

## The Church Ethic 312: A Study of All Biblical Prayers



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### *Prayers and Calvinism*

In practical terms, determining what we can and should petition God for also goes hand in hand with determining what we should not petition God to do. One very particular aspect of this pertains to Calvinism. On the topic of how Calvinist doctrines intersect with what we pray for, we begin with a quote from well-known Calvinist author R.C. Sproul.

**“In one of his famous prayers, Augustine made a seemingly harmless and innocuous statement in the prayer to God in which he says: ‘O God, command what you wouldst, and grant what thou dost command.’** Now, would that give you apoplexy — to hear a prayer like that? Well **it certainly set Pelagius, this British monk, into orbit.** When he heard that, **he protested vociferously,** even appealing to Rome to have this ghastly prayer censured from the pen of Augustine. Here’s why. He said, ‘Are you saying, Augustine, that God has the inherent right to command anything that he so desires from his creatures? Nobody is going to dispute that. God inherently, as the creator of heaven and earth, has the right to impose obligations on his creatures and say, ‘Thou shalt do this, and thou shalt not do that.’ ‘Command whatever thou would’ — it’s a perfectly legitimate prayer.’ **It’s the second part of the prayer that Pelagius abhorred when Augustine said, ‘and grant what thou dost command.’”** – “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” by R.C. Sproul, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/sproul1.html>

Of course, it should be noted that our point here is not to defend Pelagius in particular. After all, like Augustine, Pelagius is a fourth century figure, far too removed from Jesus Christ, His apostles, the writing of the New Testament, and even the earliest generations of Christianity to be of central concern to correct Christian doctrines, including how to pray. While this episode between Augustine and Pelagius might provide a useful contrast for teaching purpose, we would hope everyone would agree that the measure of Christianity is not to be found in identifying ourselves as faithful followers of fourth century figures like Augustine or Pelagius, but with properly tracing Christian doctrine to the earliest form as expressed in the decades after the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, when His hand-picked apostles were still leading the church under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let Augustine and Pelagius be judged along with the rest of us by the biblical standard rather than using Augustine or Pelagius themselves as the litmus test for authentic Christianity.

With that said, we can go on to examine the central premise of Augustine's prayer, a premise that is here championed by R.C. Sproul. As we can see from this excerpt, R.C. Sproul identifies the phrase, "grant what thou dost command" as the pivotal component of Augustine's prayer. The basic concept articulated by Augustine is not only that God controls what is commanded but also that God controls who chooses to obey or not to obey those commands. When Augustine asks God to "grant" what He commands, he is intentionally depicting that it is God alone who determines whether or not men obey Him. Conversely, according to Augustine and Calvinism, if God does not grant for a man to obey His commands, the man will not (and indeed cannot) choose to obey of his own free will. Consequently, Augustine's prayer expresses the expectation that God can and does control how men respond to His words, and ultimately, how they behave in any situation. And, of course, this Augustinian notion that God unilaterally and irresistibly controls which human beings choose to respond with obedience and faith in any (and every) situation is the central teaching of Calvinism. (For a more direct and in-depth explanation and refutation of particular Calvinist doctrines, please see our study outline on Calvinism.)

We've now arrived at the central question of this segment of our study. Should our prayers petition God to cause other people to do one thing or another or to be one way or another? And the measuring stick for answering this question is whether or not we see such expectations in biblical prayers. If Augustine and R.C. Sproul are correct, we should find this same kind of content, this same expectation for God to control people's behavior, character, thoughts, attitudes, etc. in the prayers we find recorded throughout the scripture. If, on the other hand, the prayers that populate scripture from cover to cover do not express this expectation, then we ought to conclude that Augustine's expectation and indeed his prayer itself is not a biblical one, but an invention or transfusion into Christianity from someone in those many decades and centuries between Christ and Augustine.

