



Spurgeon on Prayer

*Reflections on Our Prayers
and the God Who Hears*

Charles Spurgeon

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*“And if you believe,
you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

Matthew 21:22

Table of Contents

The Power of Prayer and the Pleasure of Praise	7
<i>2 Corinthians 1:11–12</i>	
Praying in the Holy Ghost	31
<i>Jude 20</i>	
Intercessory Prayer	51
<i>Psalms 141:5</i>	
Hindrances to Prayer	75
<i>1 Peter 3:7</i>	
Encouragement to Trust and Pray	99
<i>Isaiah 30:19</i>	
Humility, the Friend of Prayer	123
<i>Genesis 32:10</i>	
Concerning Prayer	147
<i>Psalms 86:6–7</i>	
Pray, Always Pray	171
<i>John 16:26–27</i>	
Prayer: It's Discouragements and Encouragements	195
<i>Matthew 15:23</i>	
Restraining Prayer	215
<i>Job 15:4</i>	
Comfort For Those Whos Prayers are Feeble	235
<i>Lamentations 3:56</i>	
Prayer-Meetings	253
<i>Acts 1:14</i>	

The Power of Prayer and the Pleasure of Praise

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 1:11–12

Preached May 3, 1863

“Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf. For our rejoicing in this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.” — 2 Corinthians 1:11–12

The apostle Paul had, by singular providences, been delivered from imminent peril in Asia. During the great riot at Ephesus, when Demetrius and his fellow shrine-makers raised a great tumult against him, because they saw that their craft was in danger, Paul’s life was greatly in jeopardy, so that he writes, “We were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life.” The apostle attributes to God alone his singular preservation; and if he referred also to the occasion when he was stoned and left for dead, there is much appropriateness in his blessing “God which raised the dead.” The apos-

tle, moreover, argues from the fact that God had thus delivered him in the past, and was still his helper in the present, that he would be with him also in the future. Paul is a master at all arithmetic, his faith was always a ready-reckoner, we here find him computing by the believer's Rule of Three; he argues from the past to the present, and from the present to things yet to come. The verse preceding our text is a brilliant example of this arriving at a comfortable conclusion by the Rule of Three—"Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us." Because our God is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever;" his love in time past is an infallible assurance of his kindness to-day, and an equally certain pledge of his faithfulness on the morrow; whatever our circumstances may be, however perplexed may be our pathway, and however dark our horizon, yet if we argue by the rule of "he hath, he doth, he will," our comfort can never be destroyed. Courage, then, O ye afflicted seed of Israel; if ye had a changeable God to deal with, your souls might be full of bitterness, but because he is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever," every repeated manifestation of his grace should make it more easy for you to rest upon him; every renewed experience of his fidelity should confirm your confidence in his grace. May the most blessed Spirit teach us to grow in holy confidence in our ever-faithful Lord.

Although our apostle thus acknowledged God's hand, and God's hand alone, in his deliverance, yet he was not so foolish as to deny or undervalue the second causes. On the contrary, having first praised the God Of all comfort, he now

remembers with gratitude the earnest prayers of the many loving intercessors. Gratitude to God must never become an excuse for ingratitude to man. It is true that Jehovah shielded the apostle of the Gentiles, but he did it in answer to prayer: the chosen vessel was not broken by the rod of the wicked, for the outstretched hand of the God of heaven was his defence, but that hand was outstretched because the people of Corinth and the saints of God everywhere had prevailed at the throne of grace by their united supplications. With gratitude those successful pleadings are mentioned in the text, “Ye also helping together by prayer for us,” and he desires the brethren now to unite their praises with his, “that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf,” for he adds that he has a claim upon their love, since he was not as some who were unfaithful to their trust, but his conscience was clear that he had preached the Word simply and with sincerity.

While speaking upon these topics may the anointing Spirit now descend to make them profitable to us. We shall, first, acknowledge the power of united prayer; secondly, excite you to united praise; and then, in the third place, urge our joyful claim upon you—a claim which is not our’s alone, but belongs to all ministers of God who in sincerity labour for souls.

I. First, then, dear friends, it is my duty and my privilege this morning to acknowledge the power of united prayer.

It has pleased God to make prayer the abounding and rejoicing river through which most of our choice mercies flow to us. It is the golden key which unlocks

the well-stored granaries of our heavenly Joseph. It is written upon each of the mercies of the covenant, "For this will I be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them." There are mercies which come unsought, for God is found of them that sought not for him; but there are other favours which are only bestowed upon the men who ask, and therefore receive; who seek, and therefore find; who knock, and therefore gain an entrance. Why God has been pleased to command us to pray at all it is not difficult to discover, for prayer glorifies God, by putting man in the humblest posture of worship. The creature in prayer acknowledges his Creator with reverence, and confesses him to be the giver of every good and perfect gift; the eye is lifted up to behold the glory of the Lord, while the knee is bent to the earth in the lowliness of acknowledged weakness. Though prayer is not the highest mode of adoration, or otherwise it would be continued by the saints in heaven, yet it is the most humble, and so the most fitting, to set forth the glory of the perfect One as it is beheld by imperfect flesh and blood. From the "Our Father," in which we claim relationship, right on to "the kingdom, and the power, and the glory," which we ascribe to the only true God, every sentence of prayer honours the Most High. The groans and tears of humble petitioners are as truly acceptable as the continual "Holy, holy, holy," of the Cherubim and Seraphim; for in their very essence all truthful confessions of personal fault are but a homage paid to the infinite perfections of the Lord of hosts. More honoured is the Lord by our prayers than by the unceasing smoke of the holy incense of the altar which stood before the veil. Moreover, the act of prayer teaches us our unworthiness, which is no small blessing to

such proud beings as we are. If God gave us favours without constraining us to pray for them we should never know how poor we are, but a true prayer is an inventory of wants, a catalogue of necessities, a sun in formâ pauperis, an exposure of secret wounds, a revelation of hidden poverty. While it is an application to divine wealth, it is a confession of human emptiness. I believe that the most healthy state of a Christian is to be always empty, and always depending upon the Lord for supplies; to be always poor in self and rich in Jesus; weak as water personally, but mighty through God to do great exploits; and hence the use of prayer, because while it adores God, it lays the creature where he should be, in the very dust. Prayer is in itself, apart from the answer which it brings, a great benefit to the Christian. As the runner gains strength for the race by daily exercise, so for the great race of life we acquire energy by the hallowed labour of prayer. Prayer plumes the wings of God's young eaglets, that they may learn to mount above the clouds. Prayer girds the loins of God's warriors, and sends them forth to combat with their sinews braced and their muscles firm. An earnest pleader cometh out of his closet, even as the sun ariseth from the chambers of the east, rejoicing like a strong man to run his race. Prayer is that uplifted hand of Moses which routs the Amalekites more than the sword of Joshua; it is the arrow shot from the chamber of the prophet foreboding defeat to the Syrians. What if I say that prayer clothes the believer with the attributes of Deity, girds human weakness with divine strength, turns human folly into heavenly wisdom, and gives to troubled mortals the serenity of the immortal God. I know not what prayer cannot do! I thank thee, great God, for the mercy-seat, a

choice gift of thy marvellous lovingkindness. Help us to use it aright!

As many mercies are conveyed from heaven in the ship of prayer, so there are many choice and special favours which can only be brought to us by the fleets of united prayer. Many are the good things which God will give to his lonely Elijahs and Daniels, but if two of you agree as touching anything that ye shall ask, there is no limit to God's bountiful answers. Peter might never have been brought out of prison if it had not been that prayer was made without ceasing by all the Church for him. Pentecost might never have come if all the disciples had not been "with one accord in one place," waiting for the descent of the tongues of fire. God is pleased to give many mercies to one pleader, but at times he seems to say—"Ye shall all appear before me and entreat my favour, for I will not see your face, unless even your younger brethren be with you." Why is this, dear friends? I take it that thus our gracious Lord sets forth his own esteem for the communion of saints. "I believe in the communion of saints" is one article of the great Christian creed, but how few there are who understand it. Oh! there is such a thing as real union among God's people. We may be called by different names—

"But all the servants of our King
In heaven and earth are one."

We cannot afford to lose the help and love of our brethren. Augustine says—"The poor are made for the rich and the rich are made for the poor." I do not doubt but that strong saints are made for weak saints, and that the weak saints

bring special benedictions upon the full-grown believers. There is a fitness in the whole body; each joint owes something to every other, and the whole body is bound together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth. There are certain glands in the human body which the anatomist hardly understands. He can say of the liver, for instance, that it yields a very valuable fluid of the utmost value in the bodily economy, but there are other secretions whose distinct value he cannot ascertain; yet, doubtless, if that gland were removed, the whole body might suffer to a high degree: and so, beloved friends, there may be some believers of whom we may say—"I do not know the use of them; I cannot tell what good that Christian does; yet were that insignificant and apparently useless member removed, the whole body might be made to suffer, the whole frame might become sick and the whole heart faint." This is probably the reason why many a weighty gift of heaven's love is only granted to combined petitioning—that we may perceive the use of the whole body, and so may be compelled to recognize the real vital union which divine grace has made and daily maintains among the people of God. Is it not a happy thought, dear friends, that the very poorest and most obscure Church-member can add something to the body's strength. We cannot all preach; we cannot all rule; we cannot all give gold and silver, but we can all contribute our prayers. There is no convert, though he but two or three days old in grace, but can pray. There is no bed-ridden sister in Jesus who cannot pray; there is no sick, aged, imbecile, obscure, illiterate, or penniless believer, who cannot add his supplications to the general stock. This is the Church's riches. We put boxes at the door that we may receive

your offerings to God's cause—remember there is a spiritual chest within the Church, into which we should all drop our loving intercessions, as into the treasury of the Lord. Even the widow, without her two mites, can give her offering to this treasury. See, then, dear friends, what union and communion there are among the people of God, since there are certain mercies which are only bestowed when the saints unitedly pray. How we ought to feel this bond of union! How we ought to pray for one another! How, as often as the Church meets together for supplication, should we all make it our bounden duty to be there! I would that some of you who are absent from the prayer-meeting upon any little excuse would reflect how much you rob us all. The prayer-meeting is an invaluable institution, ministering strength to all other meetings and agencies. Are there not many of you who might by a little pinching of your time and pressing of your labours come among us a little oftener? And what if you should lose a customer now and then, do you not think that this loss could be well made up to you by your gains on other days? Or if not so, would not the spiritual profit much more than counterbalance any little temporal loss? "Not forgetting the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is."

We are now prepared for a further observation. This united prayer should specially be made for the ministers of God. It is for them peculiarly that this public prayer is intended. Paul asks for it—"Brethren, pray for us;" and all God's ministers to the latest time will ever confess that this is the secret source of their strength. The prayers of the people must be the might of the ministers. Shall

I try to show you why the minister more than any other man in the Church needs the earnest prayers of the people? Is not his position the most perilous? Satan's orders to the hosts of hell are—"Fight neither with small nor great, save only with the ministers of God." He knows if he can once smite through the heart one of these, there will be a general confusion, for if the champion be dead, then the people fly. It is around the standard-bearer that the fight is thickest. There the battle-axes ring upon the helmets; there the arrows are bent upon the armour, for the foeman knows that if he can cut down the standard, or cleave the skull of its bearer, he will strike a heavy blow and cause deep discouragement. Press around us, then, ye men at arms! Knights of the red cross rally for our defence, for the fight grows hot. We beseech you if you elect us to the office of the ministry, stand fast at our side in our hourly conflicts. I noticed on returning from Rotterdam, when we were crossing the bar at the mouth of the Maas, where by reason of a neap tide and a bad wind the navigation was exceedingly dangerous, that orders were issued—"All hands on deck!" So methinks the life of a minister is so perilous, that I may well cry—"All hands on deck;" every man to prayer; let even the weakest saint become instant in supplication. The minister, standing in such a perilous position, has, moreover, a solemn weight of responsibility resting on him. Every man should be his brother's keeper in a measure, but woe to the watchmen of God if they be not faithful, for at their hands shall the blood of souls be required; at their door shall God lay the ruin of men if they preach not the gospel fully and faithfully. There are times when this burden of the Lord weighs upon God's ministers until they

cry out in pain as if their hearts would burst with anguish. I marked the captain as we crossed that bar throwing the lead himself into the sea; and when one asked why he did not let the sailors do it, he said, "At this point, just now, I dare not trust any man but myself to heave the lead, for we have hardly six inches between our ship and the bottom." And, indeed, we felt the vessel touch once or twice most unpleasantly. So there will come times with every preacher of the gospel, if he be what he should be, when he will be in dread suspense for his hearers, and will not be able to discharge his duty by proxy, but must personally labour for men, not even trusting himself to preach, but calling upon his God for help since he is now overwhelmed with the burden of men's souls. Oh, do pray for us. If God gives us to you and if you accept the gift most cheerfully, do not so despise both God and us as to leave us penniless and poverty-stricken because your prayers are withheld. Moreover, the preservation of the minister is one of the most important objects to the Church. You may lose a sailor from the ship, and that is very bad, both for him and for you; but if the pilot should fall over, or the captain should be smitten with sickness, or the helmsman be washed from the wheel, then what is the vessel to do? Therefore, though prayer is to be put up for every other person in the Church, yet for the minister is it to be offered first and foremost, because of the position which he occupies. And then, how much more is asked of him than of you? If you are to keep a private table for individual instruction, he is, as it were, to keep a public table, a feast of good things for all comers; and how shall he do this unless his Master give him rich provisions? You are to shine as a candle in a house: the minister has

to be as a lighthouse to be seen far across the deep, and how shall he shine the whole night long unless he be trimmed by his Master, and fresh oil be given him from heaven? His influence is wider than yours: if it be for evil, he shall be a deadly upas, with spreading boughs poisoning all beneath his shadow; but if God make him a star in his right hand, his ray of light shall cheer with its genial influence whole nations and whole periods of time. If there be any truth in all this, I implore you yield us generously and constantly the assistance of your prayers.

I find that in the original, the word for “helping together,” implies very earnest work. Some people’s prayers have no work in them; but the only prayer which prevails with God is a real working-man’s prayer—where the petitioner, like a Samson, shakes the gates of mercy, and labours to pull them up rather than be denied an entrance. We do not want finger-end prayers, which only touch the burden, we need shoulder-prayers, which bear a load of earnestness and are not to be denied their desire. We do not want those dainty run-away knocks at the door of mercy, which professors give when they show off at prayer-meetings, but we ask for the knocking of a man who means to have, and means to stop at mercy’s gate till it opens and all his need shall be supplied. The energetic, vehement violence of the man who is not to be denied, but intends to carry heaven by storm until he wins his heart’s desire—this is the prayer which ministers covet of their people. Melancthon, it is said, derived great comfort from the information that certain poor weavers, women and children, had met

together to pray for the Reformation. Yes, Melancthon, there was solid ground for comfort here. Depend on it, it was not Luther only, but the thousands of poor persons who sung psalms at the plough-tail, and the hundreds of serving men and women who offered supplications, that made the Reformation what it was. We are told of Paulus Phagijs, a celebrated Hebrew scholar, very useful in introducing the Reformation into this country, that one of his frequent requests of his younger scholars, was that they would continue in prayer, so that God might be pleased to pour out a blessing in answer to them. Have I not said a hundred times, that all the blessing that God has given us here, all the increase to our Church, has been due, under God, to your earnest, fervent supplications? There have been heaven-moving seasons both in this house and at New Park Street. We have had times when we have felt we could die sooner than not be heard; when we carried our Church on our bosom as a mother carrieth her child; when we felt a yearning and a travailing in birth for the souls of men. “What hath God wrought?” we may truly say, when we see our Church daily increasing, and the multitudes still hanging upon our lips to listen to the Word. Shall we now cease from our prayers? Shall we now say unto the Great High Priest, “It is enough?” Shall we now pluck the glowing coals from the altar and quench the burning incense? Shall we now refuse to bring the morning and evening lambs of prayer and praise to the sacrifice? O children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, will ye turn your backs in the day of battle? The flood is divided before you; the Jordan is driven back; will you refuse to march through the depths? God, even your God, goeth up before you; the shout of a

King is heard in the midst of your hosts; will you now be recreant and refuse to go up and possess the land? Will you now lose your first love? Shall "Ichabod" be written upon the forefront of this tabernacle?' Shall it be said that God hath forsaken you? Shall the day come in which the daughters of Philistia shall rejoice and the sons of Syria shall triumph? If not, to your knees again, with all the force of prayer. If not, to your vehement supplications once more! If not, if you would not see good blighted and evil triumphant, clasp hands again, and in the name of him who ever liveth to intercede, once more be prevalent in prayer that the blessing may again descend. "Ye also helping together by prayer for us."

II. We must now excite you to praise.

Praise should always follow answered prayer; the mist of earth's gratitude should rise as the sun of heaven's love warms the ground. Hath the Lord been gracious to thee, and inclined his ear to the voice of thy supplication? Then praise him as long as thou livest. Deny not a song to him who hath answered thy prayer and given thee the desire of thy heart. To be silent over God's mercies is to incur the guilt of shocking ingratitude, and ingratitude is one of the worst of crimes. I trust, dear friends, you will not act as basely as the nine lepers, who after they had been healed of their leprosy, returned not to give thanks unto the healing Lord. To forget to praise God, is to refuse to benefit ourselves, for praise, like prayer, is exceedingly useful to the spiritual man. It is a high and healthful exercise. To dance, like David, before the Lord, is to quicken the blood in the veins and make the pulse beat at a healthier rate. Praise gives to us

a great feast, like that of Solomon, who gave to every man a good piece of flesh and a flagon of wine. Praise is the most heavenly of Christian duties. The angels pray not, but they cease not to praise both day and night. To bless God for mercies received is to benefit our fellow-men; “the humble shall hear thereof and be glad.” Others who have been in like circumstances, shall take comfort if we can say, “Oh! magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together; this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him.” Tongue-tied Christians are a sad dishonour to the Church. We have some such, some whom the devil has gagged, and the loudest music they ever make is when they are champing the bit of their silence. I would, my brethren, that in all such cases the tongue of the dumb may sing.

To go a step further here. As praise is good and pleasant, blessing man and glorifying God, united praise has a very special commendation. United praise is like music in concert. The sound of one instrument is exceeding sweet, but when hundreds of instruments, both wind and stringed, are all combined, then the orchestra sendeth forth a noble volume of harmony. The praise of one Christian is accepted before God like a grain of incense; but the praise of many is like a censer full of frankincense smoking up before the Lord. Combined praise is an anticipation of heaven, for in that general assembly they altogether with one heart and voice praise the Lord.

“Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
But all their joys are one.”

Public praise is very agreeable to the Christian himself. How many burdens has it removed; I am sure when I hear the shout of praise in this house it warms my heart. It is at times a little too slow for my taste, and I must urge you to quicken your pace, that the rolling waves of majestic praise may display their full force, yet with all drawbacks, to my heart there is no music like yours. My Dutch friends praise the Lord so very slowly that one might very well go to sleep, lulled by their lengthened strains. Even there, however, the many voices make a grand harmony of praise. I love to hear God's people sing when they really do sing, not when it is a drawling out somewhere between harmony and discord. O for a sacred song, a shout of lofty praise in which every man's soul beats the time, and every man's tongue sounds the tune, and each singer feels a high ambition to excel his fellow in gratitude and love. There is something exceedingly delightful in the union of true hearts in the worship of God, and when these hearts are expressed in song, how sweet the charming sounds. I think we ought to have a praise-meeting once a week. We have a prayer meeting every Monday, and a prayer-meeting every Saturday, and a prayer-meeting every morning, but why do we not have a praise-meeting? Surely seasons should be set apart for services made up of praise from beginning to end. Let us try the plan at once.

As I said about united prayer, that it should be offered specially for ministers, so should united praise often take the same aspect, the whole company should praise and bless God for the mercy rendered to the Church through its pastors. Hear how our apostle puts it again—"That for the gift bestowed upon us by

the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf.”

Brethren, we ought to praise God for good ministers that they live, for when they die much of their work dies with them. It is astonishing how a reformation will press on while Luther and Calvin live, and how it will cease directly the reformers die. The spirits of good men are immortal only in a sense. The Churches of God in this age are like the Israelites in the times of the judges, when the judges died they went after graven images again. And it is so now. While God spares the man the Church prospers, but when the man dies the zeal which he blew to a flame smoulders among the ashes. In nine cases out of ten, if not in ninety-nine out of every hundred, the prosperity of a Church rests on the minister's life. God so ordains it to humble us. There should be gratitude, then, for spared life; but there should be great gratitude for preserved character, for oh! when a minister falls, what a disgrace it is! Why, when you read in the police-reports the sad case of the Rev. Mr. —, who chose to call himself a Baptist minister, everybody says, “What a shocking thing! what a bad set the Baptists must be.” Now, any fool in the world may call himself a Baptist minister. Our liberty is so complete that no law or order exists. Any man who can get a dozen to hear him, is a minister at least to them; therefore you cannot suppose but what there will be some hypocrites who will take the name in order to get some sort of reputation. If the true minister be kept, and made to hold fast his integrity, there should be constant gratitude to God on his behalf. If the minister be kept well supplied with goodly matter; if he be like a springing well; if God give him to bring out of his treasury things both new and old

to feed his people, there should be hearty thanks. And if he be kept sound, if he go not aside to philosophy on the one hand, nor to a narrowness of doctrine on the other, there should be thanksgiving there. If God give to the masses the will to hear him, and above all, if souls be converted, and saints be edified, there should be never-ceasing honour and praise to God. Ah! I am talking now about what you all know, and you just nod your heads to it, and think there is not much in it, but if you were made to live in Holland for a little time you would soon appreciate these remarks. While travelling there, I stayed in houses with godly men, men of God with whom I could hold sweet communion, who cannot attend what was once their place of worship. Why not? "Sir," they say, "can I go to a place of worship when the most of the ministers deny every word of Scripture; not those of the Reformed Church only, but of every sect in Holland; how can I listen to the traitors who swear to the Calvinistic or Lutheran articles, and then go into the pulpit and deny the reality of the resurrection, or assert that the ascension of Jesus is a mere spiritual parable?" I find that in the Netherlands they are fifty years in advance of us in infidelity. We shall soon catch up with them if gentlemen of a certain school I know of are suffered to multiply. The Dutch divines have taken great strides in Neologianism, till now the people love the truth, and there are multitudes that are willing to hear it, but these are compelled absolutely to refuse to go to church at all, lest by any means they should give countenance to the heretical and false doctrines which are preached to them every Sabbath-day. Ah! if God were once to take away from England the ministers who preach the gospel boldly and plainly, you

would cry to God to give you the candlestick back again. We may indeed say of England—

“With all thy faults I love thee still.”

We have a colonial bishop who avows his unbelief; we have a few men of all denominations who are quietly sliding from the truth; but thank God they are nothing as yet; they are but as a drop in a bucket compared to the Churches of Christ, and those among us who are not quite as Calvinistic as we might wish, I thank God, never dispute the inspiration of Scripture, nor doubt the great truth of justification by faith. We have still preserved amongst us men that are faithful to God, and preach the whole truth as it is in Jesus. Be thankful for your ministers, I say again, for if you were placed where some believers are, you would cry out to your God—“Lord, send us back thy prophets; send us a famine of bread or a famine of water, but send us not a famine of the Word of God!”

I ask for myself this morning, as your minister, your thanksgivings to be mingled with mine in praising God for the help which he has vouchsafed to me in the very arduous work of the last fortnight. Praise be to God for the acceptance which he gave me in that country among all ranks of the people. I speak to his praise, and not to mine, for this has been a vow with me; that if God will give me a harvest, I will not have an ear of corn of it, but he shall have it all. I found in all the places where I went great multitudes of people; crowds who could not understand the preacher, but who wanted to see his face, because God

had blessed his translated sermons to their souls; multitudes who gave me the grip of brotherly kindness, and, with tears in their eyes, invoked, in the Dutch language, every blessing upon my head. I hoped to preach to some fifties and hundreds, and instead of that there were so many that the great cathedrals were not too large. This surprised me and made me glad, and caused me to rejoice in God, and I ask you to rejoice with me. I thank God for the acceptance which he gave me among all ranks of the people. While the poor crowded to shake hands, till they almost pulled me in pieces, it pleased God to move the heart of the Queen of Holland to send for me, and for an hour and a quarter I was privileged to talk with her concerning the things which make for our peace. I sought no interview with her, but it was her own wish; and then I lifted up my soul to God that I might talk of nothing but Christ, and might preach to her of nothing but Jesus; and so it pleased the Master to help me, and I left that very amiable lady, not having shunned to declare the whole counsel of God. Gratified was I, indeed, to find myself received cordially by all denominations, so that on the Saturday at Amsterdam I preached in the Mennonite Church in the morning, and at the Old Dutch Reformed Church in the evening; the next Sunday morning in the English Presbyterian Church, and then again in the evening in the Dutch Free Church; sometimes in the great cathedrals, as in the Dom Kirk, at Utrecht, and in Peter's Kirk, at Leyden, not having the poor only, but the nobility and the gentry of the land, who of course could understand English better than most of the poor, who have had no opportunity of learning it. I felt while going from town to town the Master helping me continually to

preach. I never knew such elasticity of spirit, such bounding of heart in my life before; and I come back, not wearied and tired, though preaching twice every day, but fuller of strength and vigour than when I first set out. I give God the glory for the many souls I have heard of who have been converted through the reading of the printed sermons, and for the loving blessings of those who followed us to the water's edge with many tears, saying to us—"Do thy diligence to come again before winter," and urging us once more to preach the word in that land. There may be mingled with this some touch of egotism; the Lord knoweth whether it be so or not, but I am not conscious of it. I do praise and bless his name, that in a land where there is so much philosophy, he has helped me to preach the truth so simply, that I never uttered a word as a mere doctrinalist, but I preached Christ, and nothing but Christ. Rejoice with me, my dear brethren. I must have you rejoice in it, or if you will not, I must rejoice alone, but my loaf of praise is too great for me to eat it all.

