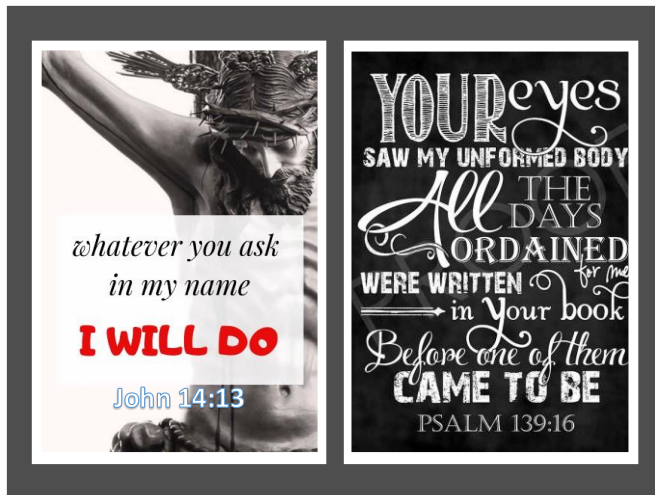


## Intercessory Prayer

Online Sermon: [http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

Last week we learned the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16) for as we draw nearer (4:8) and approach God's throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) we as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2), His children (John 1:12) not only receive forgiveness (1 John 1:9) but also invite our Father to plant furrows of righteousness in our hearts! We also learned to keep our prayers from being a product of selfish ambition or vain conceit and to fulfill God's



command to love one another we are called to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of requests” (Ephesians 1:16) for believers, for our rulers and yes even our enemies (Romans 13:1-5; Matthew 5:43-48)! The following sermon is going to further define intercessory prayer by examining its boundaries and effectiveness. For example, when Jesus said, “you ask me anything in My name and I will do it” (John 14:13) how can this be so for if one takes this verse literally then would not our will be supreme and God's sovereignty a mere puppet of our whims and imaginations?<sup>1</sup> And since God's ways and

thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9) how could He remain holy when following the ways of His redeemed (Ephesians 1:7) but still unrighteous children (Romans 3:9-18)? On the other hand, if all our “days are written in His book before one came to be” (Psalms 139:16) then would not prayer be an exercise in futility for nothing we do or say would ever alter what a sovereign God has predetermined?<sup>2</sup> The first two parts of this sermon are going to give examples of both when intercessory prayer was denied and when it was granted. The third part is going to suggest that the key to God maintaining His sovereignty and yet still granting our requests is to be found in praying in His will that can have more than one direction! The final part of the sermon is going to expound on why it is so crucial that we obey God and pray for one another.

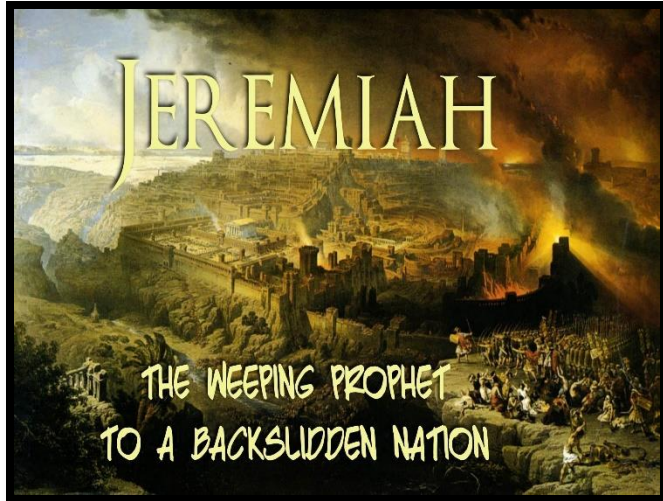
### Examples of Intercessory Prayer that was Denied

One of the best examples of intercessory prayer requests being denied can be found in the book of Jeremiah. At the young age of 12 or 13 Jeremiah is called to become a prophet of

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, [“Prayer Changes Things ... or Does It?”](#) in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Ex 32:1–14.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, [“Prayer Changes Things ... or Does It?”](#) in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Ex 32:1–14.

the most high God.<sup>3</sup> While the first five years of his ministry “may have been instrumental in the great revival of 622 under king Josiah,”<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah’s prophetic message of repentance under later kings Jehoiakim<sup>5</sup> and Zedekia resulted in him being heavily persecuted! The complaint God had against His people was that they had “gone up on every high hill and under every



spreading tree and committed adultery” (3:6). They were unfaithful (3:11) and harbored so many wicked thoughts (4:14) that they had become “so skilled in doing evil that they forgot how to do good” (4:22). Instead of listening to the prophet’s pleas that Judah “circumcise their hearts” (4:4) lest God turn His fierce anger upon them and turn their “fruitful land into a desert” (4:26), not a single person could be found “who dealt honestly and sought the truth” (5:1). Despite intercessory prayer on behalf of the people being one of the primary roles of a prophet,<sup>6</sup> God was so angry with

His people that He told Jeremiah “do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with Me, for I will not listen to you” (7:16). Even when Jeremiah prayed and cited God’s justice as the reason He should punish the evil people of Anathoth who were plotting to kill him a righteous prophet (11:21)<sup>7</sup> God not only refused to grant his intercessory request but also told Jeremiah that his future situation would be even worse than his current one (12:5)!<sup>8</sup> What we learn from Jeremiah is once God decides to act decisively in history no one may question or change His sovereign right and divine authority to rule all things seen and unseen (Colossians 1:16)!

