was so overwhelming and so complex, you didn't know how or what to pray. You might have prayed some things about justice, but how, and for who? You didn't know. And peace, but how, and for who? You didn't know. And for God's kingdom to come, but how, and whatever does that mean anyway? But you still prayed. Generally speaking, it was right to pray all those things because those are the things on God's heart, and we know God's heart. What His will was exactly, who can say?**

We pray because we have the honor of expressing a part – not the whole, but a part – of God's own **heart**. Many – not all, but many – of the things on our hearts are already on God's heart. So we pray because we feel a sense of oneness with Him in prayer, even if He decides to care for us not in the way we think He should. That is the privilege we have in prayer. May we all be people of prayer, people of God's will, and people of God's heart.

## A Comparative Chart of Providence and Prayer

Modified by Mako Nagasawa from Terrance Tiessen's *Providence and Prayer (IVP: Downer's Grove, 2000)*

	<i>Semi-Deist</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Openness</i>	<i>Church Dominion</i>	<i>Redemptive Intervention</i>	<i>Molinist</i>	<i>Thomist</i>	<b><i>Mako's PROPOSAL</i></b>	<i>Barthian</i>	<i>Middle Knowledge Calvinist</i>	<i>Calvinist</i>	<i>Fatalist</i>
<i>God's experience of time</i>	?	temporal	temporal	timeless?	could be either	timeless	timeless	temporal	timeless	probably temporal	timeless	?
<i>God knows the future totally</i>	no	no	no	no according to Tiessen	no	yes	yes	yes, ultimately, but open to various possible paths	yes, because His knowledge IS His will: simple fore-knowledge	yes, thru middle knowledge of His own choices, which affect the preconditions of human volition	yes, probably thru simple foreknowledge	yes
<i>God knows alternative futures</i>	no	no	no	no	no	yes	no	yes, because libertarian freedom has a finite range of choices	no	yes	no	there are none
<i>God takes a risk in creation</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no
<i>God and evil</i>	general permission	general permission	general permission	general permission	general permission	specific permission	specific permission	unknown	specific permission	specific permission	specific permission	actively causes
<i>Human freedom is</i>	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	libertarian	volitional	volitional	volitional	illusory
<i>Prayer affects the outcome</i>	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
<i>Prayer changes God's mind</i>	no	yes	yes	yes	influenced the plan but does not change it now	no	no	no regarding the ultimate future, yes regarding the path to get there	no	no	no	no

### Important Terms:

- *Libertarian Freedom*: The view that a person could make at least 2 different choices in exactly the same circumstances. Tiessen assumes libertarian freedom requires an infinite range of choices, thus making God's middle knowledge impossible. I disagree on both counts. I believe libertarian freedom can imply a finite range of human choices, and that God could nevertheless consider an infinite range of human choices. To distinguish my view from Tiessen's, my view can be called *limited libertarian freedom*.
- *Volitional Freedom*: The view that a person acts spontaneously and willingly, but absolutely predictably from God's perspective. There is only 1 possible choice in any particular circumstance.
- *Simple Foreknowledge*: The view that God knows for certain what will happen in all future events, which requires one future and no other possible futures.
- *Middle Knowledge*: Term most often associated with Luis de Molina. This view holds that God has knowledge of alternate futures.