III. And now we come to a close. I have to urge the joyful claims which the apostle gives in the twelfth verse, as a reason why there should be prayer and praise.

"For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." Ah! after all, a man's comfort must come, next to the finished salvation of God, from the testimony of his own conscience, and to a minister what a testimo-

ny it is that he has preached the gospel in simplicity, to which there are two senses: preached it not with double-mindedness—saying one thing and meaning another; preached it, not as watermen row, looking one way and pulling another, but preached it meaning what he said, having a single heart, desiring God's glory and the salvation of men. And what a blessing to have preached it simply, that is to say, without hard words, without polished phrases, never studying elocutionary graces, never straining after oratorical embellishments. How accursed must be the life of a man who profanes the pulpit to the dignity of eloquence; how desperate will be his deathbed, when he remembers that he made an exhibition of his powers of speech rather than of the solid things which make for the winning of souls. That conscience may well be easy that can speak of having dealt with God's truth in simplicity. The apostle says, also, that he had preached it with sincerity, that is, he had preached it meaning it, feeling it, preached it so that none could accuse him of being false. The Greek word has something in it of sunlight, and he is the true minister of God who preaches what he would wish to have hung up in the sunlight, or who has the sunlight shining right through him. I am afraid we are none of us like white glass, most of us are coloured a little, but he is happy who seeks to get rid of the colouring matter as much as possible, so that the light of the gospel may shine right straight, clear as it comes from the Sun of Righteousness, through him. Paul had preached with simplicity and sincerity. And he adds, "Not with fleshly wisdom." Oh! what stories have I heard of what fleshly wisdom will do, and I have learned a lesson during the last fortnight which I would that England

would learn. There are three schools of theological error over yonder, and each one leaps over the back of its fellow, some of them holding that all the facts of Scripture are only myths, others of them saying that there are some good things in the Bible, though there are a great many mistakes, and others going further still, and flinging the whole Bible away altogether as to its inspiration, though they still preach it, and still lean on it, saying that they do that merely for the edification of the vulgar, merely holding it up for the sake of the masses, though I ought to add merely to get their living as well. Sad! sad! sad! that the Church has gone to such a length as that—the Old Dutch Reformed Church, the very mirror of Calvinism, standing fast and firm in its creeds to all the doctrines we love, and yet gone astray to latitudinarian and licentious liberty. Oh! how earnestly should we decry fleshly wisdom! I am afraid, dear friends, sometimes that some of you when you hear a minister, you like him to put it pretty well, and you find fault unless he shows some degree of talent. I wonder whether that is not a sin? I am half inclined to think it is. I sometimes think whether we ought not to look less every day to talent, and more and more to the matter of the gospel that is preached; whether if a man be blessed with elocutionary power we may perhaps be more profited by him—whether that is not a weakness, whether we had not better go back to the days of fishermen once again, and give men no sort of education whatever, but just send them to preach the truth simply, rather than go the length they are now going, giving men, I know not what, of all sorts of learning that is of no earthly use to them, but which only helps them to pervert the simplicity of God. I love that word in

my text—“Not with fleshly wisdom.”

And now I lay my claim, as my conscience bears me witness—I lay my claim to this boasting of our apostle. I have preached God’s gospel in simplicity; I do not know how I can preach it more simply, nor can I more honestly declare it. I have preached it sincerely—the Searcher of all hearts knows that; and I have not preached it with fleshly wisdom, and that for one excellent reason—that I have not any, and have been compelled to keep to the simple testimony of the Lord. But if I have done aught, it has been done by the grace of God. If any success has been achieved, it has been grace that has done it all. “And more especially to you-ward;” for though our word has gone forth to many lands, and our testimony belts the globe, yet “more especially to you-ward.” You have we warned; you have we entreated; you have we exhorted; with you have we pleaded; over you have we wept; for you have we prayed; to some of you we have been a spiritual parent in Christ; to many of you as a nursing father; to many of you as a teacher and an edifier in the gospel; and we hope to all of you a sincere friend in Christ Jesus. Therefore do I claim your prayers—yours more than any other people’s; and though there will be not a few who will remember us in their supplications, I do conjure you, inasmuch as it has been “especially to you-ward,” let us specially have your prayers. Some will say that it is unkind even for me to suppose that you do not pray. Well, I do not so suppose it out of unkindness, but there may be some who forget—some who forget to plead. Oh! do pray for us still! The whole congregation is not saved yet. There are some that hear us

that are not yet converted. Plead with God for their sakes. There are some hard hearts unbroken; ask God to make the hammer strike; and while there are some still unmelted, pray God to make the word like a fire. This great London needs to be stirred from end to end. Pray for all your ministers, that God may make them mighty. The Church wants more still of the loud voice of God to wake it from its sleep. Ask God to bless all his sent servants. Plead with him with divine energy, that so his kingdom may come, and his will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

O that you all believed in Jesus; for until you do, you cannot pray nor praise!
O that you all believed in Jesus! Remember, this is the only way of salvation.
Trust Jesus, for he that believeth on him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he believeth not on the Son of God.
Trust Jesus and you shall be saved. May Christ accept you now, for his own love's sake. Amen.

Praying in the Holy Ghost

Sermon on Jude 20

Preached November 4, 1866

“Praying in the Holy Ghost” — Jude 20

It must have been a fine sight to see the hoary-headed Jacob sitting up in his bed whilst he bestowed his parting benediction upon his twelve sons. He had been noble in many instances during his life—at the sleeping place of Bethel, the brook of Jabbok, and the halting of Peniel. He had been a glorious old man, one before whom we might bow down with reverence, and truly say, “There were giants in those days.” But his closing scene was the best. I think if ever he stood out more illustrious than at any other time, if his head was, at any one season more than another, encircled with a halo of glory, it was when he came to die. Like the sun at setting, he seemed then to be the greater in brilliance, tinging the clouds of his weakness with the glory of grace within. Like good wine which runs clear to the very bottom, unalloyed by dregs, so did Jacob, till his dying hour, continue to sing of love, of mercy, and of goodness, past and future. Like the swan, which as old writers say singeth not all its life until it comes to die, so the old patriarch remained silent as a songster for many

years, but when he stretched himself on his last couch of rest, he stayed himself up in his bed, turned his burning eye from one to another, and although with a hoarse and faltering voice, he sang a sonnet upon each of his offspring, such as earthly poets, uninspired, cannot attempt to imitate. Looking upon his son Reuben, a tear was in his eye, for he recollected Reuben's sin; he passed over Simeon and Levi, giving some slight rebuke; upon the others he sung a verse of praise, as his eyes saw into the future history of the tribes. By-and-by his voice failed him, and the good old man, with long drawn breath, with eyes pregnant with celestial fire, and heart big with heaven, lifted his voice to God, and said, "I have waited for thy salvation, O God," rested a moment on his pillow, and then, again, sitting up, re-commenced the strain, passing briefly by the names of each. But oh! when he came to Joseph, his youngest son but one—when he looked on him, I picture that old man as the tears ran down his cheeks. There stood Joseph, with all his mother Rachel in his eyes—that dear-loved wife of his—there he stood, the boy for whom that mother had prayed with all the eagerness of an eastern wife. For a long twenty years she had tarried a barren woman and kept no house, but then she was a joyful mother, and she called her son "increase." Oh! how she loved the boy; and for that mother's sake, though she had been buried for some years and hidden under the cold sod, old Jacob loved him too. But more than that; he loved him for his troubles. He was parted from him to be sold into Egypt. His father recollected Joseph's trials in the round house and the dungeon, and remembered his royal dignity as prince of Egypt; and now with a full burst of harmony, as if the music of

heaven had united with his own, as when the widened river meets the sea, and the tide coming up doth amalgamate with the stream that cometh down, and swelleth into a broad expanse, so did the glory of heaven meet the rapture of his earthly feelings, and giving vent to his soul, he sung “Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall; the archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him; but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel:) even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb: the blessings of thy fathers have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.” What a splendid stanza with which to close! He has only one more blessing to give; but surely this was the richest which he conferred on Joseph.

Joseph is dead, but the Lord has his Josephs now. There are some still who understand by experience—and that is the best kind of understanding—the meaning of this passage, “The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.”

There are four things for us to consider this morning: first of all, the cruel

attack.—“the archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him;” secondly the shielded warrior,—“but his bow abode in strength;” thirdly his secret strength,—“the arms of his hands were made strong by the mighty power of the God of Jacob;” and fourthly, the glorious parallel drawn between Joseph and Christ,—“from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel.”

I. First, then, we commence with the cruel attack. “The archers have sorely grieved him.” Joseph’s enemies were archers. The original has it, “masters of the arrows,” that is, men who were well skilled in the use of the arrow. Though all weapons are alike approved by the warrior in his thirst for blood, there seems something more cowardly in the attack of the archer, than in that of the swordsman. The swordsman plants himself near you, foot to foot, and lets you defend yourself and deal your blows against him; but the archer stands at a distance, hides himself in ambuscade, and, without your knowing it, the arrow comes whizzing through the air, and perhaps penetrates your heart. Just so are the enemies of God’s people. They very seldom come foot to foot with us; they will not show their faces before us; they hate the light, they love darkness; they dare not come and openly accuse us to our face, for then we could reply; but they shoot the bow from a distance, so that we cannot answer them; cowardly and dastardly as they are, they forge their arrowheads, and aim them, winged with hell-bird’s feathers, at the hearts of God’s people. The archers sorely grieved poor Joseph. Let us consider who are the archers who so cruelly shot at him. First, there were the archers of envy; secondly, the archers of temp-

tation; and thirdly, the archers of slander and calumny.

1. First, Joseph had to endure the archers of envy. When he was a boy, his father loved him. The youth was fair and beautiful; in person, he was to be admired; moreover, he had a mind that was gigantic, and an intellect that was lofty; but, best of all, in him dwelt the spirit of the living God. He was one who talked with God; a youth of piety and prayerfulness; beloved of God, even more than he was by his earthly father. Oh! how his father loved him! for in his fond affection, he made him a princely coat of many colours, and treated him better than the others—a natural but foolish way of showing his fondness. Therefore, his brethren hated him. Full often did they jeer at the youthful Joseph, when he retired to his prayers; when he was with them at a distance from his father's house, he was their drudge, their slave; the taunt, the jeer, did often wound his heart, and the young child endured much secret sorrow. On an ill day, as it happened, he was with them at a distance from home, and they thought to slay him; but upon the entreaty of Reuben they put him into a pit, until, as providence would have it, the Ishmaelites did pass that way. They then sold him for the price of a slave, stripped him of his coat, and sent him naked, they knew not, and they cared not whither, so long as he might be out of their way, and no longer provoke their envy and their anger. Oh! the agonies he felt,—parted from his father, losing his brethren, without a friend, dragged away by cruel-mansellers, chained upon a camel it may be, with fetters upon his hands. Those who have borne the gyves and fetters, those who have felt

that they were not free men, that they had not liberty, might tell how sorely the archers grieved him when they shot at him the arrows of their envy. He became a slave, sold from his country, dragged from all he loved. Farewell to home and all its pleasures—farewell to a father’s smiles and tender cares. He must be a slave, and toil where the slaves’ task-master makes him; he must be exposed in the market, he must be stripped in the streets, he must be beaten, he must be scourged, he must be reduced from the man to the animal, from the free man to the slave. Truly the archers sorely shot at him. And, my brethren, do you hope, if you are the Lord’s Josephs, that you shall escape envy? I tell you, nay; that green-eyed monster envy, lives in London as well as elsewhere, and he creeps into God’s church, moreover. Oh! it is hardest of all to be envied by one’s brethren. If the devil hates us, we can bear it; if the foe’s of God’s truth speak ill of us, we buckle up our harness, and say, “Away, away, to the conflict.” But when the friends within the house slander us; when brethren who should uphold us, turn our foes; and when they try to tread down their younger brethren; then, sirs, there is some meaning in the passage, “The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him.” But blessed be God’s name, it is sweet to be informed that “his bow abode in strength.” None of you can be the people of God without provoking envy; and the better you are, the more you will be hated. The ripest fruit is most pecked by the birds, and the blossoms that, have been longest on the tree, are the most easily blown down by the wind. But fear not; you have nought to do with what man shall say of you. If God loves you, man will hate you; if God honors you, man will dishonor

you. But recollect, could ye wear chains for Christ's sake, ye should wear chains of gold in heaven, could ye have rings of burning iron round your waists, ye should have your brow rimmed with gold in glory; for blessed are ye when men shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for Christ's name sake; for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you. The first archers were the archers of envy.

2. But a worse trial than this was to overtake him. The archers of temptation shot at him. Here I know not how to express myself. I would that some one more qualified to speak were here, that he might tell you the tale of Joseph's trial, and Joseph's triumph. Sold to a master who soon discovered his value, Joseph was made the bailiff of the house, and the manager of the household. His wanton mistress fixed her adulterous love on him; and he, being continually in her presence, was perpetually, day by day, solicited by her to evil deeds. Constantly did he refuse still enduring a martyrdom at the slow fire of her enticements. On one eventful day she grasped him, seeking to compel him to crime; but he, like a true hero, as he was, said to her, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Like a wise warrior, he knew that in such a case fleeing was the better part of valour. He heard a voice in his ears, "Fly, Joseph, fly; there remains no way of victory but flight;" and out he fled, leaving his garment with his adulterous mistress. Oh, I say in all the annals of heroism there is not one that shall surpass this. You know it is opportunity that makes a man criminal, and he had abundant opportunity; but importunity will drive most

men astray. To be haunted day by day by solicitations of the softest kind—to be tempted hour by hour—oh! it needs a strength super-angelic, a might more than human, a strength which only God can grant, for a young man thus to cleanse his way, and take heed thereto according to God's word. He might have reasoned within himself, "Should I submit and yield, there lies before me a life of ease and pleasure; I shall be exalted, I shall be rich. She shall prevail over her husband, to cover me with honours; but should I still adhere to my integrity, I shall be cast into prison, I shall be thrown into the dungeon; there awaits me nothing but shame and disgrace." Oh! there was a power indeed within that heart of his; there was an inconceivable might, which made him turn away with unutterable disgust, with fear and trembling, while he said, "How can I? how can I—God's Joseph—how can I—other men might, but how can I do this great wickedness and sin against God." Truly the archers sorely grieved him and shot at him; but his bow abode in strength.

3. Then another host of archers assailed him: these were the archers of malicious calumny. Seeing that he would not yield to temptation, his mistress falsely accused him to her husband and his lord believing the voice of his wife, cast him into prison. It was a marvellous providence that he did not put him to death, for Potiphar, his master, was the chief of the slaughtermen; he had only to call in a soldier, who would have cut him in pieces on the spot. But he cast him into prison. There was poor Joseph. His character ruined in the eyes of man, and very likely looked upon with scorn even in the prison-house; base

criminals went away from him as if they thought him viler than themselves, as if they were angels in comparison with him. Oh! it is no easy thing to feel your character gone, to think that you are slandered, that things are said of you that are untrue. Many a man's heart has been broken by this, when nothing else could make him yield. The archers sorely grieved him when he was so maligned—so slandered. O child of God, dost thou expect to escape these archers? Wilt thou never be slandered? Shalt thou never be calumniated? It is the lot of God's servants, in proportion to their zeal, to be evil spoken of. Remember the noble Whitfield, how he stood and was the butt of all the jeers and scoffs of half an age, while his only answer was a blameless life.

“And he who forged, and he who threw the dart,
Had each a brother's interest in his heart.”

They reviled him and imputed to him crimes that Sodom never knew. So shall it be always with those who preach God's truth, and all the followers of Christ—they must all expect it; but blessed be God, they have not said worse things of us than they said of our Master. What have they laid to our charge? They may have said “he is drunken and a winebibber:” but they have not said “he hath a devil.” They have accused us of being mad, so was it said of Paul. Oh, holy infatuation, heavenly furor, would that we could bite others until they had the same madness. We think if to go to heaven be mad, we will not choose to be wise; we see no wisdom in preferring hell; we can see no great prudence in despising and hating God's truth. If to serve God be vile, we purpose

to be viler still. Ah! friends, some now present know this verse by heart, “The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him.” Expect it; do not think it a strange thing; all God’s people must have it. There are no royal roads to heaven—they are paths of trial and trouble; the archers will shoot at you as long as you are on this side the flood.

II. We have seen these archers shoot their flights of arrows; we will now go up the hill a little, behind a rock, to look at the shielded warrior and see how his courage is while the archers have sorely grieved him. What is he doing? “His bow abideth in strength.” Let us picture God’s favorite. The archers are down below. There is a parapet of rock before him; now and then he looks over it to see what the archers are about, but generally he keeps behind. In heavenly security he is set upon a rock, careless of all below. Let us follow the track of the wild goat, and behold the warrior in his fastness.

First, we notice that he has a bow himself, for we read that “his bow abode in strength.” He could have retaliated if he pleased, but he was very quiet and would not combat with them. Had he pleased, he might have drawn his bow with all his strength, and sent his weapon to their hearts with far greater precision than they had ever done to him. But mark the warrior’s quietness. There he rests, stretching his mighty limbs; his bow abode in strength; he seemed to say, “Rage on, ay, let your arrows spend themselves, empty your quivers on me, let your bow-strings be worn out, and let the wood be broken with its constant bending: here am I, stretching myself in safe repose; my bow abides in strength;

Praying in the Holy Ghost

I have other work to do besides shooting at you; my arrows are against you foes of God, the enemies of the Most High; I cannot waste an arrow on such pitiful sparrows as you are; ye are birds beneath my noble shot; I would not waste an arrow on you.” Thus he remains behind the rock and despises them all. His bow abideth in strength.

Mark well his quietness. His bow “abideth.” It is not rattling, it is not always moving, but it abides, it is quite still; he takes no notice of the attack. The archers sorely grieved Joseph, but his bow was not turned against them, it abode in strength. He turned not his bow on them. He rested while they raged. Doth the moon stay herself to lecture every dog that bayeth her? Doth the lion turn aside to rend each cur that barketh at him? Do the stars cease to shine because the nightingales reprove them for their dimness? Doth the sun stop in its course because of the officious cloud which veils it? Or doth the river stay because the willow dippeth its leaves into its waters? Ah! no; God’s universe moves on, and if men will oppose it, it heeds them not. It is as God hath made it; it is working together for good, and it shall not be stayed by the censure, nor moved on by the praise of man. Let your bows, my brethren, abide. Do not be in a hurry to set yourselves right. God will take care of you. Leave yourselves alone; only be very valiant for the Lord God of Israel: be stedfast in the truth of Jesus, and your bow shall abide.

But we must not forget the next word. “His bow abode in strength.” Though his bow was quiet, it was not because it was broken. Joseph’s bow was like that

of William the Conqueror, no man could bend it but Joseph himself; it abode “in strength.” I see the warrior bending his bow—how with his mighty arms he pulls it down and draws the string to make it ready. His bow abode in strength; it did not snap, it did not start aside. His chastity was his bow, and he did not lose that: his faith was his bow, and that did not yield, it did not break; his courage was his bow, and that did not fail him; his character, his honesty was his bow; not did he cast it away. Some men are so very particular about reputation. They think, “surely, surely, surely they shall lose their characters.” Well, well, if we do not lose them through our own fault, we never need care about anybody else. You know there is not a man that stands at all prominent, but what any fool in the world can set affect some bad tale against him. It is a great deal easier to set a story afloat than to stop it. If you want truth to go round the world you must hire an express train to pull it; but if you want a lie to go round the world, it will fly; it is as light as a feather, and a breath will carry it. It is well said in the old Proverb, “A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.” Nevertheless, it does not injure us; for if light as a feather it travels as fast, its effect is just about as tremendous as the effect of down, when it is blown against the walls of a castle: it produces no damage whatever, on account of its lightness and littleness. Fear not, Christian. Let slander fly, let envy send forth its forked tongue, let it hiss at you, your bow shall abide in strength. Oh! shielded warrior, remain quiet, fear no ill; but, like the eagle in its lofty eyrie, look thou down upon the fowlers in the plain; turn thy bold eye upon them and say, “Shoot ye may, but your shots will not reach, half way to the pinnacle

where I stand. Waste your powder upon me if ye will; I am beyond your reach.” Then clap your wings, mount to heaven and there laugh them to scorn, for you have made your refuge God, and shall find a most secure abode.

III. The third thing in our text is the secret strength. “The arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.”

First, notice concerning his strength, that it was real strength. It says, “the arms of his hands,” not his hands only. You know some people can do a great deal with their hands, but then it is often fictitious power; there is no might in the arm—there is no muscles, but of Joseph it is said, “the arms of his hands were made strong.” It was real potency, true muscle, real sinew, real nerve. It was not simply slight of hand—the power of moving his fingers very swiftly—but the arms of his hands were made strong. Now, that strength which God gives to his Josephs is real strength; it is not a boasted valour, a fiction, a thing of which men talk, an airy dream, an unsubstantial unreality, but it is real strength. I should not like to have a combat with one of God’s Josephs. I should find their blows very heavy. I fear a Christian’s strokes more than any other man’s, for he has bone and sinew, and smites hard. Let the foes of the church expect a hard struggle if they attack an heir of life. Mightier than giants are men of the race of heaven; should they once arouse themselves to battle, they could laugh at the spear and the habergeon. But they are a patient generation, enduring ills without resenting them, suffering scorn without reviling the scoffer. Their triumph is to come when their enemies shall receive the vengeance due; then shall it be

seen by an assembled world that the “little flock” were men of high estate, and the “offscouring of all things” were verily men of real strength and dignity.

Even though the world perceive it not, the favoured Joseph has real strength, not in his hands only, but in his arms—real might, real power. O ye foes of God, ye think God’s people are despicable and powerless; but know that they have true strength from the omnipotence of their Father, a might substantial and divine. Your own shall melt away, and droop and die, like the snow upon the low mountain’s top, when the sun shines upon it, it melteth into water; but our vigour shall abide like the snow on the summit of the Alps, undiminished for ages. It is real strength.

Then observe that the strength of God’s Joseph is divine strength. His arms were made strong by God. Why does one of God’s ministers preach the Gospel powerfully? Because God gives him assistance. Why does Joseph stand against temptation? Because God gives him aid. The strength of a Christian is divine strength. My brethren, I am more and more persuaded every day that the sinner has no power of himself, except that which is given him from above. I know that if I were to stand with my foot upon the golden threshold of heaven’s portal, if I could put this thumb upon the latch, I could not open that door, after having gone so far towards heaven, unless I had still supernatural power communicated to me in that moment. If I had a stone to lift, to work my own salvation, without God’s help to do that, I must be lost, even though it were so little. There is nought that we can do without the power of God. All

Praying in the Holy Ghost

true strength is divine. As the light cometh from the sun, as the shower from heaven, so doth spiritual strength come from the Father of lights, with whom there is neither variableness nor shadow of a turning.

Again: I would have you notice in the text in what a blessedly familiar way God, gives this strength to Joseph. It says, “the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.” Thus it represents God as putting his hands on Joseph’s hands, placing his arms on Joseph’s arms. In old times, when every boy had to be trained up to archery, if his father were worth so many pounds a-year, you might see the father putting his hands on his boy’s hands and pulling the bow for him, saying, “there, my son, in this manner draw the bow.” So the text represents God as putting his hand on the hand of Joseph, and laying his broad arm along the arm of his chosen child, that he might be made strong. Like as a father teaches his children, so the Lord teaches them that fear him. He puts his arms upon them. As Elijah laid with his mouth upon the child’s mouth, with his hand upon the child’s hand, with his foot upon the child’s foot, so does God put his mouth to his children’s mouth, his hand on his minister’s hand, his foot to his people’s foot: and so he makes us strong. Marvellous condescension! Ye stars of glory, have ye ever witnessed such stoops of love? God Almighty, Eternal, Omnipotent, stoops from his throne and lays his hand upon the child’s hand, stretching his arm upon the arm of Joseph, that he may be made strong!