After conducting a cover-to-cover survey of biblical prayer from Genesis to Revelation, it is once again important to frame the statistical setting. Out of the approximately 986 prayers (including instructions on prayer) that we found in the bible, there were only 70 that even had potential for Calvinist rhetoric. This amounts to a little over 7% (7.099 to be exact). Now, when we say "potential," we simply mean that the passages contained the usual kind of familiar scriptural language that Calvinists often appeal to in support of their doctrines. Our arguments will show that just like with other aspects of Calvinist theology, when it comes to prayer Calvinist interpretations amount to nothing more than the typical and inevitable Calvinist track record of lifting certain phrases out of their immediate and historical context in order to isolate those phrases and superimpose foreign concepts that have nothing to do with surrounding scriptural details or precedent. In fact, when the immediate context is included, not only does it become apparent that the prayers do not suggest or support Calvinism, but they outright contradict its basic premises.

Looking ahead, it is necessary to say something about the basic structure we will use for discussing these 70 passages. Many of them were similar to one another and could easily be grouped together. This process of grouping passages by similar content resulted in a total of 46 notes analyzing the intended meaning of these 70 passages within their immediate textual and historical settings. Our intention is to include only a dozen sample notes in the main section of this study in order to address some of the more prominent or stereotypical prayers found in these passages. Then, the total collection of notes discussing all of the passages will be included in an Addendum.

### Note 1 – Genesis 24

**Genesis 24:1** And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. 2 And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: 3 And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: 4 But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac. 5 And the servant said unto him, Peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me unto this land: must I needs bring thy son again unto the land from whence thou camest? 6 **And Abraham said** unto him, Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again. 7 **The LORD God of heaven**, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; **he shall send his angel before thee**, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence. 8 And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again. 9 And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and sware to him concerning that matter. 10 And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, unto the city of Nahor. 11 And he made his camels to kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water. 12 **And he said, O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham.** 13 **Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water:** 14 **And let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master.** 15 And it came to pass, **before he had done speaking**, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher upon her shoulder. 16 And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up. 17 **And the servant ran** to meet her, and **said, Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher.** 18 **And she said, Drink, my lord: and she hasted,**

**and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink.** 19 And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking. 20 And she hasted, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again unto the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels. 21 **And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the LORD had made his journey prosperous or not.** 22 And it came to pass, as the camels had done drinking, that the man took a golden earring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold; 23 **And said, Whose daughter art thou? tell me, I pray thee: is there room in thy father's house for us to lodge in?** 24 **And she said unto him, I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor.** 25 She said moreover unto him, We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in. 26 **And the man bowed down his head, and worshipped the LORD.** 27 And he said, **Blessed be the LORD God** of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: **I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren.** 28 And the damsel ran, and told them of her mother's house these things. 29 And Rebekah had a brother, and his name was Laban: and Laban ran out unto the man, unto the well. 30 And it came to pass, when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, Thus spake the man unto me; that he came unto the man; and, behold, he stood by the camels at the well. 31 And he said, Come in, thou blessed of the LORD; wherefore standest thou without? for I have prepared the house, and room for the camels. 32 And the man came into the house: and he ungirded his camels, and gave straw and provender for the camels, and water to wash his feet, and the men's feet that were with him. 33 And there was set meat before him to eat: but he said, I will not eat, until I have told mine errand. And he said, Speak on. 34 And he said, I am Abraham's servant. 35 And the LORD hath blessed my master greatly; and he is become great: and he hath given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and menservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses. 36 And Sarah my master's wife bare a son to my master when she was old: and unto him hath he given all that he hath. 37 And my master made me swear, saying, **Thou shalt not take a wife to my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell:** 38 **But thou shalt go unto my father's house, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son.** 39 And I said unto my master, Peradventure the woman will not follow me. 40 And he said unto me, **The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee, and prosper thy way;** and thou shalt take a wife for my son of my kindred, and of my father's house: 41 Then shalt thou be clear from this my oath, when thou comest to my kindred; and if they give not thee one, thou shalt be clear from my oath. 42 **And I came this day unto the well, and said, O LORD God of my master Abraham, if now thou do prosper my way which I go:** 43 **Behold, I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the virgin cometh forth to draw water, and I say to her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water of thy pitcher to drink;** 44 **And she say to me, Both drink thou, and I will also draw for thy camels: let the same be the woman whom the LORD hath appointed out for my master's son.** 45 And before I had done speaking in mine heart, behold, **Rebekah came forth with her pitcher on her shoulder;** and she went down unto the well, and drew water: and I said unto her, Let me