There are many instances in the Bible when God said NO to a prayer request. For example, when Samuel was told that God “regretted making Saul king” of Israel (1 Samuel 15:10) despite “crying out to the Lord all night” (15:11) God told him to “stop mourning for Saul, fill his horn with oil” (16:1) and anoint David as king. Despite Jonah fleeing from the

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<sup>3</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, “[Jeremiah \(Prophet\)](#),” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 686.

<sup>4</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Jeremiah \(Person\)](#),” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1110.

<sup>5</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Jeremiah \(Person\)](#),” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1111.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, ed. William P. Brown, Carol A. Newsom, and David L. Petersen, First Edition., The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 98.

<sup>7</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 21, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 99–100.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Dyer, “[Jeremiah](#),” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1145.

Lord and then later praying that he would die because God showed compassion and mercy on the evil inhabitants of Nineveh, God did not grant him his wish (Jonah 1-4). Though king David “pleaded with God,” “fasted and spent seven nights lying in a sackcloth on the ground” his request that God would forgo His punishment and spare the life of his son with Bethsaida was



denied (2 Samuel 12:13-20). When Balak asked Balaam to ask God to curse Israel God not only said NO but instead gave a blessing to His people (Numbers 22-24)! When Elijah who was afraid of Jezebel’s wrath sat under a juniper tree and asked God to “take his life” he was told NO for God had something better in mind, the calling of Elisha of him to go to heaven without tasting death (1 Kings 19, 2 Kings 2)! When Apostle Paul prayed three times that God would remove the “messenger of Satan” or “thorn” God’s response was an empathetic NO,<sup>9</sup> “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in

weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). When the rich man in hell interceded on behalf of his family by asking God to send Lazarus to warn them so that “they might not also come to this place of torment” God’s response was NO, “if they did not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:19-31)! While the reasons for receiving a NO can be due to cherishing sin in one’s heart (Psalms 66:18), a lack of faith (Matthew 13:58), asking with the wrong motives (James 4:1-3), or our request is not good for us (James 1:17); more likely we receive a NO due to making a request that does not align with the will of God (1 John 5:14).

### Examples of Intercessory Prayer that was Granted



Even though God sometimes says NO to prayer requests for either us or that of others He often says YES! When Moses cried out for God to save Israel from the pursuing Egyptian army God granted his request by “dividing the water so that the Israelites could go through the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14). In response to Elisha’s requests that God would save them from King Aram’s wrath not only were his servant’s eyes opened to witness the “hills full of horses and chariots of fire” but the

<sup>9</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 571.

Lord also struck an entire army helpless by blindness (2 Kings 6:8-23)! In response to Hezekiah's pleas that God would save them from the Assyrian army that was threatening to destroy Jerusalem "the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 of the Assyrian camp (2 Kings 18-19)! In response to the "fasting, weeping and wailing" of the Jews over King Xerxes decree to annihilate their nation God said YES to their request and not only saved them but had the perpetrator Haman impaled on a pole (book of Esther). When Samson prayed that God would return his strength God said YES and in doing so was able to get revenge on the Philistines (Judges 16). When the centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant who was about to die Christ said YES and healed him that very moment (Luke 7:1-10). When a father pleaded with Jesus to heal his son possessed by an impure spirit He said YES and not only commanded the spirit to leave but also to never return (Mark 9:14-29). When a synagogue leader "pleaded earnestly" for Jesus to heal his dying daughter, while she still died, Christ raised her from the dead (Mark 5:21-43)! When the church "earnestly prayed for God" to save Peter from King Herod's prison God said YES and sent an angel to release his chains and help him walk out completely undetected by the guards (Acts 12:1-19).