One more thought, and I have done. This strength was covenant strength, for

it is said, “The arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.” Now, wherever you read of the God of Jacob in the Bible, you may know that that respects God’s covenant with Jacob. Ah! I love to talk about God’s everlasting covenant. Some of the Arminians cannot bear it, but I love a covenant salvation—a covenant not made with my fathers, not between me and God, but between Christ and God. Christ made the covenant to pay a price, and God made the covenant that he should have the people. Christ has paid the price, and ratified the covenant, and I am quite sure that God will fulfil his part of it, by giving every elect vessel of mercy into the hands of Jesus. But, beloved, all the power, all the grace, all the blessings, all the mercies, all the comforts, all the things we have, we have through the covenant. If there were no covenant: if we could rend the everlasting charter up: if the king of hell could cut it with his knife, as the king of Israel did the roll of Baruch, then we should fail indeed: for we have no strength, except that which is promised in the covenant. Covenant mercies, covenant grace, covenant promises, covenant blessings, covenant help, covenant everything—the Christian must receive if he would enter into heaven.

Now, Christian, the archers have sorely grieved you, and shot at you, and wounded you but your bow abides in strength, and the arms of your hands are made strong. But do you know, O believer, that you are like your Master in this?

IV. That is our fourth point—a glorious parallel. “From thence is the

shepherd, the stone of Israel.” Jesus Christ was served just the same; the shepherd, the stone of Israel, passed through similar trials; he was shot at by the archers, he was grieved and wounded but his bow abode in strength; his arms were made strong by the God of Jacob, and now every blessing rests “upon the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brethren.” I shall not detain you long, but I have a few things to tell you: first about Christ as the shepherd, and then about Christ the stone.

Christ came into the world as a shepherd. As soon as he made his appearance, the Scribes and Pharisees said, “Ah! we have been the shepherds until this hour: now we shall be driven from our honours, we shall lose all our dignity, and our authority. Consequently they always shot at him. As for the people, they were a fickle herd; I believe that many of them respected and admired Christ, though, doubtless, the vast majority hated him, for wherever he went he was a popular preacher; the multitude always thronged him and crowded round him, crying, “Hosannah.” I think, if you had walked up to the top of that hill of Calvary, and asked one of those men who cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him,” “What do you say that for? Is he a bad man?” “No,” he would have said, “he went about doing good.” “Then why do you say crucify him?” “Because Rabbi Simon gave me a shekel to help the clamour.” So the multitude were much won by the money and influence of the priests. But they were glad to hear Christ after all. It was the shepherds that hated him, because he took away their traffic, because he turned the buyers and sellers out of the temple, diminished their

dignity and ignored their pretensions; therefore, they could not endure him. But the Shepherd of Israel mounted higher and higher; he gathered his sheep, carried the lambs in his bosom; and he now stands acknowledged as the great Shepherd of the sheep, who shall gather them into one flock and lead them to heaven. Rowland Hill tells a curious tale, in his “Village Dialogues,” about a certain Mr. Tiplash, a very fine intellectual preacher, who, in one of his flights of oratory, said, ‘O virtue, thou art so fair and lovely, if thou were to come down upon earth, all men would love thee;’ with a few more pretty, beautiful things. Mr. Blunt, an honest preacher, who was in the neighbourhood, was asked to preach in the afternoon, and he supplemented the worthy gentleman’s remarks, by saying, “O virtue, thou didst come on earth, in all thy purity and loveliness, but, instead of being beloved and admired, the archers sorely shot at thee and grieved thee; they took thee, virtue, and hung thy quivering limbs upon a cross; when thou didst hang there dying they hissed at thee, they mocked thee, they scorned thee; when thou didst ask for water they gave thee vinegar to drink, mingled with gall, yea, when thou diedst thou hadst a tomb from charity, and that tomb, sealed by enmity and hatred.”

The Shepherd of Israel was despised, incarnate virtue was hated and abhorred; therefore, fear not Christians, take courage, for if your Master passed through it, surely you must.

To conclude: the text calls Christ the stone of Israel. I have heard a story—I cannot tell whether it is true or not—out of some of the Jewish rabbis; it is a

tale, concerning the text, “The stone which the builders refused, the same is become the head-stone of the corner.” It is said that when Solomon’s temple was building, all the stones were brought from the quarry ready cut and fashioned, and there were marked on all the blocks the places where they were to be put. Amongst the stones was a very curious one; it seemed of no describable shape, it appeared unfit for any portion of the building. They tried it at this wall, but it would not fit; they tried it in another, but it could not be accommodated; so, vexed and angry, they threw it away. The temple was so many years building, that this stone became covered with moss, and grass grew around it. Everybody passing by laughed at the stone; they said Solomon was wise, and doubtless all the other stones were right; but as for that block, they might as well send it back to the quarry, for they were quite sure it was meant for nothing. Year after year rolled on, and the poor stone was still despised, the builders constantly refused it. The eventful day came when the temple was to be finished and opened, and the multitude was assembled to see the grand sight. The builders said, “Where is the top-stone? Where is the pinnacle?” they little thought where the crowning marble was, until some one said, “Perhaps that stone which the builders refused is meant to be the top-stone.” They then took it, and hoisted it to the top of the house; and as it reached the summit, they found it well adapted to the place. Loud hosannas made the welkin ring, as the stone which the builders refused thus became the head-stone of the corner. So is it with Christ Jesus. The builders cast him away. He was a plebeian; he was of poor extraction; he was a man acquainted with sinners, who walked in poverty and meanness;

hence the worldly-wise despised him. But when God shall gather together, in one, all things that are in heaven and that are in earth, then Christ shall be the glorious consummation of all things.

Christ reigns in heaven the topmost stone,
And well deserve the praise.

He shall be exalted; he shall be honoured; his name shall endure as long as the sun, and all nations shall be blessed in him, yea, all generations shall call him blessed.

Intercessory Prayer

Sermon on Psalm 141:5

Preached May 5, 1872

“For yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities.” — Psalm 141:5

This is a very difficult passage in the original, and it is hard to fix its meaning with absolute certainty. However, it is no business of mine, at this present, to go into the various interpretations which have been given, for I am aiming at something else; I am, for my immediate purpose, quite content with the authorised version. The meaning given to the passage by our translators is this, David says, although the righteous man should rebuke him most sternly so as to smite his conscience, and bring before him his wrong-doing, and even though he should do this with considerable severity, yet he would not be displeased with him, but would love him all the better, and be thankful to him for having acted so faithfully, and he would prove his love by continuing to pray for his reprover, should the good man at any time be overtaken by calamity. David would always give his honest censor a warm place in his prayers.

Now, if this be the meaning, and I think it is, it shows us that David was in the

habit of praying for the saints; for if he had not been, he would not have said that even in their calamities his prayers should go up for them. He had made it his daily custom to bring before his God in his private prayers the names of God's righteous ones, or else, I say, he would not have made the remark that even if some of them should rebuke him and reprove him sternly, he still would continue to pray for them.

Our subject this morning shall be the high duty of intercession, a duty all too little regarded in these days. We shall speak upon it, first, as the text would lead us to do, in reference to saints, and, secondly, we shall urge it upon you on behalf of sinners.

I. First, then, we have to speak upon the duty of intercession for the people of God.

To arrange our thoughts in some order we will take for our first keynote the word obligation. It is incumbent upon every child of God to pray for the rest of the sacred family. Doth not nature itself teach us this? I mean not the old nature, but the new nature created within us by the Holy Spirit. Did you not find, my brethren, as soon as you were yourselves possessors of divine life, that you began without any exhortation to pray for others? Your very first believing cries began with "Our father which art in heaven," and so included others besides yourself. Among the earliest prayers which a renewed heart offers will be one for the man through whose agency it was brought to Jesus. No new convert forgets to pray for the minister who was the instrument of his conver-

sion. The newly-delivered soul also pleads for others who are still in the deplorable condition from which grace has enabled it to escape. "Thou hast brought my soul out of prison, Lord, set my fellow-captives free. In thy lovingkindness enable others to taste the sweetness of thy salvation." Then the Christian people who have at any time conversed with the convert, who have ministered to his comfort or instruction, will be sure to obtain a share in his prayers, for a renewed heart is a tenderly grateful heart, and a man is not born again from above who feels no thankfulness to earnest friends below. Set a bird free from a cage, and it will sing you its thanks as it speeds forth into the air, even thus, if you are enabled to open the prison doors of bondaged spirits, they will repay your loving efforts with prayer.

I say it is a natural instinct of the new-born believer to begin to intercede for others, and this instinct continues with him throughout life. It is one of the things that he must do, it is a pleasure to him to do it, it would be impossible for him utterly to cease from it, for the indwelling Spirit in his bosom maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

And, brethren, as it is an instinct of the heaven born nature, so it is a law of the elect household. The saints in their due order may be described as "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." Every believer has a watchman's place appointed him in the matter of prayer, and he is bound not to be silent, but to give the Lord no rest till he establish and make Jerusalem a

praise in the earth. We are all equally bound to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and our prosperity is made to hinge upon it. The new commandment which the Lord has given us, in which he bids us “love one another,” necessitates our praying for each other. How shall a man claim that he loves his brother if he never intercedes with God for him? Can I live continually with my fellow-believers and see their sorrows, and never cry to God on their behalf? Can I observe their poverty, their tribulation, their temptation, their heaviness of heart, and yet forget them in my supplications? Can I see their work of faith and labour of love, and never implore a blessing upon them? Can I wrap up myself within myself, and be indifferent to the case of those who are my brethren in Christ Jesus? Impossible. I must belong to some other family than that of God, for in the family of love, common sympathy leads to constant intercession. God forbid that we should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for our brethren. Every bee in the hive of the church should bring in its own share of this honey to the common store. As all the rootlets of a tree traverse the earth in search of nutriment, and all suck in provision for the benefit of all, so should each believer with open mouth of prayer search out and drink in spiritual blessings for the benefit of the whole church. Forget not then, my brethren, the sweet obligation under which you are laid by your relationship to the saints, and their ever blessed Lord.

Moreover, beloved, we recognise a vital union among believers, a oneness of a very intimate kind. We are not barely brethren, but we are “members of the

same body.” Christ is the head of his mystical body the church, and we are all members of his body. Now, as in the human frame each separate limb, member, organ, vein, nerve, is needful to the whole, so in the church each believer is necessary to the rest, and the rest are needful to him. We may not be able to show what particular mischief would be done to the arm by an injury to the knee, yet, rest assured there would be a sympathetic suffering. No single cell or sac within the whole system can be out of order without in some degree affecting all the rest of the frame. Even so, God has made us dependent upon one another, far more than we imagine. In the church-unity every man contributes to the health or to the disease of the whole corporation, nor can he avoid so doing. No man liveth to himself in the church of God, and no man dieth to himself. When a believer grows in grace, he is enriched not for himself alone, the Christian community has increased its spiritual wealth by his gains. When, on the other hand, a man declines in divine things, and so becomes poor and feeble, it is not to himself alone that the injury occurreth, but in a measure the church is impoverished, weakened, and injured. O brethren, since this is the case, let us discharge abundantly the duties which we owe to the body of which we form a part; and in the delightful exercise of supplication let us abound more and more. Intercession should throb like a pulse through the whole body, causing every living member to feel the sacred impulse. Intercession is one of the least things which we can do, and yet it is one of the greatest: let us not be slack in it. A prayerless church member is a hinderance, he is in the body like a rotting bone, or a decayed tooth, and, ere long, since he does not contribute

to the benefit of his brethren, he will become a danger and a sorrow to them. Brethren, let it not be so with any one of you.

Besides, brethren, if an argument were needed to touch our hearts, it is not far to find. We ourselves owe much to the prayers of others. Many Christians can trace their conversion to their mother's prayers which went up to heaven for them, when as yet their infant tongues could not pronounce the Saviour's name. A mother brought them to Jesus and besought him to lay his hands on them and bless them. Many of you owe your conversion to the pleadings of Sabbath-school teachers, or to the supplications of ministers, or to earnest individual Christians who were led to intercede for you. Now, if by the way of prayer you have received a blessing, show your gratitude by praying for others. Endeavour to confer the blessing in the same way as you have received it. For my own self personally, I say this morning that no man can do me a truer kindness in this world than to pray for me. I reckon, brethren, that the more of prayers I have the wealthier I am in real riches, in that form of personal estate which is better than gold and silver. An old Puritan remarks that when a man thrives in business, he sets many hands to work for him, and, saith he, when a man grows in usefulness he brings many souls to pray for him, and so his business is carried on. The greater the expenditure of grace in the case of the Lord's servant, the more he needs intercessory help from all his brethren and sisters that he may be able to carry on his work under the divine blessing. I am under bonds, my brethren, to pray for you, since I know that many of you continu-

Intercessory Prayer

ally besiege the throne of grace on my behalf. I put the argument, therefore, to you, if you have received blessings through the intercession of saints, would you not be ungrateful indeed if you did not intercede for others in return? Did a mother's prayers bring you to Christ? Then, dear young mother, send up your entreaties to the Lord for your dear little one. Did a father's supplications lead to your salvation? Then, young man, uphold thy father with thy constant prayers, and so enrich his latter days. Freely ye have received, freely give. The soil fertilised by the dew gives back its harvest, do thou also make a fair return to the church which has been the channel of blessing to thee. It is not, therefore, a matter of choice with us, to-day, whether we shall pray for our brethren in Christ or not. Beloved brethren, you are not alive unto God, you have not the instincts of the new life if you do not intercede for the household of faith. You have not the love which is of God, which is the sure sign of regeneration, if you forget intercession: you are unmindful of the debt you owe, and you are acting unworthily of your professed union with the church of Christ, if intercession be neglected by you. As with a trumpet call, I would arouse you, my brethren and sisters, to effectual earnest prayer for the family of the living God. Let us change our watch-word now from obligation to honour. What an honour it is to be permitted to pray for the saints! For, observe, this brings us into the closest conceivable fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We cannot assist in providing an atonement for human sin: "It is finished" said the Saviour, and finished it is. In that work we can have no fellowship except as we

receive of its results, for “He hath trodden the wine press alone, and of the people there was none with him.” In preaching the gospel to-day, we are exercising an office in which our Lord Jesus has now no share: the Holy Spirit helpeth us, but the man Christ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, and his voice is not heard proclaiming the glad tidings. Therefore, in some respects, we have diverse occupations and exercise different offices, but, in the business of intercession we are one: at this very moment, our Lord is pleading before the throne, and when we intercede for his people we are doing precisely the same. We, in praying for the saints, have actual present fellowship with our great High Priest who intercedes within the veil. I say again, if I preach to-day, Christ is not preaching, but if I pray, my voice harmonises with his. If I pray for the brethren, I remember that he stands before the throne of glory with the breastplate on, having the names of all his chosen glittering there upon its precious stones. Is it not then a delightful thing to be partakers with the Son of God in the ministry of intercession? In this service he hath made us priests unto our God. He is the great Angel, with the golden censer, and the smoke of the incense which he offers ascends with the prayers of the saints before the Lord. Beloved, if you would be conformed in service to the Lord Jesus, the opportunity is ready to your hand; be much in intercession for the saints.

And, what an honour it is that we, who so lately were beggars for ourselves at mercy’s door, are now received so much into royal favour that we may venture to speak a word in the king’s ear for others. It was sovereign mercy which al-

lowed us to say, "Have mercy upon me!" but what condescension is this which has taken us into such nearness with itself that now we can come to the Lord, and say, "I would fain speak a word with thee for a brother of mine: I would venture to ask bounties at thy hands, my Father, for a sister who needs compassion." See, my brethren, how eminently you are promoted, you are ordained to the high office of "the king's remembrancers," to enquire of him concerning the good things of his covenant. You are constituted royal almoners for the King of kings, he sets before you his open exchequer and bids you ask what you will. O priceless grace; if thou, O believer, knowest how to ask by faith, thou mayst hand out to thy brethren wealth more precious than the gold of Ophir; for intercession is the key of the ivory palaces wherein are contained the boundless treasures of God. Saints in intercession reach a place where angels cannot stand. Those holy beings rejoice over penitent sinners, but we do not read of their being admitted as suppliants for the saints. Yet we, imperfect as we are, have this favour, we are permitted to open our mouth before the Lord for the sick and for the tried, for the troubled and for the downcast, with the assurance that whatsoever we shall ask in prayer believing we shall receive. In this thing great honour is put upon you.

Brethren, avail yourselves of his honor. I know very well if Her Majesty should give a permission to any one of you to call at the palace, and to ask what you would for your friends, you would not neglect the opportunity. Why, in these days, if a man thinks he has the ear of a member of Parliament, or somebody

in power, it is not often that he neglects the opportunity of speaking for his cousin or his son who desires an office, where there is little to do and much to receive. All over the world place-hunters are in abundance, men of influence, having the ear of the authorities, are always pressed to make all possible use thereof. And yet, I have to stand here this morning and urge you, dear brethren, who have the ear of God, to exercise your choice prerogative. You have promises from God of the granting of your request, and many are saying, "I would be spoken for unto the king," pray be not slow to help. Use the liberty which your Prince has given you and plead for your brethren. If there be no other who needs your prayers, I eagerly ask for a place in them. "Brethren, pray for us," said an apostle, how much more may I say it. Having to minister daily in holy things, our responsibilities and needs are very great, do not, therefore, forget us when it is well with you. Say a kind thing unto the Prince for his servants and ask him to grant us more of his grace.

We will change the word now from honour to excellence. Intercessory prayer is a most excellent thing; for first, it benefits those who use it. I know you desire, beloved, to be of real service in the church of God. I trust we have no members of this church who are satisfied to have their names in the book, and to attend services, and to feel that all is done when this is done. No, you wish to be really helpful and to bring glory to God. Well, then, I urge upon you for this end the excellence of intercessory prayer.

First, brethren, it will suggest to you to know your brethren. You cannot pray

well for those you know nothing about. You will not, therefore, go in and out of the assembly not knowing the person who sits next to you in the pew, but you will enquire how the brethren fare, and, when you hear of any one being in distress of mind, or body, or estate, you will be ready to take notice of that, in order that you may offer prayer on his account, and then there will be in you a sympathetic knowledge of your brethren. Paul tells us to know them that labour among us and are over us in the Lord! and I wish all church members did know more of their pastor's struggles, and sorrows, and joys, that they might have more sympathy with him, and the same is true of the rest of the brethren; the more you know and sympathise the better will your prayer be, and because you will need to know, in order to intercede; therefore, I call intercession an excellent exercise.

Earnest intercession will be sure to bring love with it. I do not believe you can hate a man for whom you habitually pray. If you dislike any brother Christian, pray for him doubly, not only for his sake, but for your own, that you may be cured of prejudice and saved from all unkind feeling. Remember the old story of the man who waited on his pastor to tell him that he could not enjoy his preaching. The minister wisely said, "My dear brother, before we talk that matter over, let us pray together," and, after they had both prayed, the complainant found he had nothing to say except to confess that he himself had been very negligent in prayer for his pastor, and he laid his not profiting to that account. I ascribe want of brotherly love to the decline of intercessory prayer. Pray for one

another earnestly, habitually, fervently, and you will knit your hearts together in love as the heart of one man. This is the cement of fair colours in which the stones of the church should be laid if they are to be compact together.

Dear brethren, when you pray for one another, not only will your sympathy and love grow, but you will have kinder judgments concerning one another. We always judge leniently those for whom we intercede. If a talebearer represents my brother in a very black light, my love makes me feel sure that he is mistaken. Did I not pray for him this morning, and how can I hear him condemned? If I am compelled to believe that he is guilty I am very sorry, but I will not be angry with him, but will pray the Lord to forgive and restore him, remembering myself also lest I be tempted. We think our children beautiful because they are our own, and have a place in our heart, and in the same way we are quick to perceive any admirable traits of character which may exist in those for whom we intercede; and we are willing to suggest extenuations for the failings of their dispositions. Prayer is a wondrous blender of hearts and a mighty creator of love.

Intercessory prayer is of much efficacy in fostering watchfulness. Suppose that you, as a member of this church, are brought into contact with backsliders and are led to seek their restoration, your prayers for their recovery will naturally lead you also to pray, "Lord, preserve me from this evil, keep me from backsliding, preserve me from becoming cold and indifferent as these brethren have done." If we meet with professed Christians who have fallen into drunkenness,

Intercessory Prayer

and are earnest in pleading with the Lord to rescue them from that horrible ditch, our own souls are made to loathe the sin and to stand upon its watch tower against it. If we perceive that two brethren have disagreed and cannot be brought into a state of peace, if we pray to God that unity may be restored between them, we are led also to ask that we may be of a gentle and quiet spirit, that we may not cause strife, and that if we have caused it at any time we may be prepared to confess the wrong and amend it. Thus the objects of our prayerful solicitude become beacons to us. If you observe others with captious eye, censure them eagerly, and go from house to house to spread the ill-savour industriously, your unhallowed course of action will breed self-righteousness in yourself; but, if you go to the Lord with sorrow about all misdeeds of brethren, and importunately seek the restoration of the erring, you will foster in your own heart tenderness of feeling and watchfulness against sin. Those who supplicate much for others will frequently find on their own lips the prayer, "Search me, O God, and try me, and know my ways, see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

I cannot stay to tell you what other excellent things there are wrapped up in this exercise of intercession, but I am persuaded it is both one of the holiest, healthiest, and most heavenly exercises in which a devout man can possibly be occupied.

Do you not think, dear brethren, that if we were each one required upon the spot to give an account of his attention to this excellent duty, we should most

of us need to be ashamed? May I venture to put the question to every Christian here, have you rendered to God and his church your fair proportion of intercessory prayer? We have not interceded too much, I am certain, for of this salt it may be said, "salt without prescribing how much." No man prays too much for his fellowman. Have we prayed enough? I give you space, and make a pause, in which you may put the question. I will give you my own answer. I am clear as to my duty to this church in the matter of preaching, for I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God. If I could learn to preach better I would gladly do so. I am conscious of my failures, but I have served you heartily and faithfully before God in this pulpit. But I cannot say so of my intercessions. I have many confessions to make to God of shortcomings in that department, and I am afraid that a great number of my fellow-workers here must plead guilty to the same indictment. You have never missed your class on Sunday afternoon yet, you are always at your work in time, with the Scripture-lesson well studied; that is right, but, dear brother, do you always pray the lesson into your soul? Dear sister, have you made a habit of praying for the girls under your care, one by one, with intense fervour? I do not accuse, but I ask you to look into your own soul, for the fault is not a trivial one, but causes ourselves and the church no little damage. Elders and deacons of this church, are you clear in the matter of intercession? Some men among us may be without blame in this business, but I am afraid that the most of us have attended to other duties far beyond the proportion in which we have attended to this. We have prayed in public at the prayer-meetings, and we have not forgotten supplication

for the saints at the family altar, neither, I trust, is it unknown in our private devotions; but, still, if we had prayed for our brethren ten times as much, or even a hundred times as much, we should not have gone too far. We stand up sometimes on the public platform, and we charge the church of God with growing cold; let us ask ourselves the question, have we by our prayers added to her heat? Have we pleaded for her revival? We find fault with the Missionary Societies because such slender results are apparent. Do we pray for missions as we should? I hear a mournful complaint about the present and rising race of preachers: have we interceded for students, and for pastors, as we should? I hear people speak of Christians as either worldly, superficial or proud. Have you prayed them out of their worldliness and pride? May it not be that you would have done far better if you had prayed for them than found fault with them? Ay, and may not the errors you see in them be, in a considerable measure, traceable to the neglect of the office of intercession by yourself?

Oh, let us have done with murmurings and complainings, criticisms and finding fault, and take the whole of it up to the mercy-seat, for if half the breath that is vainly spent in censorious complaints were turned into intercession, there would be much more holiness in the church.

Now, I must come to the text again while I give you another word, that is extent. David says in the text, "Yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities;" and his meaning is this, if any of the saints of God should by their fidelity to his soul displease him, he would nevertheless pray for them. Brethren, we are not

to confine our prayers to those who please us in their mode of addressing us, but we are to pray lovingly for those who are too sharp, too harsh, too cutting in their remarks. Suppose they should be so severe as to grieve our spirits, suppose their rebukes appear to be uncalled for, injurious and unjust, we are still bound to pray for them. David, in the text, seems to say that, let the righteous do what they might with him, he would still pray for them in their calamities; and I urge you, my brethren, if there be any member of this church who has treated you unkindly, revenge yourself upon him by loving him ten times more than ever you did, and praying for him more constantly and more earnestly. If some brother has crushed your spirit and wounded you, so that to think of him causes you pain, never mind, the best cure for the wound is to go to God in prayer and pour out your soul for him; ask the Lord to give him a great blessing and to make him a better Christian, to fill him full of divine love; and, then, when you see him improved, you will either come to think that you made a mistake in judging what he said, and took wrongly what he meant to do you good, or else you will find that he will come to you and will say, "I was in the wrong, my brother," or, if he does not confess that in words, he will by extra kindness to you acknowledge it in his deeds.