drink, I pray thee. 46 **And she made haste**, and let down her pitcher from her shoulder, and said, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: so I drank, and she made the camels drink also. 47 **And I asked her, and said, Whose daughter art thou? And she said, The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son**, whom Milcah bare unto him: and I put the earring upon her face, and the bracelets upon her hands. 48 **And I bowed down my head, and worshipped the LORD**, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham, **which had led me in the right way** to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son. 49 And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left. 50 Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the LORD: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. 51 Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the LORD hath spoken. 52 And it came to pass, that, when Abraham's servant heard their words, he worshipped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth.

As we can see, this passage contains a prayer from Abraham's servant in which he petitions God to help him find a daughter from Abraham's larger family for Isaac to marry. There are at least two ways to interpret this.

Concerning the first option, perhaps the servant is praying that God will cause the right woman to say the designated phrase. This would imply that the servant expects God to control what people say. The idea that God inspires people to say certain words is, of course, not unusual in scripture although it is presented as unusual and does not imply that God always determines every word (or action) of men. The high priest in John 11:49-51 is an example of this. The text presents this as a special, noteworthy occasion. The high priest, after all, is presented as chief among those who are opposing God's work in Jesus' ministry. If this passage were meant to suggest that every word of sinners was inspired by the Holy Spirit, then God would even be inspiring lies. Consequently, it would be contrary to the sense of the text to deduce that John intends to convey that every word of the high priest, let alone every man, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. In short, as we can see from John 11, there are times when God inspires someone to say particular words, but this is rare and the vast majority of human communication is not directed by God.

Concerning the second option, we must take note of the instructions that Abraham gives his servant. Abraham demands that the bride not be Canaanite but be from his relatives in the land from which Abraham came (verses 3-4). He states that God would send his angel to guide the servant to the house of Abraham's relatives to find such a bride (verse 7). And in the midst of his exchange, the servant's primary concern is whether or not he will find a woman who is willing to travel the long journey to become Isaac's wife (verse 5). In response (verse 8), Abraham acknowledges that it is distinctly possible that the servant will not find a willing woman in which case he will be freed from this duty.

When the servant arrives in the land of Nahor (verse 12), his words and actions are intriguing.

First, it is noteworthy that according to verse 21, after the woman says exactly the words designated by the servant in his prayer, the servant is still wondering whether or not his prayer request has been granted. This tells us that the words designated in the prayer were not necessarily peculiar enough to distinguish the right woman from the wrong woman. In other words, it was not sufficiently unlikely that any woman might say those words, with or without God answering the prayer. If the words had been unlikely without God's answering the prayer, then the use of the designated words would have immediately signaled that God had indeed answer his request. Consequently, when the woman said the words, the servant was still left wondering if God had granted his petition. From the servant's perspective, the designated phrase was something that any woman (or at least more than one woman) was likely to say even the wrong woman who was not related to Abraham.

Second, the fact that the servant considered the designated words as a reasonably likely response from any woman, right or wrong, has implications for the servant's intention when he prayed. If the servant's intention was to ask God to cause the right woman to say the designated words and prevent the wrong woman from saying them, he would have chosen a response that was unlikely to be uttered apart from God's intervention. For example, petitioning God that the appointed woman would say, "Hello" would be an incredibly ineffective way to identify the right candidate. Many women might say, "Hello." Therefore, petitioning God while designating a reasonably likely response, such as "Hello," suggests the purpose of the prayer is not to determine the identity of the woman by means of God causing her to say the designated response. So, the question remains, what is the servant's intended purpose for his prayer?

Third, it seems plausible that the servant could easily enough have gone to the well, identified himself as the servant of Nahor's brother Abraham (as he does in verse 34), and asked the women for the location of Nahor's house. But instead, he mentions nothing of payment for water or service, nor his identity, nor the household that he seeks until after he has tested the character of the first woman he sees at the well. Given that the servant's primary concern was that he would find a willing woman, it is not surprising that he would begin by testing the hospitality and sense of social responsibility of the potential candidates even before he tests the other criteria, which is her ancestral relationship to Abraham's family. It is very possible that instead of praying that God cause the right woman to say the designated words and prevent the wrong women from saying them, instead the servant is petitioning God that the woman who met Abraham's criteria would be one of the women who met him with a favorable, hospitable, and socially responsible reply at the well. Does this mean the servant is praying that God would control the character of the woman? Not really. There is more to the story.