Not only has God granted many requests but He has also changed His course of action in response to prayer! A great example of God relenting a decision can be found in the story of the Golden Calf. Since Moses took a long time on Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments (32:1) the Israelites grew restless and asked Aaron to make them a gold idol "cast in the shape of



a calf" (32:4). One almost gets whiplash reading about the Ten Plagues of Egypt and Israel's deliverance in the first part of the book of Exodus to now hearing Aaron boldly state "these are your gods, Israel who brought you out of Egypt" (32:4)! While on the mountain God told Moses of the golden calf which was a direct violation of His law to not make any other gods (20:4-5, 22:2), especially those of gold (20:23).<sup>10</sup> Even though God proved time and again to be strong enough to deliver Israel from her enemies it seems like to them God was not strong or attractive enough to capture their hearts!<sup>11</sup>

God's anger burned so intense against these "stiff-necked people" that He told Moses He was going to destroy them all and make a new nation from Moses' seed (32:9). Deeply in love with Israel and not wishing them to be annihilated Moses appealed to God's reputation, the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (32:11-15) to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 26:4) and even went so far as to ask for his name to be blotted out of the

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<sup>10</sup> James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 282.

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, "[Moses' Intercessory Prayer](#)," in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Ex 32-34.

book of those inheriting eternal life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5)<sup>12</sup> in exchange for Israel's forgiveness (32:31-32)! While God as our Creator had every right to destroy Israel for breaking the covenant<sup>13</sup> out of His sovereign free will He chose to show mercy and merely punish (32:34-35) but not wipe them from the face of the earth! Had Moses not interceded on their behalf the Bible text implies YES God would have destroyed His people!<sup>14</sup> James was right the prayer of a righteous person truly is powerful and effective (5:16)!

## The Key to Hearing a YES from God

Let's go back to our original question: is it possible to ask and receive from God and yet not violate either his sovereignty or holiness and if not then does this mean that prayer is an exercise in futility for nothing we do or say could ever alter what a sovereign God has



predetermined? From Jeremiah, Samuel, Jonah, king David, Elijah, Apostle Paul, and the rich man we learned that there are times when God says NO and no amount of pleading will change His mind. From Elisha, Hezekiah, Samson, the centurion, the father of a demon possessed child, and the church that prayed for Apostle Peter there are also times when God says YES and grants our requests. God's actions ONLY flow from His sovereign free will and therefore we cannot pray and force God into anything!<sup>15</sup> When Jesus stated that He would grant our requests if they were made in His name (John 13:14) this does not make Him our puppet for 1 John 5:14 adds an

additional stipulation to hear a YES from Jesus, the request must be made in accordance with His will! When our sovereign Creator, who has the authority over all things seen and unseen (Colossians 1:16), says NO it can be due to granting such a request would not be good for us (Romans 8:28), sin we cherish in our hearts (Psalms 66:18), a lack of faith (Matthew 13:58), asking with the wrong motives (James 4:1-3), but more likely it is due to making a request that does not align with His will for either ourselves or that of all of Creation (1 John 5:14). The key then to always hearing a YES from God is to pray in accordance with His righteous and perfect will (Romans 12:2).

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<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "[Exodus](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 481.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Carpenter, [Exodus](#), ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick, vol. 2, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 309.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Carpenter, [Exodus](#), ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick, vol. 2, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 310.

<sup>15</sup> Eugene Carpenter, [Exodus](#), ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick, vol. 2, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 310.

I want to finish by answering one final question: are we the redeemed but sinful humanity able to change God's will? The answer is both a NO and a YES!<sup>16</sup> God is holy and since His ways and thoughts are higher than ours to relent would mean to introduce imperfection into, He who is without flaw (Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Samuel 15:29)!<sup>17</sup> So, how do we reconcile Scripture that clearly states God relented His decision to destroy Israel when Moses appealed to His reputation



and the promises to make Abraham, Isaac and Israel to make them into a great nation? Let us first humbly state we are not to be like Job and question God's actions, for His will is truly beyond creation's finite ability to understand (chapter 38)! However, let us also not forget that to balance out His justice with compassion and mercy God's will often contains more than one path! While one cannot change the historical path written for this universe by God before the beginning of time one certainly can and ought to intercede with prayers, tears, persistence, and perseverance when it

comes to the daily lives of oneself and that of others!<sup>18</sup> When God was about to destroy Judah, He said He would have chosen the path of granting forgiveness instead ... if only someone would be found who would lead the nation into repentance!<sup>19</sup> While God sometimes says a definite NO that is unalterable because of His sovereign plan or to spare us from giving us our hearts desires that would sink us further in sin (James 1:14-25), may more times He is waiting to say YES if only we would humble ourselves, repent, and ask with the right motives and with faith that could move a mighty mountain! So, let us never stop praying that God will plow furrows of righteousness in ours, other believers, our rules and even our enemies' hearts for the prayers of a righteous person are truly powerful and effective!

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<sup>16</sup> D. A. Carson, "[Moses' Intercessory Prayer](#)," in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Ex 32–34.

<sup>17</sup> Iain D. Campbell, [Opening up Exodus](#), *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 126–127.

<sup>18</sup> D. A. Carson, "[Moses' Intercessory Prayer](#)," in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Ex 32–34.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, "[Ezekiel](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebel, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 849.