And, brethren, if ever we find a fellow-Christian in a calamity, then we are to pray for him doubly. Men of the world leave their companions when they get into trouble, as the herd leave the wounded deer. We have many friends when all goes well, we have very few when the evil days are lowering. But, with Chris-

tians it should not be so, we should be faithful friends; we ought to be more kind to those who become poor than we are to others; and, if we meet with a fellow-Christian who has lost his comfort, and is desponding, though his society may not be very pleasant, but may even have a depressing influence upon ourselves, we should pray for him more, and try to lift him out of the Slough of Despond. Especially if a brother in Christ should be slandered we are bound to stand by him. Too many follow the bad habit of getting right out of the way of a man who is traduced. Somebody has thrown a handful of mud at a professed Christian: let us clear the coast, for the mud may light upon us too. So say cowards, but so say not we. No, brother, if you belong to the army of Immanuel, and our persecuted brother has done no wrong, let us stand or fall by him. Let us never desert a comrade. If the world says, "Down with him! down with him! down with him!" we will rush like the old Greek hero to the rescue, and hold our shield over the fallen one, fighting for him till he can get up again; for one of these days we may be down too, and we may want a brother soldier to cover us from the enemy. Let us pray our brethren out of their troubles and not desert them, and if that prayer should be long before it gets an answer, let us persevere in importunity, saying with David, "Yet my prayer shall be in their calamities."

I shall say no more upon this matter of intercession for the saints, but shall leave it before the eternal throne, and with your own consciences. I beseech you, unless ye be traitors to Christ, if ye be members of the true unity, if your

souls are knit together by the Holy Ghost, wrestle much for one another, and do not let the covenant-angel go till a blessing shall come to the whole house of God, and thence flow into the world at large.

II. Now, secondly, the high office of intercession for sinners. Upon this I shall speak briefly, but, I trust, earnestly. As a church we have a crown, and for many years we have held it; but, I would use the language of Christ, in the Book of the Revelation, when speaking to one of the churches, he says, "Hold fast that thou hast, that no man take thy crown." Now, what has been our crown as a church? It has not been our wealth, for in that we do not excel. It has not been our learning, we do not make any show of it. It has not been our tasteful services, the beauty of our music, and the sweetness of our chanting. No, we do not care about such things, but cultivate simplicity. Our crown has been this one thing, that if there has been a church in Christendom which has given itself to winning souls, this church has done so. Our ministry has aimed always at this, the plucking of the brands from burning, the bringing of sinners out of darkness into marvellous light; and, I do you nothing but simple justice, my brethren, when I say, that by far the larger part of this church is really alive for soul-winning. It does my heart good to meet with divers knots of brethren among you who everywhere about this city are working away unostentatiously but successfully in bringing souls to Christ. I hope it always will be so. Hold fast, O church, what thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Let it always be our joy and glory that God gives us spiritual children, and souls are born to

him. Now, if we desire to do this, and I am sure we do, we must look more to intercession for the souls of the unconverted.

Pray first, for this is the most essential thing to do. What can you and I alone do in the conversion of a man? We cannot change his heart: we cannot put life into him—we might as well think to create a soul within the ribs of death. It is God's work to regenerate souls; What then? if I am to be his instrument in doing it, my very first action must be to fall on my knees and pray, "O God, work with me." You are going to your Sunday school this afternoon, or you are off to your street preaching; now, if you could do the work, I would not urge you to waste time in asking God to do what you could do alone, but, as you are utterly powerless to win a single soul to Jesus without the Spirit of God, let your first action be to pray, "O power divine, come and clothe me! O tongue of fire, be given to me; and sacred, rushing, mighty wind, come thou forth to breathe life upon dead souls!" Prayer is the most essential thing in turning sinners from the error of their ways.

Then, intercessory prayer will fit you for becoming God's instrument. If I pray for a person's conversion, especially if I single out some individual, then my heart gets warmed into love to that individual; as I think over his position and condition in prayer. Very well, that instructs me, and helps me to deal out the proper word to him when I come near to him. I am like a surgeon, who, coming to a case where he has to use the lancet, knows exactly where every bone is, and also what part has been injured. My prayer has given me a diagnosis of

the man's state. I have looked it through and considered it in my petitions, and when I come practically to work upon him, I shall be wise by the Spirit of God to do the right thing, and in the right way. If we wished to send a man to college to make him a good helper to troubled hearts, we should send him to the college of all-prayer, for intercession is the mode to become wise in winning souls.

And, brethren, prayer will have this effect upon you, that you will go to work hopefully. It is a very horrible thing to think of persons being buried alive, put underground by their friends in their coffins while yet there was breath in their bodies. Let us mind that we never bury a soul alive;—I am afraid we are in the habit of doing it. We judge of such an one that he will never be converted, it is a case where all effort would be useless. We think of another person that he is so abandoned, we may very well give him up and attend to more hopeful cases. In all this we are wrong, since we have no right to sign a soul's death-warrant, or to say to the grace of God "hitherto canst thou come but no further." Believe that as long as a man lives in this world there are possibilities of grace for him. Take him in your arms before God in prayer, and when you begin to pray for him you will feel that there is hope, and you will afterwards converse with him in a hopeful and perhaps believing manner. I do not believe a man was ever saved by another one talking to him in a tone of despair, but the cheerful utterance of hopeful love wins its way. Believe that the hard heart may be broken, the blasphemer's tongue cleansed, the persecutor's mind changed, and that the

Intercessory Prayer

rebel may yet obey Christ crucified, and become a bright star in the heaven of God. Dear brethren, I pray you then since the power is of God, and since intercession will make you fit to be used by God, and since also it will give you great hopefulness with regard to those you deal with, exercise yourselves much more than ever in intercessory prayer.

This is a work in which all of you can aid. If I came to you this morning and said, "Brothers and sisters, the Lord's cause requires money," I know, from long experience, that you would do your best; but there are some who would be compelled to reply, "The necessities of my family do not permit my doing anything in that direction." But, when we ask for intercession, no Christian can say, "I cannot plead with God." If I were to press upon you at this moment the want of more public preaching, many of my congregation would be justly excused, for they are slow of speech and without gifts of utterance. But, O brethren and sisters, when it comes to interceding you can all fulfil the office, and by so doing you can have a share in all the great works of the church. I have heard of a holy woman who used to say, "I cannot preach but I can help my minister to do it by my prayers; therefore, whenever I see him come into the pulpit, I will pray that God will bless his word, and so I shall have a share in what he does." When you hear of a missionary working anywhere abroad pray for him, and then you will become his co-worker. Beloved, some of you are often sickly in body, and during the weary night you get but little sleep,—do you know why the Lord keeps you awake? It is that while others of us are sleeping

you may be praying for us. God must have some to keep the night watches; he determines that a guard of prayer shall be set around his church all day and all night long,—you are the sentries of the night-watches. You cannot do anything else, but you can pray, and by praying you can obtain a share in the noblest works of the church.

Now mark, David by implication tells us that some of those we pray for may perhaps not care for our prayers, and they may come into great calamities through their sins; then is our time when we should be yet more earnest in intercession for them. If I have spoken to an ungodly man for many years, and he has ridiculed all I have said, then I will resolve within myself, “I will never leave off praying for him. Perhaps, one of these days I shall find him sick, and then he will ask for the prayers he now rejects. Perhaps, I shall find him with a broken heart, and then the words he now jests at will be very sweet to his taste.” You who seek after souls must know how to keep up the chase: those who are short of breath in soul-winning will never be successful. Follow them up! follow them up! follow them to the gates of the grave. If they are not saved after twenty years of prayer, follow them up to the gates of hell! If they once pass those gates your prayers are unallowable and unavailing, but to the very verge of the infernal pit follow them, follow them with your prayers. If they will not hear you speak, they cannot prevent your praying. Do they jest at your exhortations? They cannot disturb you at your prayers, for they do not know when you offer them. Are they far away so that you cannot reach them? Your prayers

can reach them; you can still bless them. Have they declared that they will never listen to you again, nor see your face? Never mind, God has a voice which they must hear—speak you to him, and he will make them feel. Though they now treat you spitefully, rendering evil for your good, follow them, follow them, follow them with your prayers; never let them perish for want of your supplications.

The time may come when those who have been longest in yielding their hearts to Christ will repay us a thousand-fold for all the efforts and supplications we may put forth. I have sometimes seen a great sinner, when he is saved, become of as much use as twenty ordinary converts, for in proportion as he was hard to win, he has become useful when won. We do not expect that we shall get Sauls every day made into Pauls, but when it is so, then the church is rich indeed, for one Paul is worth a thousand ordinary believers. These deep sea pearls are precious. These difficult cases may turn out to be Pauls; therefore, be instant in season and out of season, praying for them till they be brought to Christ.

The one thing I want this morning is that my dear brothers and sisters in Christ should pledge themselves to be more importunate in prayer for sinners all around us. Like Abraham, a great city is before us, let us plead for it; like Moses, we dwell among a sinful people, let us stand in the gap for them. I charge every member of this church, by his fealty to God, if indeed he be not a liar in the profession that he has made, to pray importunately for the ungodly, that they may be brought to Jesus. Plead with Jehovah, plead; he loves your

prayers; your intercessions are like the sweet incense upon the golden altar. Plead with him, and you shall live to see a reward for your pleadings in the conversion of the sons of men. Go home and make your children the special objects of this afternoon's cries; implore the Lord to save your husbands or your wives, your kinsfolk, and your nearest neighbours. Implore a blessing upon the seat-holders and hearers of this congregation who remain unregenerate; then take your streets, take the district in which you live, and entreat a gracious visitation—you shall never lack for persons to pray for, therefore, continue in supplication. It was but a few days ago I saw four husbands who were converted to God, but their wives were left outside the church, and those four brethren, probably all here this morning, met together in prayer for their wives' conversion, and on the first communion Sabbath of last month the four wives were brought in in answer to the prayers of the four husbands. Anything is possible, everything is possible to him that believeth. God help us to believe and to intercede, and then may he send his benediction, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Hindrances to Prayer

Sermon on 1 Peter 3:7

Preached September 13, 1874

“That your prayers be not hindered.” — 1 Peter 3:7

To many persons this discourse will have but little reference, because they do not pray. I fear, also, there are some others whose prayers are so worthless that if they were hindered it would be of no very material consequence; it is even possible that their being forced to omit them might arouse them out of a self-righteous lethargy. Merely to bow the knee in formality, to go through a form of devotion in a careless or half-hearted manner is rather to mock God than to worship him. It would be a terrible theme for contemplation to consider how much of vain repetition and heartless prayer-saying the Lord is wearied with from day to day. I would, however, most solemnly remind those who do not truly pray that the wrath of God abideth on them. He who never seeks for mercy has certainly never found it. Conscience acknowledges it to be a righteous thing with God that he should not give to those who will not ask. It is the smallest thing that can be expected of us that we should humbly ask for the favours we need; and if we refuse to do so, it is but right that the door of grace

should be closed so long as men refuse to knock. Prayer is no hard requirement, it is the natural duty of a creature to its creator, the simplest homage which human want can pay to divine liberality, and those who refuse to render it may well expect that one of these days when in dire extremity they begin to bemoan their folly, they will hear a voice from their insulted God, saying, "I called and ye refused; I stretched out my hands and no man regarded; therefore I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh." The old story tells of a monarch who gave to a favourite courtier a ring which he might send to her in case he should be under her displeasure, promising that at the sight thereof he should be restored to favour. That ring was never shown, though long waited for, and it was little wonder that, concluding the offender to be stubbornly rebellious, the sentence of execution was carried out. If a sinner will not plead the name of Jesus to which the promise of forgiveness is appended, if he will not bend his knee in penitential prayer, and ask for pardon at the hand of God, none will wonder that he perishes for his folly. None will be able to accuse the Lord of too great severity when he casts away for ever all prayerless souls. O you who never pray, I tremble for you! Would to God you would tremble for yourselves, for there is cause enough for it.

To those who do pray, prayer is a most precious thing, for it is the channel by which priceless blessings come to them, the window through which their needs are supplied by a gracious God. To believers prayer is the great means of soul enrichment—it is the vessel which trades with heaven, and comes home from

the celestial country laden with treasures of far greater worth than ever Spanish galleon brought from the land of gold. Indeed, to true believers prayer is so invaluable that the danger of hindering it is used by Peter as a motive why, in their marriage relationships, and household concerns, they should behave themselves with great wisdom. He bids the husband “dwell” with his wife “according to knowledge,” and render loving honour to her, lest their united prayers should be hindered. Anything which hinders prayer must be wrong. If any management of the family, or want of management, is injuring our power in prayer, there is an urgent demand for an alteration. Husband and wife should pray together, as jointly heirs of grace, and any temper or habit which hinders this is evil.

The text would be most appropriately used to stimulate Christians to diligence in family prayer, and though I shall not so use it on this occasion, it is not because I undervalue the institution, for I esteem it so highly that no language of mine can adequately express my sense of its value. The house in which there is no family altar can scarcely expect the divine blessing. If the Lord do not cover our habitation with his wings our family is like a house without a roof; if we do not seek the Lord’s guidance our household is a ship without a pilot; and unless guarded by devotion our family will be a field without a hedge. The mournful behaviour of many of the children of professing parents is mainly due to the neglect or the coldness of family worship; and many a judgment has, I doubt not, fallen upon households because the Lord is not duly honoured

therein. Eli's sin still brings with it the visitations of a jealous God. That word of Jeremiah bears hard upon prayerless families, "Pour out thy fury upon the households that call not upon thy name." His mercy visits every house where night and morning vows are paid, but where these are neglected sin is incurred. In the good old Puritan times it was said, that if you had walked down Cheapside you would have heard in every house the voice of a psalm at a certain hour of the morning and evening, for there was no house then of professed Christians without family prayer. I believe that the bulwark of Protestantism against Popery is family worship. Take that away, and give over the instruction of children in the fear of God, and you lay this country open again to the theory that prayer is most acceptable in the parish church, and so you get into the sacredness of places: then taking away the priesthood from the father of the family, who ought to be the priest in his own house, you make a vacancy for a superstitious priesthood, and, leaving the teaching with these pretenders, mischiefs innumerable are introduced. If neglect of family prayer should become general throughout our churches it will be a dark day for England. Children who observe that their parents are practically prayerless in the household will grow up indifferent to religion, and in many cases will be utter worldlings, if not altogether atheists. This is a matter about which the church cannot make any inquisitorial inquiry; it must be left to the good sense and the Christian spirit of the heads of households, and I therefore speak all the more strongly, and pray you so to order things at home that family prayer be not hindered. At this time, however, I shall use the text for another purpose, and apply it to the

hindrances which beset private prayer.

Our prayers may be hindered thus—first, we may be hindered from prayer; secondly, we may be hindered in prayer; and, thirdly, we may be hindered from our prayers speeding with God.

I. First, there is such a thing as being hindered from prayer: and that may be done by falling into a generally lax, lukewarm condition in reference to the things of God. When a man becomes cold, indifferent, and careless, one of the first things that will suffer will be his devotion. When a sick man is in a decline his lungs suffer and his voice; and so when a Christian is in a spiritual decline the breath of prayer is affected, and the cry of supplication becomes weak. Prayer is the true gauge of spiritual power. To restrain prayer is dangerous, and of deadly tendency. You may depend upon it that, take it for all in all, what you are upon your knees you are really before your God. What the Pharisee and the Publican were in prayer was the true criterion of their spiritual state. You may maintain a decent repute among men, but it is a small matter to be judged of man's judgment, for men see only the surface, while the Lord's eyes pry into the recesses of the soul. If he sees that you are prayerless he makes small account of your attendance at religious meetings, or your loud professions of conversion. If you are a man of earnest prayer, and especially if the spirit of prayer be in you, so that in addition to certain seasons of supplication your heart habitually talks with God, things are right with you; but if this be not the case, and your prayers be "hindered," there is something in your spiritual system which

needs to be ejected, or somewhat lacking which ought at once to be supplied.

“Keep thine heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life;” and living prayers are among those issues.

Prayers may be hindered, next, by having too much to do. In this age this is a very common occurrence. We may have too much business for ourselves. The quiet days of our contented forefathers are gone, and men allot to themselves an increasing drudgery; not content to earn as much as is necessary for themselves and families, they must have much more than they can possibly enjoy for themselves, or profitably use for others. Wisdom seems to say that one staff is enough for a man to walk with, but ambition cannot be contented unless it carries a load of staves upon its back. “Enough is as good as a feast,” said the old proverb, but now-a-days neither enough nor a feast will satisfy men; they must needs accumulate more than would feast thousands of families before they can be content—ay, they are not content then. Many a man who might have been of great service to the church of God becomes useless because he must branch out in some new direction in business, which takes up all his spare time. Instead of feeling that his first care should be, “How can I best glorify God?” his all-absorbing object is to “stretch his arms like seas and grasp in all the shore.” Thousands, hundreds of thousands, and even millions of pounds cannot silence the greedy horseleech which men have swallowed, which continually cries, “Give, give.” Many add house to house, and field to field, as though they meant to be left alone in the land; alas, that Christians should be infected

with the same fever. The rich man in the parable had no time for prayer, for he was busy in planning new barns wherein to bestow his goods, but he had to find time for dying when the Lord said, "This night shall thy soul be required of thee." Beware, I pray you, of "the desire of other things," the canker of riches, the greed insatiable which drives men into the snare of the devil; for if it works you no other ill, it will do you mischief enough if thereby your prayers are hindered.

We may even have too much to do in God's house, and so hinder our prayers, by being like Martha, cumbered with much serving. I never heard of any one who was cumbered with much praying. The more we do the more we should pray, and prayer should balance our service, or rather, it should be the life-blood of every action, and saturate our entire life, as the dew of heaven filled Gideon's fleece. We cannot labour too much if prayer be proportionate, but I fear that some of us would do far more if we attempted less and prayed more about it. I even fear that some allow public religious engagements to override private communion with God: they attend too many sermons, too many conferences, too many Bible readings, too many committees, aye, and too many prayer-meetings—all good in their way, but all acting injuriously when they cramp our secret prayer. Mrs. Row said that if the apostles were preaching at her time for private communion with God she would not forsake her closet to go and hear them. It must be better to be with God than with Peter or Paul. Praying is the end of preaching, and woe to the man who, prizing the means

more than the end, allows any other form of service to push his prayers into a corner.

There can be no doubt, also, that prayer is hindered by having too little to do. If you want a thing well done, you must go to the man who has a great deal to do, for he is the man to do it for you. People who have nothing to do generally do it with a great deal of fuss. From morning to night they waste other people's time,—they are the callers, the interviewers, the people who write catching paragraphs about public men, very frequently invented in their own silly pates. These are the propagators of slander, who in very wantonness spit upon good men's characters. Having nothing to do they are hired by Satan to hinder and injure others. If such people ever do pray, I am sure their indolence must hinder them much. The man who has to teach in the ragged school finds he must cry for help to master those wild young natures; the young lady who has around her a dozen girls whom she longs to bring to the Saviour feels it imperative upon her to pray for Jane and Ellen, that they may be converted to God; the minister, whose hands are full of holy toil and whose eyes fail with sacred watching, finds he cannot do without drawing nigh unto his God. If these servants of Jesus had less to do they would pray less, but holy industry is the nurse of devotion.

I said we might do too much, and I could not balance that truth unless I added that a very large proportion of Christians do too little. God has given them enough wealth to be able to retire from business; they have time upon their

hands, and they have even to invent ways of spending that time, and yet the ignorant require instructing, the sick want visiting, the poor need helping; should they not lay out their abundant leisure in the service of God? Would they not then be quickened in prayer? I wish that all could say with one of the Lord's saints, "Prayer is my business and praise is my pleasure"; but I am sure they never will till the zeal of the Lord's house shall more fully consume them.

Some people hinder their prayers, again, by a want of order. They get up a little too late, and they have to chase their work all the day and never overtake it, but are always in a flurry, one duty tripping up the heels of another. They have no appointed time for retirement, no little space hedged about for communion with God; and, consequently, something or other happens, and prayer is forgotten,—nay, I hope not quite forgotten, but so slurred and hurried over that it amounts to little and brings them no blessing. I wish you would each keep a diary of how you pray next week, and see how much, or rather how little time you spend with God out of the twenty-four hours. Much time goes at the table, how much at the mercy-seat? Many hours are spent with men, how many with your Maker? You are somewhat with your friends on earth, how many minutes are you with your Friend in heaven? You allow yourself space for recreation, what do you set apart for those exercises which in very truth re-create the soul? "A place for everything, and everything in its place," is a good rule for schools and houses of business, and it will be equally useful in spirituals; other duties should be done, but prayer must not be left undone, it must have

its own place and sufficient of it. Care must be taken that our “prayers be not hindered,” so that we omit or abridge them. But time compels me to leave this wide subject and proceed.

II. Secondly, we must watch that we be not hindered in prayer, when we are really engaged in that holy work. Here I might go over the same ground as before, and remark that some are hindered while in their prayers by being lax and lukewarm—a great hindrance; others by having too much or too little to do, and another class by being in that flurried condition of heart, which results from a want of order; but I need not repeat myself when you are so eagerly drinking in my words.

Let us note that some are hindered in prayer by selecting an unfit time and place. There are times when you may expect a knock at your own door, do not just then knock at God’s door. There are hours when your letters arrive, when customers call in, when tradespeople need attention, when workmen want orders, and it would be foolish to be going into your closet just then. If you are employed by others, you must not present to God those hours which belong to your master; you will be honouring the Lord better by diligence in your calling. There are times that are demanded of you by the necessities of the household and your lawful calling; these are already the Lord’s in another way, let them be used for their own purpose. Never defile one duty with the blood of another. Give to God and prayer those suitable times in which you can reasonably expect to be alone. Of course you can pray at your work, in ejaculations and

silent groanings, and you ought to be in the spirit of supplication all the day long, but I am alluding now to times specially devoted to supplication, and I say choose a season and a place where you can be free from interruption. A pious lad who had no place at home to pray in, went to the stable and climbed up into the hay-loft; but very soon some one came up the ladder and interrupted him: the next time he took care to pull the ladder up after him, a very useful hint for us. It would be well indeed if we could so completely pull the ladder up that neither the devil nor the world could invade our sacred privacy. "Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Select, then, the fittest time and place, that your prayers be not hindered.

Worldly cares are frequent and most mischievous hindrances to prayer. A Christian man should be the most careful man in the world, and yet without carefulness. Understand ye that paradox? He should be careful not to sin, but as for other matters, he should cast his care on "him who careth for him." To take everything from God's hands, and to trust everything in God's hands, is a happy way of living, and very helpful to prayer. Has not your Master told you of the ravens and the lilies? Your heavenly Father feedeth and clotheth them, and will he not clothe you? "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Faith gives peace, and peace leaves the soul clear for prayer; but when care comes in, it confuses the mind, and puts the heart away from plead-

ing. A heart clogged with care is like a man trying to swim with heavy clothes upon him, he must get them off if he hopes to swim to shore. Many a sailor has cut his clothes to pieces, because he felt he should sink if he did not get clear of them. I could wish that many Christians would tear themselves away from their excessive worldly engagements, for they have such a mass of care upon them that they scarcely keep their heads above water. Oh, for more grace and less worry! More praying and less hoarding! More intercession and less speculating! As it is, prayers are sadly hindered.

Earthly pleasures, especially of a dubious kind, are the worst of hindrances. Some professors indulge in amusements which I am sure are not consistent with prayer. They resemble flies which plunge into the honey, until the sweet sticks to their wings and legs and they cannot fly. I once remember reading “A prayer to be said by a Christian man after coming home from a theatre,” “A collect for a saint on returning from the races,” and “A prayer for a Christian lady on returning from a ball.” Of course they were written sarcastically, and were indeed a broad farce. How can you come home from frivolity and sin and then look into the face of Jesus? How can the fashions of the world be followed, and communion with God be maintained? You cannot roll in the mire and then approach with clean garments to the mercy-seat. How can you come before the throne of God with petitions when you have just been dishonouring the name of the Most High? O Christians! keep yourselves from everything about which you have any doubt as to its rightness or even its expediency, for whatsoever is

not of faith is sin, and will hinder your prayers.

Further, prayers may be hindered equally much by worldly sorrow. Some give way to sorrow so extremely that they cannot even pray. The tears of rebellious repining damp the powder of prayer, so that a Christian man cannot send his desires heavenward as he should. The sorrow which prevents a man's praying is flat rebellion against the will of God. Our Lord was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death," but then he prayed; nay, "therefore he prayed." It is right to be sorrowful, for God intends that affliction should be grievous, and not joyous; but when sorrow is right it will drive us to prayer, and not drive us from it; and when we find our grief at the loss of some dear child, or at the decay of our property, hinders our prayers, I think we should say to ourselves, "Now I must pray; for it must be wrong for me to be so rebellious against my Father as to refuse to ask anything at his hands." You would think your child in a very sullen temper if, because he could not have his own way, he would refuse to ask anything of you whatever, and went about the house pouting at you; yet many mourners act in this fashion. We would deeply sympathise with their sorrow, but we may not excuse their repining; for the "sorrow of the world worketh death," and is unfitting in a child of God. With all your grief, bowed into the very dust by affliction, still like your Lord and Master, cry, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt," and then your prayers will be helped, and not hindered.