Fourth, it is easy to see the servant's petition as a request that God would find acceptable one of the woman who greeted him at the well with a favorable demeanor. This would imply nothing about God controlling the character of the woman. It would merely be a request that God would be satisfied with certain

characteristics, particularly a woman with a willing and helpful heart, especially since the servant's primary concern was finding a woman willing to come with him. In this case, it would be possible to consider the prayer of Abraham's servant in verse 14 as simply a request that if he encountered a hospitable and kind woman at the well, God would appoint that helpful woman to be the wife of Abraham's son. But still, God couldn't just approve of any woman. The candidate needed to be from among Abraham's extended family. It is plausible that there may have been many young women from Abraham's family in that city or even coming out to the well. After all, in Exodus 2:16-17 Moses encountered seven daughters of Jethro at the well in Median. Likewise, when Samuel the prophet was sent to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king, Jesse had eight sons and God informed Samuel that His selection depended upon the characteristics God saw in each son's heart (1 Samuel 16:1-12). Consequently, it is very plausible that Abraham's servant is praying that among all the women of the region that he might encounter at the well and among any potential young women of Abraham's extended family, God might select a woman who was not only of Abraham's kin, but who was also willing and helpful in demeanor, the kind of woman who would respond hospitably to a stranger at a well even before he offered her payment.

Fifth, another piece of information in the prayer suggests that Abraham's servant was petitioning God for "speed" in his task. In fact, the English version of the servant's prayer begins in verse 12 with the phrase "I pray thee, send me good speed." However, it would be potentially misleading to leave this solely at the English translation. The Hebrew words underlying this phrase are "paniyim" (Strong's No. 06440), which means "face, presence, before, or in front of" and "qarah" (Strong's No. 07136), which means "to encounter." So, the Hebrew language could simply convey a petition that God might help the servant encounter or come before the right woman. Even based solely on this information, it would still be very easy to comprehend the servant's prayer as a petition that the first woman who he met at the well would be the right one, rather than a petition that God would cause the right woman to say specific words.

But there is more. The only other occurrence of these two Hebrew words coupled together is just three chapters later in Genesis 27. In this chapter, an aging Isaac asks his son Esau to catch him some venison. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, hears this request and decides to send Jacob in with some food to impersonate Esau. When Jacob enters, Isaac asks him about the speed with which he acquired the food. In verse 20, Isaac says, "How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? Jacob responds, "Because the LORD thy God brought (07136) it to me (06440)?" The word Isaac uses for "quickly" is "mahar" (Strong's No. 04116), which means "to hasten" or "quickly." When Jacob answers, he uses the phrase "paniyim" (Strong's No. 06440) and "qarah" (Strong's No. 07136) coupled together and, in doing so, equates his speedy success in his father's mission with God's intervention.

As we return to Genesis 24, we see that a short while later in the chapter Abraham's servant explains his mission to Abraham's family. Like Jacob, in verse 48 the servant credits God, saying "the LORD God of my master Abraham led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son." And

he makes two other statements. After recounting his prayer to them in verses 42-44, he states in verse 45 that “before I had done speaking in mine heart, Rebekah came forth.” And not only did he encounter her quickly, but when he requested water from her, he says that she “made haste.” The word the servant uses for “made haste” is the Hebrew word “mahar” (Strong’s No. 04116), the same word used by Isaac when asking Jacob how he accomplished his father’s request so quickly. Comparing these two stories, just three chapters apart, allows us to see the association that these two Hebrew words have to do with the idea of speedy success enabled by God’s intervention. What is the servant’s point when retelling this to Abraham’s family? His point is that he had petitioned God to bring him across the right woman quickly and God faithfully brought him quickly to her. And as we saw earlier, he didn’t know God had granted his request by her words, which were common enough that any woman might have said them, but only when she told him who her father’s family was. At that moment, the servant knew that God had answered his prayer to find the right woman quickly.