There are cases in which prayer is very greatly hindered by bad temper. I do

not know where this may apply, but, wherever it does, I trust that it will go home. You cannot speak sharp habitually to servants and children, you cannot put yourself into pets, you cannot join in a grand row or in small squabbles, and then go and pray with power. I cannot speed in prayer if I feel anger in my heart, and I do not believe that you can. Get up and go and settle the matter before you try to talk with God, for the prayer of angry men makes God angry. You cannot wrestle with the angel while you are under the power of the devil. I appeal to your own consciences—you yourselves shall be judges—is it not so? That was good advice on our Lord's part. "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and first go and be reconciled to thy brother." If that be not done, the sacrifice cannot be accepted, nor do I see how you can dare to offer it. I have heard of two good men who had a sharp difference with each other in business. I do not know which was to blame—perhaps neither of them; they might have misunderstood each other; and one of them as he walked home, very much ruffled, saw the sun going down, and the passage occurred to him, "Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath." He thought, "I will go back and offer an apology, for I believe I have spoken much too strongly." He went back towards his friend's office, and half way he met the other coming to him on the same errand. Happy Christians to be both so mindful of the Holy Spirit's teaching, and so like the Lord Jesus! It must needs be that offences come, but blessed are those who are foremost in removing them. Alas, men of a certain mould cannot do this, but will keep a grudge till it rots, and fills their whole nature with its vile odours; surely they cannot expect to be heard in prayer while their unburied enmities

pollute their souls. Do endeavour, dear Christian friends, as much as you can, whenever you are angry, not to sin. It is possible, for it is written, “Be ye angry and sin not.” A man who has no anger in him is scarcely a man, and certainly not a good man, for he who is not angry at sin is not in love with virtue. They say of some that they are as easy as an old shoe, and they are generally worth no more than that article. Anger against injustice is right, but that anger against the person which degenerates into wishing him hurt, is sinful, and effectually blows out the fires of prayer. We cannot pray for forgiveness unless we forgive the trespasses of others against us.

Prayer can be hindered—very terribly hindered—in three ways: if we dishonour the Father to whom we pray, or the Son through whom we pray, or the Holy Ghost by whom we pray.

I say we can dishonour the Father. This can be done by inconsistency of life: if children of God are not obedient to the Father’s will they must not wonder if they find it hard to pray. Something will rise in the throat that will choke their pleading. You cannot pour out your heart acceptably unless you believe in your heavenly Father. If you have hard thoughts of God; if you have a cold heart towards him, and a want of reverence for his name; if you do not believe in that great willing heart which is waiting to bless you, your want of love, faith, and reverence will strangle your prayers. Oh! when a man is fully at one with the great Father; when “Abba, Father,” is the very spirit of his soul; when he speaks to God as one in whom he places implicit trust and to whose will he yields him-

self up perfectly, and whose glory is his soul's delight—then is he on a vantage ground in prayer, he will win what he wills of God. If he be not so with God his prayers will limp most painfully.

So, brethren, if we be wrong with Jesus through whom we pray, if we are in any measure self-righteous, if we delight in self and forget our Beloved, if we fancy that we can do without the Saviour, if, therefore, we pray like complacent Pharisees, our prayers will be hindered. If we are not like the Saviour; if we do not make him our example; if we have none of his loving spirit; above all, if we crucify him afresh and put him to an open shame, and if we are ungrateful for the boons we have already received, our prayers will be hindered. You cannot plead in the court if you have quarrelled with your Advocate. If your prayer be not taken in hand by the great Intercessor, and offered by him on your behalf, you will have no heart for the sacred exercise.

So, again, with the Holy Ghost. There is never a prayer that God accepts but the Spirit first writes it in our hearts. True prayer is not so much our intercession as the Spirit of God making intercession in us. Now, if we grieve the Spirit, he will not help us to pray; and if we attempt to pray for something that is contrary to the Spirit's holy, gracious, loving nature, we cannot expect him to enable us to pray in contradiction to the mind of God. Take care that you vex not the Spirit of God in any way, especially by shutting your ears to his gentle warnings, his loving calls, his earnest entreaties, his tender monitions; for if you be deaf to the divine Comforter he will be speechless to you. He will not help

you to pray if you will not yield to him in other matters.

So then, dear friends, I have stated to you in a hurried manner some of the ways in which prayer may be hindered. May God grant that none of us may be overcome by them, but may we be delivered from everything which could mar our petitions!

III. I shall now want your earnest attention to the most important part of all, upon which I shall endeavour to be brief. We may be hindered in the speeding of our prayers. We may pray, but yet the prayer may not be heard.

And here let me interpose a remark. The Lord will hear any man's prayer who asks for mercy through the mediation of the Lord Jesus. He never despises the cry of the contrite, he is a God ready to hear all those who seek reconciliation; but concerning other matters it is true that God heareth not sinners—that is, while they remain sinners he will not grant them their wishes—indeed, to do so would encourage them in their sins. If they will repent and cry for mercy through Jesus Christ he will hear their cry, and will save them; but if they are not first reconciled to him their prayers are empty wind. A man will grant his child's request, but he does not listen to strangers; he will listen to his friends, but not to enemies. It is not meet that the golden key which opens the caskets of heaven should be hung at a rebel's girdle. Yet more, God does not hear all his children alike, or alike at all times. It is not every believer who is mighty in prayer. Read the Ninety-ninth Psalm, and, if I remember rightly, you will find words like these: "Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among

them that call upon his name; they called upon the Lord and he answered them. They kept his testimonies, and the ordinances that he gave them.” Yes; he answered them—Moses, Aaron, Samuel—he answered them, for they kept his testimonies. When children of God find that their prayers do not succeed they should search, and they would soon discover a reason why their prayers are hindered.

First, there must be holy living in a believer if his prayers are greatly to succeed with God. Listen: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Note that point—of a righteous man. Listen to our Saviour (John 15:7): “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” There is an if there. If you do not do Christ’s will he will not do your will. This is not legal, it has nothing to do with the law, but it is the gospel rule of Christ’s house that obedience should have for its reward power in prayer. Just as you do with your children; you have a discipline over them; you do not turn them out of doors or give them over to the policeman because they do amiss, but you have ways of chastening the wilful and rewarding the obedient. You are in no hurry to grant the requests of yonder fractious boy, in fact you deny him his request; but that other dear, gentle, loving child has only to ask and have. This is correct discipline, and such as God exercises among us. He does not cast off his children for sin, and utterly disown them, but he chastens them in love, and one of his chastenings lies in shutting out their prayers. If we compare prayer to shooting with a bow, you must have

clean hands or you cannot shoot, for this bow refuses to bend to hands polluted with unrepented sin. If a sinner prays for mercy for Jesus' sake he shall be heard, but for general blessings it is written, "The desire of the righteous shall be granted," but not the desire of the wicked. First wash in the fountain of atoning grace, and have your heart cleansed by the Holy Spirit, for else you cannot succeed in prayer. If any one should tell me of a man whom God greatly answered in prayer, and then inform me that he lived in gross sin, I would not believe it. It is impossible for God to patronise a guilty professor of religion by giving him success in prayer. The blind man whom Jesus healed most truly said, "If any man doeth his will, him he heareth."

In addition to obedience there must be faith. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering, for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed: let not that man expect that he shall receive anything of the Lord." Faith "obtains promises, unbelief goes empty-handed." The Lord may give a blessing to a doubter, but that is more than the promise, and he has no right to expect it. The prayer which avails most with God is the prayer of one who believes that God will hear him, and who therefore asks with confidence. In a word, faith is the bow of prayer. You must lay hold on the bow, or you cannot shoot, and the stronger that bow the further you can send the arrow, and the more execution you can do with it. Without faith it is impossible to please God in prayer or in anything else; it is the very

backbone, sinew, and muscle of intercession.

Thirdly, there must be holy desires, or else prayer will be a failure; and those desires must be founded on a promise. If you cannot find that God has promised a blessing, you have no right to ask for it, and no reason to expect it. There is no use in asking money of banker without a cheque: at the counter they do not know you; they know the promise to pay, and if you present that you will get the amount, but not else. You must bring God's own promises to the mercy-seat, which is the counter of the divine exchequer, and you will obtain what you need, but only in that way. Observe, then, that faith is the bow, and strong desire fits to the string the arrow which is to be sent upward. No arrow may be shot towards heaven but that which came down from heaven. Christians take their arrows from God's quiver, and when they shoot them they shoot them with this on their lips, "Do as thou hast said. Remember thy word unto thy servant upon which thou hast caused me to hope." So the successful prayer is the desire of a holy heart, sanctioned by the promise. True prayers are like those carrier pigeons which find their way so well; they cannot fail to go to heaven, for it is from heaven that they came; they are only going home.

Furthermore; if prayer is to speed, there must be fervour and importunity. It is written, "The effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much;" not the dead-and-alive prayer of the mere professor,—not the prayer of one who does not care whether he is answered or not. There must be eagerness, intensity, the pouring out of the heart before God. The arrow must be put on

the bow string, and the bow must be drawn with all our might. The best bow is of no use until you draw it, and if you draw the bow of faith and shoot at the target up there in heaven, you will get what you will; only you must resolve to have it with this only boundary—"the will of the Lord be done"—and you will succeed.

There must be, next, a desire for God's glory—for that is the white of the target—and if we do not shoot towards that, the arrow will avail nothing. We must earnestly desire what we ask, because we believe it will glorify God to give it to us. If we are wholly living unto God, our prayers will run side by side with his purposes, and none of them will fall to the ground. "Delight thyself also in the Lord and he will give thee the desires of thine heart."

We must also have holy expectancy, or we shall hinder prayer. The man who shoots must look to see where his arrow goes. We must direct our prayer unto God, and look up. Eyeing the Lord Jesus in all, we must look to succeed through the merits of the Redeemer. "If we believe that he heareth us, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of him."

Presumption in prayer shoots with the bow of self-confidence, not for God's glory, but for the gratification of itself, and therefore it fails. Some have the idea that, ask what they like of God, they are sure to have it: but I would ask them, first, "Who are you?" secondly, "What is it you are going to ask?" and, thirdly, "What right have you to expect it?" These inquiries must be clearly answered, otherwise prayer may be an insult to God. I wish some Christians

who pray about temporals would be a little careful as to how they act. When they get into scrapes and messes by extravagance do they expect God to get them out? I remember hearing of a remark of good Mr. Muller, of Bristol. At a prayer meeting he read a letter from a brother who thanked him for a gift of some twenty pounds, which had arrived very providentially, for he owed half a year's rent. Mr. Muller remarked, "Yes, our brother should be very thankful; but I intend to write to him and tell him he ought not to owe half a year's rent without being prepared to pay; and he is acting unwisely and unjustly by not laying by in store to meet the claim. When I took a house I said, 'This is another person's house; I am bound to pay his rent,' and therefore week by week as I used the house I put by a portion to pay what was due. I did not spend the money and at the end of the quarter expect the heavenly Father to send me more." This was sound morality and common sense, and I pray you attend to it. Pray by all means, but "owe no man anything." Daily bread is to be prayed for, but speculations which may involve you in ruin, or make your fortune, are not to be mentioned. If you take to gambling you may as well give up praying. Straightforward transactions you may pray about, but do not mix up the Lord with your financing.

I am requested to pray for a young man who has lost his situation, through a defalcation, that he may get another place, but instead of doing so I suggest that he should himself pray to be made honest. Another who is deeply in debt wants me to pray that he may obtain help, but I suggest that he should let his

creditors have a dividend while there is anything left. I shall not ask of my God what I would not ask of man. The approach to the mercy-seat is holy ground and not to be trifled with, or made to minister to sin. "Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." If we walk contrary to the Lord he will walk contrary to us; and I say to every man here who is in trouble and is a Christian, take the straight path out of it, and do the right thing, and if it brings you trouble bear it like a man, and then go to God, and say, "Lord, I have, by thy grace, chosen a plain, honest path; now help me;" and he will.

God grant us grace as Christians to walk with God in the power of his Spirit, resting alone on Jesus, and may he make each one of us mighty in prayer. A man, whom God has taught to pray mightily, is one with God's mind, and is God's hand moving among the sons of men; when he acts, God acts in him. He must, however, be careful and watchful, for the Lord is a jealous God, and most jealous where he loves most. God grant you, brethren, to walk humbly with God, and to live near to him, "that your prayers be not hindered." Amen.

Encouragement to Trust and Pray

Sermon on Isaiah 30:19

Preached June 16, 1878

“He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.” — Isaiah 30:19

The great sin of man is his alienation from God. He hath said in his heart, “No God,” and in his life he laboureth to escape from the divine presence. The journey into the far country is not only made for the sake of the riotous living, but that he may get away from the Father’s house. One would have thought man would turn unto the Lord in the day of trouble, even as Hosea said, “In their affliction they will seek me early.” But this, alas, is not in truth and sincerity, for too often the sinner follows the example of Ahaz, of whom it is written, “In the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord: this is that King Ahaz.” All the trials and troubles in the world will not of themselves drive a man to God, but will the rather hurry him into rebellion, despair, and hardness of heart. Man will look in all directions sooner than look to God. He will

sooner, like Saul, seek the help of a witch or a devil than seek the living God.

He will rather make a league with death and a covenant with hell than turn his heart towards his best Friend and Helper. It is written, "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!" Vain is the warning, for man still leans upon an arm of flesh, and counts it a foolish and fanciful thing to rely upon the almighty God.

Man shifts his ground of trust full often, and now depends on this, then on that, and in due course upon a score of equally unreliable confidences. Very early he is deceived, the staff of the broken reed upon which he essayed to lean pierces his hand. He smarts and bleeds; repents of his folly in one direction, and repeats it in another. He cries in the pride and stoutness of his heart, "The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones: the sycomores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars." Though again and again deceived by his false confidences, he returns to them like the dog to his vomit. He chooses his own delusions and attempts again to build upon that sandy foundation which the tide has already shifted so many times. Nor is it only when he is deceived that he persists in his folly, for he continues in it when he knows that he has paid heavily for his folly, and has been impoverished by spending his money for that which is not bread. Egypt has drained his treasure, and has yielded him no assistance, and yet he sendeth more treasure to the same

market only to be again ashamed of a people that could not profit him. He exercises painful thought, he spends his mental force, he schemes, he frets, he worries himself, to find in his carnal confidences some little consolation; and so he wasteth his life, and drieth up the very marrow of his bones in seeking for that in the creature which might so readily be found in the Creator. He rises up early, he sits up late, and he eats the bread of carefulness: but he will not turn unto the Lord, who alone giveth his beloved sleep. Even when impoverished and worn out with unbelief, man will not look to the Lord; even then he doteth upon some new thing which promises him assistance. He seems anxious to be duped and willing to be deluded. If at last all carnal trust is excluded, by sheer failure of every hope, he will lie down and die sooner than seek the Lord. He suffers, ah, how cruelly, from the vain joys in which he trusted, yet would he still pursue them if he could. He faints, he pines, he is ready to die, for he cannot fill his belly with the husks the swine do eat; but yet he will not, until almighty grace constrains him, turn his face toward the house where there is bread enough and to spare. He will sooner perish with hunger than confess his sin against heaven and begin to live by faith in God. This is the fruit of the fall, the black evidence of our depravity, the fruitful mother of destruction—"the carnal mind is enmity against God." We must needs have something to rely upon which we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands, but the invisible Jehovah we cannot trust, and yet he alone is the living and true God. Oh that we were wise, that we would understand this, and say within our hearts, "Come, and let us return unto the Lord; for he hath torn, and he will heal us;

he hath smitten, and he will bind us up.”

Now all this time, while man is struggling to get away from God, the Lord is willing enough to receive him, to forgive him, to bless him, and to enrich him with every joy. Nor is he merely willing only but he is able, fully able to assist the troubled heart in every difficulty and to comfort under every distress. Therefore doth the Lord wait that he may be gracious, and he is exalted that he may show mercy. If the unwillingness were on God’s part also we might very readily understand and in a measure justify the unwillingness of man to turn unto God, but when the Lord bids man return, invites him, reasons with him, entreats him, and makes every preparation for his reception, why is it that man refuses? His Lord has given rich promises of every help that he can want, and it is inexcusable ingratitude and wicked obstinacy on the part of man that still he persists in keeping aloof from his Creator. He chooses to perish for ever sooner than trust his God. Is not this the case of some who hear these my words?

I desire at this time to set forth the graciousness of God and his readiness to listen to the cry of the needy, with the hope that some here present who may have forgotten this, to whom it may be a time of need, may hear it and be encouraged to say, “I will arise and go to my Father.” It is joy to me to hope that it will be so, but I remember with sadness that if I should be helped to set this forth clearly, and if any of you who are in trouble should afterwards refuse to trust in the Lord, your alienation will be aggravated, your sin will become still more crying. He who will not trust when he knows that the Lord will be gracious

to him sins against his own soul and plunges himself in sevenfold wrath. If the Lord saith that he will be very gracious at the voice of your cry, what must be your doom if you will not cry?

I. In trying to set forth the overflowing grace of the Lord our God, I shall first of all speak upon the fact that this assurance is particularly suitable to certain characters. “He Will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.” This is applicable and comfortable to all afflicted people. To such I speak. You are depressed at this time by heavy grief. Things have gone amiss with you: you do not prosper in business, or you are sickening in body, or a dear one lies at home pining away. We do not wonder that you feel exceedingly burdened in spirit. At the same time you are ill at ease as to your own state, the iron is entering into your soul. While passing through this thick darkness you will be strongly tempted to think hardly of God and to blame him for the troubles which now surround you; yet this will only make matters worse and increase your sin and your sorrow. Peradventure also you will be ready to despair and say, “There is no hope, I am taken as in a net, and there is no escape for me”: though if you knew all you would chase away despair as your greatest enemy. Possibly you will be ready to try some wrong method by way of helping yourself out of present straits. Satan will suggest to you dishonest, impure, or reckless courses which hold out some shadow of relief. This is your danger at this time, and in pity to you the Lord bids us assure you that there is a far wiser course open to you, namely, to turn to him,

for he will be very gracious unto you at the voice of your cry, and when he hears it he will answer you. There is help in God for your present trial, whatever form it assumes. Infinite wisdom understands it, and infinite power can help you through it. God can remove from you that which you are suffering, or he can prevent the occurrence of that which you dread; or if in his divine wisdom he shall see fit to lay the rod upon you, he can enable you to bear it, and make it to turn to your everlasting good. Be well assured that he doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men out of any delight in their sorrows. He pities those who are afflicted, for he is very tender and full of compassion, and ever swift to succour the suffering. There is a needs be for the heavy trial which now bows you down; depend upon that, and do not repine. The Lord is not now visiting you in wrath, there is kindness in his severity. Can you not believe this? It is really so, and your strength, your comfort, your ultimate deliverance out of it all, will come through your knowing this to be true, and acting accordingly. By yielding yourself to God, and trusting him in this your evil plight, you will obtain deliverance. “For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.”

In so large a congregation there must be some with broken hearts on account of their temporal trials. I am persuaded that I am speaking to some of the sons and daughters of woe. Go, ye sorrowing ones. Turn unto the hand that smites you. Kiss the rod and him that hath appointed it, and let your confidence

henceforth be in the Lord, for he is God, and beside him there is none else. Say “From this time, my Father, I will seek thee, and thou shalt be my guide. Through Jesus Christ thy Son I will approach thee, trusting in his precious blood: help me and deliver me.” You shall find him ready to pardon and rescue, and you shall live to sing of him whose “mercy endureth for ever.” Let me whisper in your ear the sweet assurance of the text—“He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.”

A second class of persons to whom the text will be very applicable consists of those who are troubled on account of sin,—sinners who are beginning to feel the iniquity of their heels compassing them about. You are at this time overthrown with a sense of guilt and with the fear of punishment. You cannot well be smarting under severer blows than the law of God can give when it begins to smite the conscience and the heart. Now, in order to escape from sin and punishment, the very first thing with you is to come back to your God whom you have offended, since he alone can pardon you. There must be a turning of the face in repentance, and a looking of the eye by faith unto God in Christ Jesus, or you will die in your sins. The natural tendency of your heart even when under a sense of sin will be to keep from the Lord. Alas, you will look at your sin again and again and again, till you are ready to pine away in despair, but you will not look to Christ Jesus and be saved. A terrible sound is in your ears as of an approaching judgment, and you listen both to it and to the howlings of the dog of hell, but you refuse to hear the loving voice of compassion which tells

of pardon bought with blood, freely given to all who trust their Saviour God. Possibly you may conclude that there is no hope for you in better things, and that therefore you had better enjoy such pleasures as may be found in sin, and take your swing while you may. Now, do not believe this lie of Satan. There is hope: you are in the land of mercy still. Poor guilty sinner, you are where pardons are commonly given, where God is gracious to all them that seek him. You have not yet come to the judgment seat, and to the voice of a trumpet waxing exceeding loud and long. Calvary is before you with dying love, not Sinai with consuming fire. To-day is the day of salvation; the hour of vengeance is not yet. God willeth not your death, nor takes delight in your perdition, but desireth that you turn unto him and live, for he delighteth in mercy. A joyful acceptance awaits you if you return to your Father's house: he will not upbraid you for your wanderings, but he will take off your rags and put on the best robe of Christ's righteousness: he will fill the house with music concerning you, and he himself will rejoice over you. You need do nothing to make the Lord propitious, he is love already; you need not undergo penance, nor pass through grievous anguish of spirit, in order to render God more merciful, for his grace aboundeth. In Christ Jesus the stream of divine love floweth freely, swiftly, richly, even to the worst of men. Only return unto God against whom you have transgressed, acknowledge your transgression, and put your trust in him through Jesus Christ his Son, and "He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee."

Equally sweet will the assurance of our text be to backsliders filled with their own ways, who are alarmed and distressed at their grievous departures from their God. It is true, my dear friend, that you have very greatly transgressed in becoming a backslider: you have sinned against much light, and against much love, and this makes sin exceeding sinful. What peaceful hours you once enjoyed when you had communion with your Saviour and your God! You have sinned against those sweet enjoyments, and against the condescending endearments of eternal love. You have done despite to the Spirit of God, and crucified the Son of God afresh. You were taught of the Lord in the deep things of his word, and the secret of his covenant was opened up to you; you had an experimental acquaintance with the divine life, and you entered into the joys of sacred fellowship; and yet you have turned aside from the way of the Lord, and been unfaithful to all your vows. You have left the cold flowing waters which come from the Rock of Ages to drink of the muddy pools of earth; you have turned away from the living God to live upon the beggarly elements of the world; you have bowed down before the golden calf, or some other image of jealousy; you have gone far astray from the Most High, defiled the chastity of your soul, and provoked the Lord exceedingly. Moreover, you may well be grieved, for you have done much dishonour to the name of God amongst the ungodly: you have pierced his saints with many sorrows; and you have made his ministers to go as with broken bones. You and such as you are our shame and our anguish. If you were cast off for ever as a traitor and left to die as a son of perdition what could be said but that you were reaping the fruit of your own

ways? Yet the text rings in your ears at this time like a clear silver bell, and its one note is grace—"he will be very gracious unto thee." "Turn, O backsliding children, for I am married unto you, saith the Lord." Return; return! It is thy bridegroom's voice that calls thee. With what sweeter notes wouldst thou be wooed? "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." O beloved friend, hear the exhortation and let thy heart say, "I will return unto my first husband, for it was better with me then than now." He hath not shut up the bowels of his compassion, but he cries in the greatness of his love, "Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger for ever." He has chastened thee sorely, but he has not given thee over unto death; he hears thy groaning at this time, and his soul pities thee. Behold, he crieth, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man." Hearken to me, O wanderer: let a brother softly whisper it in thine ear, and may the Holy Ghost speak it to thine heart,—“He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.”

We are sure that a fourth class of persons will be very glad of the text, namely, all believers in Christ who are at all exercised in heart; and we are all in that

condition at times. We do not always dwell upon the mount of transfiguration nor sit at the festival of love in rapturous fellowship, but at times we are thrust into the furnace of soul-trouble, and our faces become black as a coal through grief of heart. We find it hard even to retain a spark of faith; we even question whether we are the Lord's, though we resolve to battle on in his name, come what may. Even when by full assurance we can read our title clear we are apt to look forward, and there comes over us the fear that we shall yet fall by the hand of the enemy. If trials multiply, how will faith be able to stand? When the days of weakness arrive, what shall we do in our old age? Behind all stands the skeleton form of death: what shall we do in the swellings of Jordan? We recollect how we ran with the footmen in our former trials, and they wearied us, and we ask ourselves, "How shall we contend with horsemen?" When eternity is close in view, and when within a few hours we shall be made to confront the judgment seat, shall we bear it? Will our religion then prove to be a reality, or will our hope dissolve like a dream? Such questions torment our souls. Now, brothers and sisters, it will not do to try and answer these questions by taking counsel with the flesh. If you consult your own strength, it is clear that you cannot win the life-battle. What is your strength but perfect weakness? If you look to your own wisdom, it is evident that you cannot guide your own way across the pathless desert of life. What is your wisdom but the essence of folly? Come back, then, in childlike confidence to God, and go no more from him. Come to the very spot where your spiritual life commenced and find strength, wisdom, rest, and all in the living God. Let this verse smile on you and beckon

you to God, “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.” No trial shall happen to you but such as is common to man, and when the temptation comes the way of escape shall come with it. The burden shall always find your back strengthened to bear it, or else if your back be weak the burden shall not be laid upon you. The whole of your future history, though unknown to yourself, is spread out like a map before the eye of your great leader and guide. Follow where Jesus leads you, and know that he cannot forsake you; he will make you to lie down in green pastures, and his goodness and his mercy will follow you all your days. Be careful for nothing, be prayerful for everything. Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust thou also in him and he shall bring it to pass; and he shall bring forth thy judgment as the light and thy righteousness as the noonday. Go to his mercy-seat in every time of trial, for he will be very gracious to thee. Pour out thy heart before him and thou shalt have an answer of peace from the God of thy salvation.

Now, I think those four cases include the bulk of us, and, therefore, I would pray the Holy Spirit to speak the words of the text to every one here present. May we feel them dropping into our hearts like a soft saturating rain—“He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.”

II. Now we will make a second observation, and dwell upon it for awhile: it is this—the assurance here given is very firmly based. The words of our text are no old wives’ fable, they are not such a pretty tale as mothers sometimes

tell their children, a story made to please them, but not actually true. Our text is no fiction, it is a faithful saying from the mouth of God. "He will be very gracious unto thee." What, then, is the ground of this assurance?

And first I would say, the ground of our comfort is found in the plain promise of God as given in the text, and in many similar declarations which are scattered all over the Scriptures. I have repeated this text a great many times in my sermon, because it is far better than anything which can be spoken by man.

Let me read it again. You want to know why we should turn to God and trust him; it is because thus saith the Lord who can neither lie nor change: "He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry: when he shall hear it, he will answer thee." This is a portion of his infallible word, is it not? It is true, then: you have no doubt about its being so. Come, then, with your Bible open, put your finger upon the words and say, "I believe that God is here declaring his readiness to be very gracious to me and to hear my prayer." Now, what more do you want? Does a child need any better assurance than his father's word? Does a true disciple ask any stronger evidence than his Master's promise? "It is written," is not that enough for you? Go on your knees and plead this word at once. If your friend had said, "I will grant your request," would you not believe him? Doubt not, then, your God, your Father. He has never given you cause to mistrust his word. Are not all his promises faithful? Come, then, the assurance is well grounded. If there were only this one promise, it ought to be enough, but see how many there are! The gracious promises of God's word are as many

as the stars which bestud the midnight sky. "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." "My grace is sufficient for thee." "Fear not, I will help thee." "He that believeth shall not be confounded." "Trust in the Lord and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed." I need not quote them, for you know them well, and their number is very great, but they are all made to faith, and none of them to unbelief. Have thou faith in them and believe thy God, and his words shall be fulfilled in thy happy experience.

A second ground upon which this assurance is built is the gracious nature of God. The text intimates this. "He will be very gracious unto thee." It is the nature of God, the God of Israel, to be very generous in his dealings, he openeth his hand and supplieth the want of every living thing. He is the God of bounty. Nor does he stay there, for while he is bountiful to his needy creatures, he is also merciful to his sinful creatures. Judgment is his strange work, but he delighteth in mercy. Nothing pleases him more than to pass by transgression, iniquity, and sin. That he might indulge his attribute of mercy he sacrificed the darling of his soul, even his Son Jesus. He loved his Son, but he loved his mercy so greatly, and he loved sinful man so heartily, that "he spared not his own Son, but freely delivered him up for us all," that he might have mercy upon our guilty race. See then, what a merciful God he is. Nor does he end even here, for to those whom he has forgiven he is rich in lovingkindnesses. His love is very wonderful, deeper than the abyss, higher than the heavens, broader than the sea. Well, now, what is thy trouble? Trust thy merciful God to help thee. What

is thy sin? Trust thy merciful God to forgive thee. What are thy backslidings? Trust thy merciful God to restore thee. What are the trials thou art expecting? Rely upon thy merciful God to bear thee through. If he were a tyrant thou mightest well flee from him, but as his mercy endureth for ever it will be thy wisdom to turn to him. Come, let us all together go, by an act of faith, this moment, and cast ourselves at Jehovah's feet, and, though we see him not, yet let us henceforth trust him as he hath revealed himself in Christ Jesus; so shall we be at peace with him, and hereby good shall come unto us. It is certain from the character of God, which abounds in love, grace, and mercy, that he will be gracious to those who seek him; let us seek him at once, every one of us. The text saith not "he will be gracious," but "he will be very gracious." I love to see grace thus decorated with expressive words. It refreshes my mind to think that very frequently when we read of the mercy of God in Scripture there is some word with it by way of intimating its greatness, its freeness, or its excellence. "God who is rich in mercy." "Thou Lord art plenteous in mercy." "The Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting." "The tender mercy of our God." "His mercy endureth for ever." "His merciful kindness is great toward us." "According to his abundant mercy he hath begotten us again unto a lively hope." "According to the multitude of his tender mercies." See what great words go with the mention of the Lord's mercy: there is no fear of exaggerating it, for all language falls short. In the text we have the word "very." "He will be very gracious unto thee." Dost thou need special comfort? thou shalt have it. Dost thou want great help? thou shalt have it. Come, thou grievous sinner, there is plenteous for-

giveness. Come thou sorely afflicted one, there is rich consolation. Come thou weary wanderer, there is complete restoration. Come thou impoverished and needy one, there are abounding supplies.

“Rivers of love and mercy here,
In a rich ocean join;
Salvation in abundance flows,
Like floods of milk and wine.”

The assurance of the text is grounded upon the merciful nature of God, and may be relied upon without hesitation.

And next it is based upon the grand fact of the prevalence of prayer. “He will be very gracious to thee at the voice of thy cry.” Is it not a wonderful thing that God permits men to pray? It is a more wonderful thing that they do not pray when he permits them. It is marvellous that God should hearken to the voice of a man. This has been so astonishing to mere thinkers that they cannot admit it to be true, and consequently they have asserted that there could be no actual power in prayer to move the heart of God. I do not wonder that they should have thought so, for though this surprising truth is not contrary to reason it is certainly far above reason. Now, we know, for we have tried it, that God heareth prayer: therefore we say to you, go to him and test him, for he will be gracious to the voice of your cry. God has been pleased to set up a mercy-seat; answer me, O doubting one, would there be a divinely-appointed mercy-seat for the presentation of prayer if the Lord did not intend to hear prayer? He

has sprinkled that mercy-seat with the blood of his only-begotten Son, that through that atonement the guilty might approach him. Would he shed that matchless blood, and yet reject the sinner who comes trusting therein? In addition to all this, he has promised to give the Holy Spirit to assist in prayer, helping our infirmities, because we know not what we should pray for as we ought. Would he give that Holy Spirit, and still suffer prayer to be ineffectual? It is not conceivable. It delights God to listen to the cries of his creatures. Your voice may be very cracked and inharmonious, and your prayer may be like an infant's wailing, or like the cry of a young bird in its nest when it is hungry; but he who heareth the young ravens when they cry will hear your inarticulate, discordant utterances, therefore pour out your heart before him.

He will answer thee, too, and that very quickly. "When he hears thy prayer, he will answer thee"—so says the text. Has he not said, "Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear"? Where there is true prayer for grace in the heart the prayer is heard before it is offered; for it is grace that makes us pray in such a fashion. He who asks for grace sincerely has grace already in a measure or else he would not be inclined to ask for more. Let this encourage us. Since God waiteth to be gracious, and hath in wondrous condescension endued prayer with such privileges in his sacred courts, who among us will not turn unto him now, with all our heart, and cry to him, "My Father, save and help me now?"

I am pleading for my God, and I know that I am advocating the best of causes,

but my tongue and my mind fall short in the argument. I do not, however, much regret my want of eloquence in this matter, for it is better that the theme should plead for itself. May the Lord by his Eternal Spirit make the reasonableness and the blessedness of the claim to appeal to your conscience and your heart, and instead of searching elsewhere for succour may you now turn to your God in loving trustfulness.

If you required further confirmation of your faith beyond the three truths which I have laid before you, namely, the promise itself, the nature of God, and the efficacy of prayer, I could ask many in this house to-day to give their personal testimony as to the result of faith in God and supplication to him. We can speak positively, for we speak from actual trial of faith and prayer. I have now reached middle life, and having known the Lord from my youth up I can speak from eight-and-twenty years' experience. Through the favour of God I have led a very happy life by faith in his name. I have not been without many trials, sicknesses, and difficulties, and some of these are daily with me, but in all things faith sustains me. I bear my witness that confidence in man is utter folly, and brings sorrow to the soul: but I am more than ever certain that confidence in God is always wise, never leads to disappointment, and never causes regret. I mourn that I have not trusted my Lord more fully, and I lament that I have not attempted greater things in reliance upon his word; but I have no question that faith is right, and I am sure that it will always be justified by results. Speaking deliberately, as though I were bearing witness concerning my fellow man in a

court of justice, I have no word to say by way of questioning the faithfulness, and goodness, and truthfulness of my Lord, but I am bound to declare that he has heard my prayers, not once nor twice, but evermore, and hath been gracious to the voice of my cry. Why speak I thus? Why must the objectionable “I” be introduced? Because I cannot ask anyone else in the audience to stand up and speak without disturbing the order of our service; but if I could do so, my brethren and sisters here by the hundred would each one offer similar testimony. Dear friends, your troubles have been different from mine, you have tested God in other directions than I have done, but you have equally found him true: have you not? Is not his word like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times? Some of you are older than I. The snows of many a winter whiten your brows, but in no one day of all those seventy years has the Lord been unfaithful to you. Are you verging upon fourscore? Still in that long period there has not been a single breach of covenant on the part of your Lord. Your last days are freer from doubt than your former years; though your spirits are by no means so elastic your peace is less disturbed. Each year of your life trust in God grows easier, for facts prove the reality of his working, and fellowship with your invisible Friend makes his influence over you to be more constant and powerful. The path of faith increases in brightness: every hour accumulates evidence for its support. We know and are persuaded of the love which God hath towards us: Verily he is gracious, and inclineth his ear to his people.

III. There I leave this matter, and I close by the third observation, which is

this: the assurance of the text being so well confirmed should be practically accepted at once. If God will be gracious to the voice of our cry, and when he hears it will answer us, let us renounce at once all earth born confidences. Let us defile the covering of our graven images and cast them away, and say unto our false confidence, “Get thee hence.” “We have done so,” says one. Do it again, brother, for the tendency of thy heart is still to rest in that which is seen rather than in the invisible Jehovah. Idolatry is bound up in our hearts. Cast out the idol yet again. Alas, some of you have never done so; your carnal hope still usurps the place of God. Let me put it to you. What is your confidence for life? You all have some confidence or other; what is yours, young man? What is your reliance, O man in middle life? Especially, O greybeard, what is thy confidence now? Thou hast good reason to examine it, for soon thou wilt need it; and woe to thee if it be found to fail. What is your confidence, my brother? Is it your wealth? Is it your strong common sense? Is it your stalwart frame—that strong pair of arms which hitherto have enabled you to stem the current? What are you relying upon? Will it support you in death? Will it stand you in good stead in eternity? I know it will not if it be anything short of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Come let us flee from all creature confidence as from a filthy thing, for it is base to the last degree for a creature to be trusting in another creature and putting that creature into the place of its Creator. Let us abhor such idolatrous trust. Let us shun it also as a vexing and deceitful thing, for it is treacherous as the smooth, deceitful sea, and it mocks us as the mirage of the desert mocks the thirsty traveller. Let us flee from vain confidence in self or in

man, for it is a poisonous thing; the fiery flying serpent of Egypt was not more deadly than confidence in an arm of flesh. Let us away from it and never return. O trusters in that which is seen, leave your idols, cast them to the moles and to the bats, even the dearest of them all. If your confidence be in yourself, fly from yourself, for you have no worse enemy. Flee from unbelief and carnal trust, and provoke not the Lord to jealousy by setting up another God, for there is no other. "Once have I spoken, yea twice have I heard this, that power belongeth unto God." Trust not then where there is no power, but set all your confidence upon the Almighty.

If this be done, and you flee away from other trusts, then let me commend you at the same time to refuse despair. When a man sees that his confidences are broken up like a potter's vessel till, to use the expressive figure of the prophet, there is not a piece left large enough to take fire from the hearth, or to take water out of the pit, then he is apt to exclaim, "Now it is all over with me, and I must needs perish." You loved your wife, she was all the world to you; but, alas, she is dead, and you cry, "Let me die also." You hugged your wealth, it has melted; that speculation has dissolved it, and left you a beggar: and now you cry, "What is there worth living for?" Beware of dark thoughts, which may beset you just now. In your worst moment, should Satan whisper in your ear a suggestion concerning rope, or knife, or poison bowl, or sullen stream, flee from it with all your soul. Obey the apostolic word, "Do thyself no harm." Nothing could be worse for thee than to break the law, which saith expressly,

“Thou shalt do no murder.” Self-destruction, if done by a man in his senses, is a daring defiance of God, and the sealing of damnation. This is to leap from measured trouble into infinite woe, the depth of which none can guess. Why shouldst thou do this? Turn unto thy God; that is a wiser thing for a man to do than to destroy his own life; yea, there is something braver for a man to do than to rush upon the pikes of the foe because the battle waxeth too hot for him. Go thou to thy great Captain, even to him whom God hath given to be a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people, and he will make thee more than a conqueror. There are brighter days in store for thee yet. Yea, there are days to come, which shall never end, of everlasting life and blessedness if thou wilt but now in thy distress cast thyself upon the covenanted mercies of God in Christ Jesus his Son. It is grand to spring up from despair into the fullness of delight, and many a man hath done this at a bound. This earth moveth by slow degrees from the frosts of winter into the bright days of June, but God can make our souls to pass out of the deepest despair into the brightest hope in a single moment, and if we do but trust and rest in him it shall be done.

I know some who do not trust their all with God because they have picked a quarrel with him. They resemble a little child I have heard of who one night would not say his prayers. His fond mother said to him, “Dear child, why do you not pray?” “Mother,” said he, “I shall not say my prayers to God any more, because he let my little bird die.” Do not some people talk thus against God? They have a quarrel about their dead child, or their lost property. Now, if you

get into such a state of sullenness it will go hard with you; it would be far better if you would bow to the divine decision and believe that God meaneth your good. Oh, do believe the words of my text. May his Holy Spirit lead you to believe them. “He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry.”

Those two counsels being followed, namely, the renunciation of carnal hope, and at the same time the determination not to despair, there remaineth only this, that we do now try the power of prayer and childlike confidence in God. But you say, “There is no hope for me.” Have you ever sought for mercy? “I do not think I should be heard.” Have you ever tried? Dear heart, have you ever gone into your chamber, and shut to your door, opened the word of God and found out a gracious promise, and then said, “Lord, fulfil this promise to me. For Christ’s sake be gracious to me. I trust thee, and expect thee to be gracious to me”? If any one of you has tried this and it has failed, please let me know it, for I am in the habit of continually saying that “him that cometh to Christ he will in no wise cast out,” and I do not want to spread a falsehood. If you find that Jesus casts you out, do let me know it, for I would not like to go about telling lies. I have asked others, and I have tried for myself, but I have never found any exception to the rule—“he that believeth in him shall not be ashamed nor confounded;” nor of that other rule—“every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” If I can have evidence true and certain that God does not honour faith and does not hear prayer, I must revise my convictions, contradict my statements, and disbelieve

my own consciousness. Have you ever tried believing prayer? Most of the people who disbelieve the Bible have never read it with care and attention; those who doubt the faithfulness of God have never tried it; and those who deride prayer have never practised it. But, mind, I am speaking of real prayer, not of repeating certain good words. I am not talking of formal prayer, but of going with your heart to the unseen God, and telling him what you feel and what you want, and trusting him to supply your wants, and help you. Have you done this? Go and try prayer at once, I beseech you. Divine Spirit, help these poor souls to pray this day. If you do pray and trust this day it shall be unto you as the beginning of days, and from henceforth you shall delight yourselves in the abundance of peace. O believer, it shall be true of you, "His soul shall dwell at ease, and his seed shall inherit the earth." From the Lord's good Spirit there shall come to you such grace that you shall be blessed, and become a blessing to others. You shall walk happily before the Lord in this land of the dying, and then shall abide with him for ever in the land of the living above. God bless you all for his name's sake. Amen

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Humility, the Friend of Prayer

Sermon on Genesis 32:10

Preached June 22, 1884

“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.” — Genesis 32:10

Jacob’s character was far from faultless, but equally removed from despicable. He possessed great strength of character and force of judgment, and this became somewhat a snare to him, so that he did not always move through life with the childlike repose of Isaac, or the royal serenity of Abraham, but was at times crafty and pettifogging, like his relatives on the mother’s side. Yet I demur to that depreciation of Jacob’s character which is so common in certain quarters, because he used the means, as well as prayed. Our God is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob; and very frequently he is called the God of Israel, and even the God of Jacob. “He is not ashamed to be called their God:”

and if he is not ashamed to be called Jacob's God, no fellow-believer has any right to be ashamed of Jacob. With all his imperfections—and he certainly had them—he was a noble man. Some good people are built upon too small a scale to display either good or bad qualities in any high degree,—let not such carp at a great man like Jacob. He has impressed his character upon multitudinous generations, and a whole nation bears his lineaments. He was a man full of energy, active, enduring, resolute, and hence his infirmities became more conspicuous than they would have been in a quieter and more restful nature.

Say what you will of him, he was a master of the art of prayer, and he that can pray well is a princely man. He that can prevail with God will certainly prevail with men. It seems to me that when once a man is taught of the Lord to pray he is equal to every emergency that can possibly arise. Depend upon it, it will go hard with any man who fights against a man of prayer. All other weapons may be dashed aside; but the weapon of All-prayer, invisible though it may be, and despised of the worldling, hath in it a might and majesty which will secure the victory. The sword of prayer hath such an edge that it will cut through coats of mail. Jacob was a prevailing prince when he came upon his knees.

Dr. Kitto, in his admirable Bible Illustrations, has a chapter upon this chapter which is entitled, "The First Prayer." I take leave to differ a little from that title. This can hardly be said to be the first prayer that is recorded in Scripture. I admit that the excellent writer excludes the prayer of Abraham for Sodom as rather an intercession than a prayer; but there are other prayers of Abraham,

and other instances of supplication. Yet it may be truly said that this is the first prayer in the Bible of a man for himself, which is given at full length; and being the first, it may be viewed in some degree as a pattern for succeeding pleaders. If you examine it carefully, you will find that it is a valuable model which may be copied by any child of God in the day of his trouble. Jacob begins by pleading the covenant:—“O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac”: what better plea can we have than the covenant of a faithful God, which he has already fulfilled to our fathers? He next pleads a special promise which had been made to himself. That promise was wrapt up in the folds of a precept which he was obeying: “Thou saidst unto me, return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee.” While we plead the general covenant made with all believers in Christ, we may also particularly and especially plead any promise which has been laid home to our own soul by the Spirit of the blessed God. Next, he proceeded to plead his own unworthiness; by faith he turned even his faultiness into an argument, as I shall have to show you: “I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies.” Furthermore, he went on to plead with God, stating his special danger: “Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau.” He also set the little children and their danger before God—a strong plea with such a God of love as we have: “Lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children.” Then he concluded with what must ever remain a potent plea with God: “Thou saidst.” He urged God’s promise, and virtually cried, “Do as thou hast said.” It is wise to spread the promise before him who gave it, and to beg for its fulfilment.

We may appeal to God's faithfulness, and cry, "Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope."

The very first sentence of Jacob's prayer has this peculiarity about it, that it is steeped in humility; for he does not address the Lord as his own God at the first, but as the God of Abraham and Isaac. The prayer itself, though it is very urgent, is never presumptuous; it is as lowly as it is earnest. I take it that even when Jacob in his desperation grasped the angel, and said, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me," there was no undue familiarity in his holy boldness. There was an extraordinary courage, and an invincible determination; but it was of the kind which God approves, otherwise he would not have blessed him there. No man wins a blessing through a sinful act towards God. Throughout this prayer I see, with all its intensity, a loving remembrance of who Jacob is, and who Jehovah is; and the suppliant speaks in terms fit to be used towards the thrice holy God by a man of lowly heart.

This is to be the subject of our discourse—humility is the fit attitude of prayer. We will begin with that—"I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant." Then we will advance in the second place to remark that humility is promoted by the same considerations which encourage prayer—that I shall show you from the text; and thirdly, humility suggests and supplies many arguments which can be used in prayer. A proud man has few reasons to bring before God; but the humbler a man is, the more numerous are his prevailing pleas. Prayer is a suitable em-

ployment for a sinner, and a sinner is the best person to exercise prayer.

I. Our first observation is that humility is the fit attitude of prayer. I do not think that Jacob could have prayed unless he had stripped off the robes of self-justification which he wore in his controversy with Laban, and had stood disrobed before the infinite majesty of the Most High.

Observe that he here speaks not as before man, but as before God; and he cries, "I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies." He had been talking with Laban,—Laban who had made a slave of him, who had used him in the most mercenary manner, and who had now pursued him in fierce anger because he had quitted his service with his wives and children that he might go back to his native country. To Laban he does not say, "I am not worthy of what I possess," for, as far as churlish Laban was concerned, he was worthy of a great deal more than had ever been rendered to him in the form of wage. To Laban he uses many truthful sentences of self-vindication and justification. Laban's substance had greatly increased under Jacob's unceasing care. He cared for Laban's flocks with constant diligence, and he says, "In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes." He declares that he had never taken a ram of the flock wherewith to feed his own family; that he had, in fact, for many years worked with no wages except the daughters who became his wives; and he goes the length of saying, "Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty." The same man who speaks in that

fashion to Laban turns round and confesses to his God, "I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies." This is perfectly consistent and truthful. Humility is not telling falsehoods against yourself: humility is forming a right estimate of yourself. As towards Laban it was a correct estimate for a man who had worked so hard for so little to claim that he had a right to what God had given him; and yet as before God it was perfectly honest and sincere of Jacob to say, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant." Now, whenever you go to prayer, if you have previously been compelled to say some rather strong thing as to your own integrity and industry; or, if you have heard others speak in your praise, forget it all; for you cannot pray if it has any effect upon you. A man cannot pray with a good opinion of himself: all he can manage is just to mutter, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are," and that is no prayer at all. A lofty view of your own excellence will tempt you to look down with contempt upon your neighbour; and that is death to prayer. God drives out of his temple all proud prayers: he cannot endure such provocations. Thou must put thy shoe from off thy foot when thou standest on holy ground,—that same shoe which it is quite right for thee to wear when thou hast to tread upon the lion and the dragon,—that same shoe which fits thee well, and which it befits thee to wear when travelling through this great and terrible wilderness. Put off before thy God even that which thou art forced to wear before churlish men. When we see Jesus we say of him, "whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." "Lord, I am not worthy," is our cry. Like Abraham, we acknowledge that we are but dust and

ashes; less than the least of all saints; honoured by being allowed to discharge any menial function in our Master's house. See, then, that it was essential for Jacob to get into his right attitude after having disputed with Laban. It was fit that in lifting his eyes to heaven he should use the lowliest language, and by no means pretend to any desert in the presence of the thrice Holy One.

Brethren, it would ill become any of us to use the language of merit before God; for merit we have none; and if we had any, we should not need to pray. It has been well observed by an old divine, that the man who pleads his own merit does not pray, but demands his due. If I ask a man to pay me a debt, I am not a suppliant, but a plaintiff claiming my rights. The prayer of a man who thinks he is meritorious is like serving the Lord with a writ: it is not offering a request, it is issuing a demand. Merit in effect says, "Pay me that thou owest." Little will such a man get of God; for if the Lord only pays to us what he owes us, yonder place of torment will be our speedy heritage. If while living here we receive no more than we deserve, we shall be offcasts and outcasts. The meanest of mendicants obtain more than their deserts. Even life itself is a gift from the Creator; "wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" Let us be brought low as we may, we still must own that "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not." Any other attitude but that of humility would be most unbecoming and presumptuous in the presence of the Most High.