We find another indication that the servant was chiefly concerned with speedy success in verse 55 where Rebekah’s mother and brother petition the servant to abide there with them for a few days, “at least ten” saying “after that she shall go.” The servant responds immediately by saying, “Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master.” Here the servant argues to Rebekah’s mother and brother that God himself wants him to succeed quickly and he offers God’s previous help to him along the way as proof. Clearly, we see the servant repeatedly concerned with speedy success on his journey and his conviction that God would aid him in that haste. (No doubt this desire to avoid staying long in the land may have been motivated by Abraham’s repeated warnings in verses 6 and 8 not to let Isaac return to or remain in the land to which the servant traveled. Such warnings could have instilled in the servant a strong sense of urgency not to abide long in that place.)

Ultimately, the servant’s prayer is not for God to cause the right woman to say certain words or for God to prevent the wrong woman from saying them. The servant does not expect God to control people’s words or thoughts. Rather, the servant is praying for speedy circumstances. And unlike controlling the words on a person’s tongue, it is easy to comprehend how God can influence such things through external factors outside of a person’s mind so as to bring the successful completion of a God-given task. Consequently, this prayer doesn’t necessitate anything more than the servant’s petition that God would select from among Abraham’s relative a specific woman who was willing and helpful and the servant’s expectation that God influence external factors that might affect which women came to the well first, at what time they arrived, or how soon.

We might also consider Genesis 24:7, in which Abraham tells his servant that “The LORD God of heaven...he shall send his angel before thee.” Similarly, in verse 27, the servant expresses his gratitude that “the LORD led” him directly to Abraham’s family. Again, in verse 40, the servant retells Abraham’s instructions in which he said, “the LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee.” And finally, in verse 48, the servant declares, “the LORD God of my master



Abraham, which had led me in the right way.” Does this language of the servant being led by God or by God’s angel suggest an inner, spiritual compulsion?

In the context of the Old Testament, the answer is a clear “no.” We can see this in the very famous exchange between God and Moses in Exodus 23. Here, we find a very similar type of statement to what is expressed by Abraham and his servant in Genesis 24. In Exodus 23:20, God tells Moses that “I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared.” There are two points worth noting here that relate to the events of Genesis 24.

First, throughout preceding chapters in Exodus (as well as in Numbers and Deuteronomy), we see such phrases as either “the Lord” or “the angel of God” going before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud. In fact, at night, this pillar of cloud turned to a pillar of fire enabling the people to see it (Exodus 13:21). In this prominent example from Exodus, we see that the idea of being led by God or by God’s angel was understood to be a very tangible, external thing. The angel was outside of you, visible to you, and you could watch where the angel went and follow him.

Second, the angel of God doesn’t always lead people swiftly to their intended location. After God told Moses that he would send his angel to guide the Israelites into the Promised Land, because of their unfaithfulness, God made the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years before they arrived there (Numbers 14:33-34). In Deuteronomy 29:5, God says, “I have led you forty years in the wilderness.” Yet, according to Deuteronomy 1:2, what took forty years was really only an eleven-day journey. Clearly, God did not lead them quickly to their destination. Again, the details between Genesis 24 and the Exodus journey seem quite relatable to one another and we must understand the prayer of Abraham’s servant in this setting.

While the text of Genesis 24 does not include details like this concerning the servant’s experience on his travels, we should not mistake the absence of these details for a denial of the kind of familiar, external leading that we see featured in the Exodus. This is especially true given the fact that the language is so similar in phrasing to the Exodus journey and both accounts involve the idea of persons being led along physical routes to particular locations at either notably fast or notably slow speeds by God’s angel. We may not know exactly how the angel led Abraham’s servant, but we have as much reason (if not more) to assume in this cultural, historical setting that the ancient Israelites would have understood this to be a tangible, physical leading rather than an internal, subjective compulsion of some sort.

Consequently, when read in the linguistic and cultural context of the Pentateuch, Genesis 24 contains no indications of an expectation for God to guide people through inner compulsion of some kind or to control their thoughts, words, or actions. Nor do we find any such expectations in the prayer recorded in this chapter.