Let me add, also, that in times of great pressure upon the heart there is not

much fear of self-righteousness intruding. Jacob was greatly afraid and sore distressed; and when a man is brought into such a state the lowliest language suits him. They that are filled with bread may boast, but the hungry beg. Let the proud take heed lest while the bread is yet in their mouths the wrath of God come upon them. He that is brought to penury, he that is distressed in spirit, he that lies at death's door, is not a man to show the peacock's feather and display his finery. Then he looks about him to the loving-kindness of the Lord, and he pleads for mercy. This is his one cry—"Mercy, mercy." He finds that he cannot pray until he has come to his true standing as an undeserving one; but having reached that he has a firm foothold, for he pleads the absolute sovereignty of divine grace, and the boundless love of the divine heart as substantial arguments for mercy. I am persuaded that in our prayers we fail at times because we do not get low enough. On thy face before the throne thou shalt prevail. If thou hast any righteousness of thine own, thou shalt never have Christ's righteousness. If thou hast no sin, thou shalt have no washing in the precious blood. If thou art strong, thou shalt be left to thine own weakness. If thou art rich and increased in goods, thou shalt be sent empty away. But when thou canst truly confess thy nothingness, and lie low before God, he must hear thee. "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord." No prayers speed better in the heights than those which rise from the depths. When thou art naked the Lord will clothe thee; when thou art hungry he will feed thee; when thou art nothing he will be thine all in all; for then it is that he will win glory to himself, and his mercies will not be perverted to feed thy pride. When our

mercies magnify the Lord we shall have many of them, but when we use them for the magnifying of our own selves they will depart from us. See, then, dear friend, how necessary it is that we should approach the Lord in the attitude of humility.

I call your attention to the present tense as it is used in the text—Jacob does not say, as we might half have thought he would have said, “I was not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which thou hast made to pass before thy servant,” but he says “I am not worthy.” He does not merely allude to his unworthiness when he crossed this Jordan with a staff in his hand, a poor solitary banished man: he believes that he was unworthy then; but even now, looking upon his flocks and his herds and his great family, and all that he had done and suffered, he cries, “I am not worthy.” What, has not all God’s mercy made you worthy? Brethren, free grace is neither the child nor the father of human worthiness. If we get all the grace we ever can get we shall never be worthy of that grace; for grace as it enters where there is no worthiness, so it imparts to us no worthiness afterwards as we are judged before God. When we have done all, we are unprofitable servants; we have only done what it was our duty to have done. I cannot bear the man who, in his foolish prattle about his own perfection, talks as if he had become worthy of grace. The Lord have mercy upon such boasters, and bring them to the true moorings, so that they may own that they are not worthy. When you and I shall get to heaven, though God may say, “They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy,” yet it

will never be right for any one of us to say that we are worthy of anything that God has bestowed upon us. Our psalm must be *Non nobis Domine*:—"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake." To touch the praise which comes to us through the operations of divine grace, even with our little finger, were treason against the Most High. To assume for a moment that we deserve anything of the Lord God, is so vain-glorious, so false, so unjust that we ought to loathe the very thought of it, and cry like Jacob, "I am not worthy." Job, who had defended himself with vigour and possibly with bitterness, no sooner heard God speaking to him in the whirlwind than he cried, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Prostrate before the throne is the proper attitude of prayer: in humility is our strength for supplication.

II. Secondly, the same thought will be kept up, but put in a somewhat differing light, while we note that those considerations which make towards humility are the strength of prayer.

Observe, first, that Jacob in this prayer showed his humility by a confession of the Lord's working in all his prosperity. He says with a full heart, "All the mercies and all the truth which thou hast shewed unto thy servant." Well, but Jacob, you have immense flocks of sheep, but you earned them, and through your care they greatly increased: do you not consider that those flocks are entirely your own procuring? Surely you must see that you were highly industrious,

prudent, and careful, and thus grew wealthy? No; he takes a survey of his great estate, and he speaks of it all as mercies,—mercies which the Lord had shewed unto his servant. I do not object to books about self-made men, but I am afraid that self-made men have a great tendency to worship him that made them. It is very natural they should. But, brethren, if we are self-made, I am sure we had a very bad maker, and there must be a great many flaws in us. It would be better to be ground back to dust again, and made over anew so as to become God-made man. Listen, O proud self-made mortal! What if thou hast earned everything, who gave thee strength to earn it? What if thy success be due to thy shrewd sense, who gave thee skill and foresight? What if thou hast been frugal and industrious, yet why wast thou not left to be as prodigal as others, and to waste in riot what God bestowed on thee? Oh, sir, if thou art lifted an inch above the dunghill thou shouldst bless God for it, for it is from the dunghill thou hast come. God helps his servants while they are weak, but when they fancy themselves strong, he frequently humbles them. When we cry, “Behold this great Babylon that I have builded,” God may not cast us off, but he will cast us down. He did not cast off Nebuchadnezzar, but he did allow him to lose his reason and mingle with the beasts of the field. If we act brutishly, the Lord may allow us to become like beasts in other matters. The use of our reasoning powers is a boon of heavenly charity which should lead us to deep gratitude, but never induce in us pride as to our superior abilities. If we are out of Bedlam we ought to bless the Lord in the humblest manner. Shall we dare to glory in our talents? Shall the axe boast against him that heweth therewith? Shall the net ex-

alt itself against the fisherman who drags the sea therewith? That were, indeed, a folly, a God-provoking folly. Inasmuch as God does so much for us, we ought to be humbled by the weight of obligation which love heaps upon us.

This may also yield us a hold upon God in prayer, for now we can say, "Lord, thou hast done all this for me: it is plain that thy hand has been in all thy servant's happiness; let thy hand be with me still." Oh, self-made man, when you have made yourself, can you keep yourself and preserve yourself in being? And do you hope to get to heaven and throw up your cap and say, "Hosanna to myself"? Do you reckon upon such vainglory? If you seek your own glory you shall find no place in that city where God's glory is the all-pervading bliss of the place. So, then, that which tends to keep us humble also becomes an assistance to us in our prayer.

The next point is a consideration of God's mercies. For my part, nothing ever sinks me so low as the mercy of God, and next to that I am readily subdued by the kindness of men. When the clarion rings out for battle I will stand foot to foot with him that dare encounter me, and all the man within me is aroused to the conflict; but when all is peace and quiet, and everyone wishes me well, I wonder at their kindness, and I sink into my shoes with fear lest I should act in any way unworthily. The man who has a due sense of his own character will be laid low by words of commendation. When we remember the loving-kindness of the Lord to us we cannot but contrast our littleness with the greatness of his love, and feel a sense of self-debasement. It is written, "They shall fear

and tremble for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it.” The words are true to the letter. Take a case: Peter went a fishing; and if he had caught a few fish, his boat would have floated high on the lake; but when the Master came into the boat and told him where to throw the net so that he pulled up a multitude of fish, then the little barque began to sink. Down, down, it went, and poor Peter went down with it, till he fell at Jesus’ feet and cried, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” He was confused and overwhelmed, or he would never have asked the blessed Master to leave him: Christ’s goodness had fairly beaten him till he was afraid of his Benefactor. Know ye not what it is to be weighted down with infinite goodness, oppressed with mercy, swept away by an avalanche of love. I, at least, know what it means, and I know of no experience which has made me so little in mine own eyes.

I feel less than the least of all his mercies; I shrink, and tremble in the presence of his bounty. If even providential goodness does this, you may be sure that redeeming love will be even more effectual. Here is a proud sinner, boasting of his own righteousness; you cannot get his self-glorying out of him: but by-and-by he learns that the Son of God gave his life to redeem him, poured out his heart upon Calvary’s cross, the just for the unjust, to bring him to God; and now he is of another mind. No man could ever think that he deserved that the Son of God should die for him! If he does think so, he must be out of his mind. Dying love touches the heart, and the man cries, “Lord, I am not worthy of a drop of thy precious blood; I am not worthy of a sigh from thy sacred heart; I

am not worthy that thou shouldest have lived on earth for me, much less that thou shouldest have died for me.” A sense of that wondrous condescension which is the highest commendation of God’s love, that in due time Christ died for the ungodly, brings the man down upon his knees, dissolved by the mercies of God. Now, if there is any man here who has a good hope through grace that by-and-by he will be with God in heaven, if he will meditate upon the beatific vision, if he will picture to himself the crown upon his head, and the palm branch in his hand, and himself enjoying the everlasting hallelujah,

“Far from a world of grief and sin,
With God eternally shut in”;

why, the next thing he will do is to sit down and weep that this can be possible to him. Such a poor, useless, sinful soul as I am, can I be glorified, and has Jesus gone to prepare a place for me? Does he give me his own assurance that he will come again, and receive me to himself? Am I a joint heir with Christ, and a favoured child of God? This makes us lose ourselves in adoring gratitude. Oh, sirs, we can never open our mouth again in the way of boasting; our pride is drowned in this sea of mercy. If we had a little Saviour, and a little heaven, and little mercy we might still hang out our flags; but with a great Saviour, and great mercy, and a great heaven we can only go in like David, and sit before the Lord, and say, “Whence is this to me?” I have a dear brother in Christ who is now sore sick, the Rev. Mr. Curme, the vicar of Sandford, in Oxfordshire, who has been my dear friend for many years. He is the mirror of humility, and he

divides his name into two words, Cur me? which means, “Why me?” Often did he say, in my hearing, “Why me, Lord? Why me?” Truly I can say the same, Cur me?

“Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter where there’s room;
While thousands make a wretched choice
And rather starve than come?”

This exceeding kindness of the Lord all tends to promote humility, and at the same time to help us in prayer; for if the Lord be so greatly good, we may adopt the language of the Phœnician woman when the Master said to her, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs.” She answered, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” So we will go and ask our Lord to give us crumbs of mercy, and they will be enough for us poor dogs. God’s crumbs are bigger than man’s loaves; and if he gives us what to him may be a crumb, it shall be a meal to us. Oh, he is a great Giver! He is a glorious Giver! We are not equal to his least gift! We cannot estimate his least mercy, nor describe it fully, nor praise him for it sufficiently. His shallows are too deep for us; his mole-hill mercies overtop us; what shall we say of his mountain mercies?

Again, a comparison of our past and our present, will tend to humility and also to helpfulness in prayer. Jacob at first is described thus, “With my staff I passed over this Jordan.” He is all alone, no servant attends him; he has no goods, not

even a change of linen in a parcel, nothing but a staff to walk with; now, after a few years, here is Jacob coming back, crossing the river in the opposite direction, and he has with him two bands. He is a large grazier, with great wealth in all manner of cattle. What a change! I would have those men whom God has prospered never to be ashamed of what they used to be; they ought never to forget the staff with which they crossed this Jordan. I had a good friend who preserved the axle-tree of the truck in which he wheeled home his goods when he first came to London. It was placed over his front door, and he never blushed to tell how he came up from the country, worked hard, and made his way in the world. I like this a deal better than the affected gentility which forgets the lone half-crown which pined in solitude in their pockets when they entered this city. They are indignant if you remind them of their poor old father in the country, for they have discovered that the family is very ancient and honourable; in fact, one of their ancestors came over with the Conqueror. I have never felt any wish to be related to that set of vagabonds; but tastes differ, and there are some who think that they must be superior beings because they are descended from Norman freebooters. Nobodies suddenly swell as if they were everybody. Observe that Jacob does not say, "Years ago I was at home with my father Isaac, a man of large estate." Nor does he talk of his grandfather Abraham as a nobleman of an ancient family in Ur, of the Chaldees, who was entertained by monarchs. No, he was not so silly as to boast of aristocracy and wealth, but he frankly owns his early poverty:—"With my staff, a poor, lonely, friendless man, I crossed this Jordan, and now I am become two bands." It

humbles him to think of what he was, but at the same time it strengthens him in prayer; for in effect he pleads, "Lord, hast thou made two bands of me that Esau may have the more to destroy? Hast thou given me these children that they may fall by the sword?" So again I say, that which humbled also encouraged him: he found his strength in prayer in those very things which furnished motives for lowliness.

III. And now, as time flies, we must dwell upon the third point, still hammering the same nail on the head: true humility supplies us with arguments in prayer.

Look at the first one, "I am not worthy of all thy mercies;" nay, "I am not worthy of the least of all the many mercies which thou hast shewed unto thy servant. Thou hast kept thy word and been true to me, but it was not because I was true to thee. I am not worthy of the truth which thou hast shewn to thy servant." Is there not power in such a prayer? Is not mercy secured by a confession of unworthiness? The man whom Christ most of all commended, as far as I remember, was he who used this very language. The centurion came to Christ and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come, under my roof"; yet this was he of whom the Lord said, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." Depend on it, if you want Christ's commendation you must be lowly in your own esteem; for he never praises the proud, but he honours the humble. Since the Lord was thus gracious to him when he was unworthy, had not Jacob splendid ground to stand upon while he wrestled with God, and

cried, Deliver me from Esau, my brother, though because of the wrong I did him I am not worthy of such deliverance? We are always afraid in our time of trouble that God will deal with us according to our unworthiness; but he will not. We say to ourselves, "At last the sins of my youth have come home to me; now I shall be dealt with according to my iniquities!" But Jacob virtually said, "Lord, I never was worthy of the least thing that thou hast done for me, and all thy dealings to me are in pure grace. I stand still where I always must stand, a debtor to thy sovereign undeserved favour; and I appeal to thee,—since thou hast done all this for me, an undeserving one, I beseech thee, do yet more. I have not changed, for I am as undeserving as ever, and thou hast not changed, for thou art as good as ever, therefore still deliver thy servant." This is mighty pleading with the Most High.

Then please to notice that while Jacob thus pleads his own unworthiness he is not slow to plead God's goodness. He speaks in most expressive words, wide and full of meaning. "I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies. I cannot enumerate them, the list would be too long! It seems to me as if thou hadst given me all kinds of mercies, every sort of blessing. Thy mercy endureth for ever, and thou hast given it all to me." How he extols God as with a full mouth when he says, "All thy mercies." He does not say, "all thy mercy"—the word is in the plural—"the least of all thy mercies." For God has many bands of mercies; favours never come alone, they visit us in troops. All the trees in God's vineyard are full of boughs, and each bough is loaded with fruit. All the flowers

in God's garden bloom double, and some of them bloom sevenfold. We have not mercy only, but mercies numerous as the sand. Mercy for the past, the present, the future; mercy to temper sorrows, mercy to purify joys; mercy for our sinful things, mercy for our holy things. "All thy mercies": the expression has a vast acreage of meaning. He does not know how to express his sense of obligation except with plurals and universals: the language is so full I could never exhibit all its meaning. He seems to say to the Lord, "Because of all this great goodness, I pray thee go on to deal well with thy servant. Save me from Esau, or all thy mercies will be lost. Hast thou not in thy past love given pledge to me to keep me even to the end?" Mercy and truth all through the Bible are continually joined together, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth." "God shall send forth his mercy and his truth." These two gracious ones grasp hands in Jacob's prayer—"All thy mercies and all thy truth." Oh, brethren, if you would wrestle with God and prevail, use much these two master arguments, mercies and truth. These are two keys which will open all the treasures of God; these are two shields behind which you will be out of reach of every fiery arrow. That which made Jacob humble, also made him strong in prayer. Gratitude for mercy made him bow before God, but it also enabled him to grasp the angel with the hand of believing importunity.

Notice, next, how he says "Thy servant." A plea is hidden away in that word. Jacob might have called himself by some other name on this occasion. He might have said, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the

truth which thou hast shewed unto thy child”: it would have been true, it would not have been fitting. Suppose it had run—“Unto thy chosen,” it would have been true, but not so lowly; or “unto thy covenanted one,”—that would have been correct, but not so humble an expression as Jacob felt bound to use in this time of his distress, when the sins of his youth were brought to his mind. He seemed to say, “Lord, I am thy servant. Thou didst bid me come hither, and hither I have come because of that bidding: therefore protect me.” Surely a king will not see his servant put upon when engaged in the royal service. Jacob was in the path of duty, and God would make it the path of safety. If we make God our guide, he will be our guard. If he be our Commander he will be our Defender. He will not permit any Esau to smite with the sword one of his Jacobs. When we fully cast ourselves upon the Lord by a believing obedience, we may depend upon it that he will bear us up and bear us through. Masters are commanded to give unto their servants that which is just and equal, and we may be sure that our Master in heaven will do the same to each of us who serve him. Jacob was in danger through his service, and therefore the Lord’s honour was pledged to see him through. It may seem a small thing to be a servant, but it is a great thing to plead in the hour of need; so David used it: “Make thy face to shine upon thy servant.” “Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble.” “O thou my God, save thy servant that trusteth in thee.” These are but specimens of the ways in which men of God used their position as servants as an argument for mercy.

Jacob had yet another plea which shewed his humility, and that was the argument of facts. "With my staff," says he, "I passed over this Jordan." "This Jordan," which flowed hard by, and received the Jabbok. It brings a thousand things to his mind, to be on the old spot again. When he crossed it before he was journeying into exile, but now he is coming back as a son, to take his place with loved Rebekah and father Isaac, and he could not but feel it a great mercy that he was now going in a happier direction than before. He looked at his staff, and he remembered how in fear and trembling he had leaned upon it as he pursued his hasty, lonely march. "With this staff—that is all I had." He looks upon it, and contrasts his present condition and his two camps with that day of poverty, that hour of hasty flight. This retrospect humbled him, but it must have been a strength to him in prayer. "O God, if thou hast helped me from abject want to all this wealth, thou canst certainly preserve me in the present danger. He who has done so much is still able to bless me, and he will do so."

"Can he have taught me to trust in his name,
And thus far have brought me to bring me to shame?"

Does God mock men? Does he encourage their hope and then leave them? No, the God that begins to bless perseveres in blessing, and even to the end continues to love his chosen.

In closing, I think I discover one powerful argument here in Jacob's prayer. Did he not mean that although God had increased him so greatly, there had come with it all the greater responsibility? He had more to care for than when

he owned less. Duty had increased with increased possessions. He seems to say, "Lord, when I came this way before I had nothing, only a staff; that was all I had to take care of; and if I had lost that staff I could have found another. Then I had thy dear and kind protection, which was better to me than riches. Shall I not have it still? When I was a single man with a staff thou didst guard me, and now that I am surrounded by this numerous family of little children and servants, wilt thou not spread thy wings over me? Lord, the gifts of thy goodness increase my necessity: give me proportionately thy blessing. I could before run away and escape from my angry brother; but now the mothers and the children bind me, and I must abide with them and die with them unless thou preserve me." My brethren, at this hour I know how to use this self-same plea. To me every advance in position among men means more obligation to serve my Lord and bless my generation. I need more grace, or my failure will be the more shameful. Unworthy as we are of all this blessing, yet we dare not trifle with it, and refuse to serve our God with all our powers. The more oxen the more ploughing has to be done; the broader the fields the more laboriously must we sow; the larger the harvest the more industriously must we reap; for all this we need much more strength. If God blesses and increases us in talent, or in substance, or in any way, ought we not to conclude that the larger trust involves greater responsibility? Thus our life's task grows sterner, and more difficult, and we are driven more than ever to our God. This is our argument!—"O Lord, thou hast imposed upon me a wider service; give me more grace. In thy goodness thou hast committed more talents to him that had ten talents; wilt

Humility, the Friend of Prayer

thou not give more help to put all out to interest for thy name's sake?" Yes, brother, as God uplifts you, take care that you bow lower and lower at his feet. Consecrate even more entirely your whole being unto God. Be thankful if your pound has gained one pound; and if he doth more for you, be restless till his five pounds have gained five other pounds. Let the goodness of God, instead of becoming a cloke for your pride, or a couch for your sloth, be an incentive to your industry, a stimulus to your zeal. May it help your humility, but at the same time encourage your confidence when you draw near to God in prayer, to feel how largely you are under obligations to serve the Lord.

Come, dear friends, the Lord hath been mindful of us as a church, and he will bless us. We have obtained, through our Lord Jesus and his Spirit, blessings so large that I can say in your name, we are not worthy of the least of all these mercies. Shall we not use them to God's glory? Yes, more than ever: for we are determined to pray more, and to believe more, and to work more, and to be more full of courage and dauntless resolve that the name and the truth of Jesus shall be made known wherever our voice can be heard. As long as tongues can speak and hearts can beat, God helping us, we will live for Jesus our Lord. We are what Rutherford would call "drowned debtors"; let us be living lovers. Our ships have gone down in a sea of love till mercy rolls over our topmasts. So be it. So be it. We are swallowed up in an abyss of love. My figure describes us as sinking, but in very truth it is thus we rise by being filled with all the fulness of God. With a full heart I pray for you, beloved. God bless you, for Christ's sake.

Amen.

Concerning Prayer

Sermon on Psalm 86:6–7

Preached August 23, 1888

“Give ear, O Lord, unto my prayer; and attend to the voice of my supplications.

In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me.” — Psalm 86:6–7

When I was reading this eighty-sixth Psalm, I reminded you that the title of it is “A prayer of David.” It is rightly named “A prayer,” for it is very especially filled with supplication. There are four other psalms each called by the name Tephilah, or “prayer,” but this deserves to be distinguished from the rest and known as “the prayer of David,” even as the ninetieth Psalm is known as “the prayer of Moses.” It savours of David. The man of sincerity, of ardour, of trials, of faults, and of great heart, pleads, sobs, and trusts through all the verses of this psalm.

Note one thing about this remarkable prayer of David—it is almost entirely devoid of poetry. Men use grand, studied, rapturous, and poetical expressions in their praises; and they do well. Let God be praised with the noblest thoughts, as well as the most charming music. But when a man comes to prayer, and that

prayer is out of the depths of sorrow, he has no time or thought for poetry. He goes straight at the matter in hand, and pleads with God in downright plainness of speech. You shall notice that in happy prayers, in times of joy, men use similes, and metaphors, and tropes, and symbols, and the like; but when it comes to wrestling with God in times of agony, there is no beauty of speech: parable and poesy are laid aside. The man's language is in sackcloth and ashes; or, better still, it stands stripped for wrestling, every superfluous word being laid aside. Then the cry is heard, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." That is not poetry, but it is a great deal better. Throughout this psalm David is a plain-dealer, speaking with God in downright earnest. He has got his grip of the covenant angel, and he will not let him go. Men cannot study where to put their feet prettily when they are wrestling: they have to do the best they can to hold their ground, and fling their antagonist. In such a prayer-psalm as this, there is no studying of language: it is the pouring out of the heart as the heart boils over, the utterance of the desires as they bubble up from the soul's deeps, with an entire carelessness as to the fashion of the expression.

This ought to be a hint to you when you pray. Do not study how to arrange your words when you come before the Lord. Leave the expression to the occasion: it shall be given you in the selfsame hour what you shall speak. When your heart is like a boiling geyser, let it steam aloft in pillars of prayer. The overflowing of the soul is the best praying in the world. Prayers that are indistinct, inharmonious, broken, made up of sighs and cries, and damped with

Concerning Prayer

tears—these are the prayers which win with heaven. Prayers that you cannot pray, pleadings too big for utterance, prayers that stagger the words, and break their backs, and crush them down—these are the very best prayers that God ever hears.

So, you say, dear friends, that you cannot pray; you are so troubled that you cannot speak. Well, then, copy the beggars in the street. They must not beg, for that is contrary to law. But a man sits down, and writes on a spade, “I am starving,” and he looks as white as a sheet. What a picture of misery! He is not begging; not he; but the money comes dropping into the old hat. So, when you cannot pray, I believe that your silent display of utter inability is the best sort of praying. The blessing comes when we sit down before the Lord, and in sheer desperation expose our spiritual need.

I am not going to dwell longer upon that matter, but will simply show you what was the nature of David’s prayer. There are two things which David must have when he prays—two great things after which he strains with his whole heart. The first is personal intercourse with God. Read that sixth verse: “Give ear, O Lord, unto my prayer; and attend to the voice of my supplications.” And, in the second place, he must have personal answers from God. He is not content to pray without prayer having some practical result. So, the seventh verse is, “In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me.”

I. First, then, David in his prayer sought, beyond all things, to have personal intercourse with God. To my mind that is just the distinction between prayer before conversion, and prayer after it. I often bring that out when I am seeing enquirers who have been religiously brought up. This is the sort of dialogue we hold: "You used to pray, did you?" "Yes, sir; I could not have gone to sleep if I had not said my prayers." "Was there any difference between that kind of praying and what you now practise?" The reply usually is, "Well, sir, I do not now call the first praying at all. I used to say some good words that I had been taught, but I did not say them to anybody; now I speak to God, and I have the feeling that he is hearing what I say, and that he is present with me in my room." It is the realization of that second person as really present, the consciousness of the divine presence, which makes prayer real. What can be the good of going through a form of prayer? Can there be any charm in a set of sentences? If you are not speaking to God, what are you doing? I should say that a prayer would do as much good repeated backwards as forwards, if it is not spoken to God. We have heard of instances of grown up persons keeping on saying the prayer which their mother taught them, and asking that God would bless their father and mother, after they had been dead twenty years. All sorts of absurdities, I do not doubt, have come from the long-continued and thoughtless repetition of mere words. I am not now speaking against the use of a form of prayer, if you feel that you can pray with it; but the point is, that you must be speaking to God, and you must have personal intercourse with the invisible One, or else there is nothing whatever in your prayer, whether it be

composed on the spot, or repeated from memory.

Note well, that David, while he thus sought to have dealings with God, to come to close grips with the Lord in the act of prayer, was not presumptuously bold. He perceives the condescension of such fellowship on God's part. This may be seen in the psalm. If you have the psalm open before you, kindly begin with the first line: "Bow down thine ear, O Lord, hear me." As if he said, "Thou art so high that, unless thou shalt stoop, and stoop very low, thou canst not commune with me. But, Lord, do thus stoop. Bow down thine ear. From thy lofty throne, higher than an angel's wing can reach, stoop thou down and listen to me—poor, feeble me." This is what we must have in order to true prayer. Our prayer must climb to that great ear which hears the symphonies of the perfected, and the hallelujahs of cherubim and seraphim. Is there not something very wonderful about this, that we, who are both insignificant and unworthy, should be able to speak to him who made the stars, and upholds all things by the word of his power? Yet this is the essence of prayer: to rise, in human feebleness to talk with divine omnipotence; in nothingness to deal with all-sufficiency. You cannot venture upon this without the Mediator, Christ; but with the Mediator, what a wonderful fellowship a worm of the dust is permitted to enjoy with the infinite God! What condescension there is in a sinner communing with the thrice-holy Jehovah! Seek after this intercourse; nothing can excel it.

As you further read in this psalm, you will notice that David, in order to obtain

this high privilege, pleads his need of it. He cries, “I am poor and needy”: as much as to say, “Lord, do come to me, do let me have personal intercourse with thee, for nothing else will serve my turn. I am so poor that thou alone canst enrich me; I am so feeble, that thou alone canst sustain me. Thou hast made me: Lord, forsake not the work of thine own hands! I, thy child, am full of wants, which thou only canst supply. Oh, deal with me in great compassion!”

Virtually his plea is,

“Do not turn away thy face,
Mine’s an urgent, pressing case.”

Now, is not this very encouraging, that your claim upon God should lie in your need? You cannot say to God, “Lord, look at me, and commune with me, for I am somebody”; but you may say, “Lord, commune with me, for I am nobody.” You may not cry, “Lord, help me, for I can do much”; but you may cry, “Lord help me, for I can do nothing.” Your need is your most prevalent plea with God. When you are desiring to pray such a prayer as consists in intercourse with God, it is great condescension on his part to draw near to you; but he will condescend to your needs, and come near, because your misery needs his presence. God will not condescend to your pride, but he will bow his ear to your grief. If you set up a claim to merit, he will turn his back upon you; but if you come to him with a claim of necessity, which is merely a beggar’s claim when he asks for alms—an appeal to the charity of God’s sovereign love, then he will turn about and hear your prayer. Come, my heart, art thou not encouraged

to come near to God, seeing he hath respect to thy low estate, and pitieth thy sorrows?

Read on, and you will find that David, in order to come into intercourse with God, next pleads his personal consecration: "Preserve my soul; for I am holy." By this I understand him to mean, that he belongs to God; that he is consecrated and dedicated to the divine service. Should not the priest handle the golden bowl? Should not the priest enter into the holy place? And should not God therefore come and deal with the man who is dedicated to his use, and set apart to his service? My dear brothers and sisters, can you say to-night that you live for God? Do you recognize that you are not your own, but bought with a price? Well, there dwells an argument in that fact—a reason why the Lord God should come and take hold of you, and link himself with you. You are the vessels of his sanctuary, you are the instruments of his divine service, you are consecrated to his honour, and you may expect him therefore to touch you with his hand, to employ you in his work, and to identify himself with you in your circumstances and necessities.

Moreover, David, anxious to use every argument, pleads his trust: "Save thy servant that trusteth in thee." This is a conquering plea: "Lord, my sole reliance is on thee; come to me, then, and justify the confidence which thou thyself hast inspired." "Without faith it is impossible to please God;" but when God has given us faith, then we may be quite sure that we do please him; and if we please him, then, like Enoch, who pleased him, we shall walk with him. You

may expect, in prayer, to find God drawing near to you, if in very deed you are holding to him as the one ground of your confidence. Brethren, are you sure that you do trust in God? You answer, "Yes." Ah! then let me say to you, that you shall have a reward, and that reward will probably be that you will be taught to trust him more. That you may rise to a larger faith you will probably suffer greater troubles than you have hitherto known. The reward of service is more service. A good soldier, who has fought through many battles, and won many victories, shall be sent out to the wars next time his master's forces want a captain. You, having already trusted, shall have your faith further tried, in order that you may glorify God, and so arrive at a greater faith. Do you not see that faith largely lies in the realization that God is, and that God is near? And if you so realize God when you bow the knee in prayer, you may expect to have sweet intercourse with him. Many years ago I trusted God about many things, and I found him true; but of late I have had to take a step in advance, and trust God wholly and alone, in the teeth of all appearances. I have been called almost literally to stand alone in contending against error; and in this I have distinctly taken a nearer place in prayer with the God whom I serve in my spirit. It is very well to rest on God when you have other props, but it is best of all to rest on him when every prop is knocked away. To hang on the bare arm of God is glorious dependence; and he that has once done it, cannot think of ever going back to trust in men again. "No," says he, "I tried you once, and you failed me. I had you with me, and I trusted God in you; but now that you have turned from me, I will trust God alone without you, even though you now come back

to the man you deserted.” Dependence upon the Lord creates a glorious independence of man. Verily, it is true, “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm”; but verily, verily, it is true, “Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.” Part of that blessedness will be found in the communion which such a man enjoys with God whenever he approaches him in prayer.

Still, following the same line, notice that David pleads for God’s presence because he is God’s servant. He says here, “Save thy servant.” A servant has liberty to enquire as to his master’s will, and he is justified in asking to see his Lord. If he is employed upon his master’s business, he says, “I want orders. I wish to tell my master my difficulties, and to seek from him a supply for those necessities which his service will bring upon me.” You feel that he has a good and sufficient plea when he urges this request. Even so, if you can honestly feel that you are spending your strength in the Lord’s service, you, also, may lawfully expect that, when you draw near to him in prayer, your Master will speak to you as his servant, and he that has sent you will commune with you.

David urges yet another reason why just now he should see God, namely, that he is always in prayer: “I cry unto thee daily.” The Lord will hear your prayer, my dear hearer, to-night, if you never prayed before: I am quite sure of it. But I am still more sure that, if you have been long in the habit of prayer, it is not possible that the Father of mercies should cease to hear you. Oh, the sweet delights of constancy in prayer! The habit of prayer is charming, but the spirit

of prayer is heavenly. Be always praying. Is that possible? Some have realized it, till the whole of the engagements of the day have been ablaze with prayer. God bring us each one into that condition! Then we need not barely hope that he will have intercourse with us, for we shall be already enjoying his presence and his fellowship. Blessed are we when prayer surrounds us like an atmosphere. Then we are living in the presence of God; we are continually conversing with him. May such be our lot! May we climb to the top of the mount of communion, and may we never come down from it!

David also tells the Lord that, when he could not attain to the nearness he desired, yet he struggled after it, and strained after it. Is not this the meaning of the expression, “Rejoice the soul of thy servant, for unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul”? As much as if he said, “Lord, when I cannot climb the hill of fellowship, I labour to do so. If I cannot enter into thy presence, I groan until I do so.” We ought either to be rejoicing in the Lord, or pining after him! Ask God to make you miserable, unless his conscious presence makes you happy. Unless his love is shed abroad in your heart, to be the beginning of heaven, may you mourn his absence as a very hell to your soul! Often I pray—

“Oh, make my heart rejoice, or ache;

Resolve each doubt for me:

Lord, if it be not broken, break;

And heal it if it be.”

We want one of the two—either to commune with God, or else to sigh and cry

till we do so. We must hunger and thirst after righteousness if we are not filled. To be in a state of content without fellowship with God would be a terrible condition indeed.

Now, when a man's daily cries and inward strivings are after God, he may certainly expect that God in prayer will have intercourse with him. But again, I say, does it not seem extraordinary that you and I, insignificant persons, who can have no claim upon the great Maker of the universe, should yet be permitted to come to his courts—ay, even to come to himself through Christ Jesus, and speak with him as a man speaketh with his friend? Do not think that Abraham, when he stood before the Lord, and pleaded with him, as one man does with another, was singularly favoured above the rest of the elect family. It was a high favour, I cannot tell you how great; but such honour have all the saints. There are occasions with all his people when the Lord brings them very near, and speaks with them, and they with him, when his presence is to them as real as the all-pervading air, and they are as much rejoiced in it as in the presence of father, or wife, or child, or friend.

Still David, conscious of the great privilege which he sought, was not content without pleading the master argument of all: he pleads the great goodness of the Lord. Read it in verse five: "For thou, Lord, art good." As much as to say—If thou wert not good thou wouldst never listen to me. I am, as it were, a noxious insect which a man might far sooner crush than speak with; and yet thou art so good, my God, that instead of setting thy foot on me, thou dost lift

me up and talk with me. Who thinks of an angel talking with an emmet? That would be nothing; here is Jehovah speaking with a creature which is crushed before the moth. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant." He lets an unworthy creature tell out its heart to him, and he bows his ear, and listens as earnestly as if there were no other voice in heaven to command his thought. He gives his whole attention to the feeble cry of an unworthy one. Such an amazing fact could not happen unless it were written, "For thou, Lord, art good."

Ah! but besides that, there is sin in us. I can understand the great God forgetting our littleness, and bowing down to it; but for the holy God not to be held off by our sinfulness, this is a greater wonder still. But then the verse says he is "ready to forgive." Ah, yes! when some of us think of what we were, we must be drowned in amazement that ever we should be permitted to commune with God. Yonder is a man who could once swear at an awful rate, and now God listens to his voice in prayer. Another was a Sabbath-breaker, a neglecter of the Word of God, a despiser of every holy and pure thing, and yet he is now permitted to come into intimate friendship with the Most High. It is very marvelous, is it not?

Remember, none ever washed Christ's feet except a woman that was a sinner. Our Lord selects those that have been the greatest sinners to come into the nearest communion with himself. It may be he has raised up some sister here, who was once a tempter of others, to become a mighty intercessor in prayer for

the salvation of others. It may be that some brother here, who once was—ah! but he is ashamed to remember what he was—has now become mighty in supplication; and, like Elijah, can open or shut the windows of heaven. Oh, the strangeness of Almighty grace! Let God's name be magnified for ever and ever.

Thus I have enlarged on the first thought that, in prayer, it is vital to us really to speak with God. Before I leave it, I want to pass a question round the place. Do you, my dear hearers, all pray so as to speak with God? If not, what does it mean? If you merely repeat good words, what is the use of it? You might as well stand on a hill and talk to the moon, as kneel down and hurry through the Lord's Prayer, and then think that you have prayed. I tell you, you might better do the first than the second, for you would not insult God in that case; whereas you do insult him in every one of those holy words which you use without thought, heart, and faith. Think how you would like your own child every morning to come to you, and repeat a certain set of words without meaning anything thereby. You would say, "There, child, there, I have heard that often enough. Come to me no more with your empty noise." You would not care for vain repetitions. But when your boy or girl says, "Father, I need such a thing, please give it me," you hearken to the child's words. It may be that you have not enough of this world's goods to be very anxious that your children should come with large petitions; but if you were sufficiently rich, you would say, "That is right, dear child. Is there anything else you want? Tell me what it is. I will right gladly give you all things that are needful for you." You would wish

your child's request to be an intelligent one, and then you would gladly attend to it. If your prayer does not come from your heart it will not go to God's heart; and if it does not bring you near to God, so that you are speaking to him, you have simply wasted your breath. You have done worse than nothing, for in all likelihood you have daubed your conscience over with the notion that you have prayed, and so you have even done yourself serious harm by a flattering deceit. Oh, that God would save you from being so foolish!

II. And now I come to the second point, and I pray God to give me strength to speak upon it, and give you grace to hear it. Not at any great length, but with much earnestness, I have to remind you that David, in his prayer, desired personal answers from God. When we pray, we expect God to hear us, even as David says, "In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me."

I must not speak for all Christians in this matter; but I may speak for myself and for many dear brethren in the faith, and I must boldly say that we expect the Lord to hear our prayers; nay, we are sure that he does so. We hear our fellow-Christians say, when we tell them of instances in which God has heard our prayers, "How very extraordinary!" And we look at them, and say, "Extraordinary!" Has it become an extraordinary thing for God to be true to his own promise? I like better the remark of the good old lady, who, when her prayer was answered, was asked, "Does it not surprise you?" She said, "No, it does not surprise me; it is just like him." If any one of you had a promise from a friend

that, upon your sending in a note, he would give you such and such a thing; if you sent the request, and he fulfilled his promise, would you say, "I am greatly surprised at his action"? No, no: you believe that your friend means what he says, and you look for him to keep his word. O child of God, deal with God on those terms. The wonder was, that he should make the promise at all; but when he has made the promise, it is not wonderful that he should keep it. He expects you to ask, and he waits to give.

A promise is like a cheque. If I have a cheque, what do I do with it? Suppose I carried it about in my pocket, and said, "I do not see the use of this bit of paper, I cannot buy anything with it," a person would say, "Have you been to the bank with it?" "No, I did not think of that." "But it is payable to your order. Have you written your name on the back of it?" "No, I have not done that." "And yet you are blaming the person who gave you the cheque? The whole blame lies with yourself. Put your name at the back of the cheque, go with it to the bank, and you will get what is promised to you." A prayer should be the presentation of God's promise endorsed by your personal faith. I hear of people praying for an hour together. I am very pleased that they can; but it is seldom that I can do so, and I see no need for it. It is like a person going into a bank with a cheque, and stopping an hour. The clerks would wonder. The common-sense way is to go to the counter and show your cheque, and take your money, and go about your business. There is a style of prayer which is of this fine practical character. You so believe in God that you present the

promise, obtain the blessing, and go about your Master's business. Sometimes a flood of words only means excusing unbelief. The prayers of the Bible are nearly all short ones: they are short and strong. The exceptions are found in places of peculiar difficulty, like that of Jacob, when he cried,

“With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.”

As a general rule, faith presents its prayer, gets its answer, and goes on its way rejoicing.

We expect our God to answer our prayer all the more surely when we are in trouble. David so expected: “In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me.” Trouble is sent to make us pray. When we pray, the prayer becomes the solace of our trouble; and when the prayer is heard, it becomes the salvation out of our trouble. Many of you would be out of trouble quickly if you prayed. “Sir, I have been doing my best.” And what is your best? A better thing than your best is to wait upon the Lord. Often and often trial has to rap our fingers to make us let go our harmful confidences, and turn to the Lord. With our vain-confidence we are like a madman with a razor: the more we grasp it, the more it cuts us. Drop the deadly self-trust; trust in God, and look to him, and your deliverance will speedily come to you. If you should have no answer at any other time, you will assuredly be heard in the time of trouble if you trust in the Lord.

Now, if we expect God to answer us, we do so on very good grounds. There are certain natural reasons. I was turning over in my mind the question, “Why do I pray? Why have I any reason to believe that God hears me?” And I thought to myself, “Well, on natural grounds I have a right to believe that God will hear prayer, or otherwise why is prayer commanded?” The Scripture is full of prayer. It is an institution of the old covenant, as well as of the new, and yet it is a piece of folly if God does not hear it.

“Oh,” says somebody, “but it does you good to pray, even though there may be no such a thing as God’s hearing prayer.” It might do an idiot good to pray when he knew there was no hearing of prayer on God’s part; but not being an idiot myself, I could not perform such a stupid exercise. I would as soon sit on a five-barred gate, and whistle to the hills as offer prayer if I did not hope to be heard. If there is no God that hears prayer, I shall not pray, nor will any other rational being. Show prayer to be unheard of God, and you have shown it to be a folly. Show prayer to be a folly, and who will pursue it? Does God invite us to pray? Does he command us to pray? Are there many injunctions of this kind—“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint”; “Pray without ceasing”; and so on? Then prayer must be heard of God. How would it be with you if you said to a number of poor people, “Come round to my gate to-morrow, and I will relieve your distresses”? Would you not intend to relieve their distresses when you said so? I cannot imagine that you would be so diabolical as to keep on saying, “Come to my house. Whenever you are hungry, come to my table.

Whenever you need clothes, come to my door, and ask”; all the while saying to yourself, “But I do not intend to give you anything. You may come, and ring the bell as long as you like; it will be fine exercise for you, but I shall take no notice of your appeals.” It would be a most shocking and disgraceful mockery of misery. God will not serve us in that fashion. The very institution of prayer gives us the assurance that God intends to hear and to answer.

Observe, again, that prayer has been universal among all the saints. There have been saints of different moulds and temperaments, but they have all prayed. Some of them have been, like Heman and Asaph, masters of song, and they have prayed; others could not sing, but they have all prayed. To-day you may meet with all sorts of Christians, holding many kinds of doctrines, but they all pray; and what is most curious, they all pray alike, too. You can scarcely detect a difference when they pray.

“The saints in prayer appear as one,
In word, and deed, and mind.”

A man may preach doctrine contrary to the grace of God; but get him on his knees, and he prays to God for grace, as heartily as John Calvin himself. We are one at the mercy-seat. Whatever doctrinal views we may hold, when we plead with the living God, in the power of the Holy Ghost, we are poured into one mould. How is this? If, all the ages through, saints have prayed, have they all been fools? Have they all exercised themselves in a way that was utterly useless and absurd? Do not believe it!

Concerning Prayer

Note again, that the more godly and holy a man is, the more he prays. You never heard yet that a man began to backslide, or that a sober man became a drunkard, through praying too much. Did you ever hear of a person becoming unkind to his wife, ungenerous to the poor, negligent of public worship, or guilty of grievous sin, through being too much in prayer? No; the case is the reverse. As the man loves God more, and becomes more like Christ, he takes greater delight in prayer. That cannot be an idle and useless exercise which the best of men have followed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If there be a possibility of error, we err in the best of company: for yonder comes the Lord Jesus himself from his lonely haunt, with the burrs of the heather from the mountain-side sticking to his garments. He has spent all night in agonizing prayer. He will not open his mouth to preach to the multitude till first of all he has received a new anointing from his Father's hand in secret fellowship with heaven. Our Master and his best disciples have abounded in prayer.

Well, dear friends, these are natural reasons; and there are a great many more, if you will think them out.

But, if you turn to Scriptural reasons, why was there a mercy-seat if there is nothing in prayer? Why does the throne of grace still remain as a permanent institution, of which Paul says, "Let us come boldly to the throne of grace," unless there is a reality in it? Tell me, why is Christ the way to the mercy-seat? Why is he himself the great Intercessor and Mediator, if there is nothing in prayer? The Holy Ghost helpeth our infirmities in prayer; surely there must be

something effectual where he lends his aid. What! is he, after all, helping us to do a thing which produces no result?—helping us to present petitions which will never reach the ear of God? Tell that to the philosophers; we are not so credulous.

For, once more, we know that God hears prayer, because we have met with multitudes of his people who can tell of answers to prayer. What is more, we are ourselves among that number. Looking back on my diary, I find it studded with answers to prayer. Often when I have talked with friends of an evening, telling them a few cases in which God has heard my cries in time of need, they have said, “Have you written these down?” “Well, no, I cannot say that I have.” “Oh,” says one, “pray do not let such facts be lost.” I have to reply that many cases of answered prayer are quite beyond the belief of average people. I know them to be true, but I do not expect others to believe my tale. When William Huntington wrote his “Bank of Faith,” some people called it a “Bank of Nonsense.” I could write twenty “Banks of Faith,” and every word should be as sure as an honest man could write; but the only result would be, that people would say, “Oh, well, you know, that is the result of the good man’s fanaticism.” The moment that the moderns do not like to believe a thing, they call it fanatical. If we were put into a witness-box to-morrow, our testimony would have weight with the court; but yet, the moment we talk about God’s hearing prayer, oh, then we are romancing, and our witness is not to be received. But, brothers and sisters, we bear a true witness, whether men receive it or not. I solemnly declare

that no fact is better proved by my experience than this, that the Lord hears the prayers of his believing people. You, each one, will know for himself, or herself, whether there is a God that hears prayer. Does he answer your petitions? Brethren, you are sure that he does, and at the asking of the question you bow your heads and say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." My dear brother, William Olney, sits here among us: have we not prayed him twice back from the gates of the grave? He lives as an instance of answered prayer. There is not a stone or a beam about this great Tabernacle but has been an answer to our prayers. In days when, as a congregation, we were few and feeble, we ventured on the serious enterprise of building this great house, and we prayed it up stone by stone, to the praise and glory of God. If we who worship beneath this dome did not believe in prayer, the stones out of the wall would cry out against us.

But I hear a voice saying, "There are so many difficulties about prayer being heard." Are there? The farther I go in this life, the more difficulties I am informed of, though I should not have discovered them myself. I am assured that there are great difficulties about eating, breathing, and sleeping. As to the very air, I do not know what it is not full of: it teems with the seeds of disease, and the wonder is that we live at all. But we do live, do we not? and we shall eat our suppers to-night despite the difficulties in connection with food. As to the difficulties connected with prayer, they are altogether philosophical difficulties, and by no means practical ones. If you are philosophers, you may weary your heads about them; but if you are simple, practical people, you may pray, and

receive the blessing.

“Ay, but the power of prayer with God supposes that God may change.” Well, our doing anything supposes that, but it is a mere supposition. Your even walking home to-night might raise a difficulty as to the decrees of God; but it is a non-existent difficulty. After you have entertained it as long as you like, you will find that you have entertained a shadow. Suppose that you leave off supposing, and just do as God tells you, and see whether it does not work. When you find that it does practically work, let other people enjoy the difficulties. I do not eat meat; but if I did, I should always feel quite satisfied to let my dogs have the bones: the meat would satisfy me. If there are any difficulties about prayer, the dogs may have them—I mean the philosophers; but as for us, simple Christian people, we are satisfied with the meat of the precious fact that prayer brings every blessing from above. We pray, and God hears us, and that is enough for us. Our God does not change his will, and yet he wills a change in answer to prayer.

I have done when I have made this further remark. I cannot expect any man to believe that he can commune with God, or that God will in very deed hear his prayer, and grant him his desire, unless he has been led personally to try it. But if, by the Spirit of God, he has been led to seek after God, and to draw near to God, I shall have no need of further arguments with him. That man has now entered upon a new life, in which he will be capable of understanding new things. Until he does enter upon that life, he is spiritually deaf, and blind; and

Concerning Prayer

what can he know about spiritual realities? Our Lord has said to us, "Ye must be born again." When we are born again, then the life within turns toward the life of God, and has fellowship with God, and God answers to it, and the desire of the godly one is granted. Oh! the honour of communion with God! Happy beings who enjoy it! How unspeakable the privilege of pouring out your hearts before God! Delight yourselves therein before you fall asleep this night. Oh, the holy quietude which it brings! You have not an ounce of care to carry, because all your burden is, in prayer and supplication, laid on him that careth for you! Oh, the love that dwells in the heart of the man who draws near to God in prayer! You cannot love God at a distance. You must draw nearer, and nearer, or love will not rest. As when one comes into the sunshine, he feels the warmth, so when we come nearer to God we have more joy in him. Keep near to God; abound in prayer; let your supplications be instant and constant; and you will be sure that the Father himself hears your cries!

Oh, that some here who never prayed would begin at once! Trust in Jesus, the Intercessor, and let that trust show itself by pleading the merit of his blood in earnest prayer. Oh, that you would now begin that holy life of prayer which shall lead up to the eternal life of praise at the right hand of God. Amen.

Pray, Always Pray

Sermon on John 16:26–27

Preached November 3, 1878

“At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.” — John 16:26–27

The present time, in which we live, is highly favoured, and ought to be highly valued. Let us never grudge the patriarchs their communion with God, when sometimes he spake personally into their ear, or revealed himself visibly to them. Blessed are our eyes, for they see, and our ears, for they hear the things which kings and prophets waited for in vain. That which was denied to them has been revealed to us; and we are, therefore, peculiarly privileged. Though John the Baptist, living on the very verge of the gospel dispensation, was the greatest mere man who had been born of woman, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he; and we are now living in that kingdom of heaven, although there is, at present, much to mar the glory of the reign of Christ on earth. Be grateful, therefore, O ye sons of men who are also sons of God, be grateful that you live in this truly golden age, for, with all its sorrows, and all its

shortcomings, it is an age of great mercy and of high privilege!

I venture even to set the present period above that brave age in which Jesus dwelt here among men. We are very apt to look upon that time as being the sunniest era which the Church of God ever enjoyed; yet it was not so. The dispensation of the Holy Ghost is of a higher order than the dispensation of the humiliated and suffering Saviour. That was the day of the Church's childhood, when her Lord instructed her by pictures, and taught her letters, but kept back many of the grander and deeper truths because she was not able to bear them then. Now, the Holy Spirit has been given to lead us into all truth, and he takes of the things of Christ, and shows them unto us. It was but the twilight of the gospel dispensation, or only its dawning hour when our Lord was here. True, he is the Sun of righteousness, but his disciples saw only a little of his glory, for their eyes were but slightly opened, and they had less light from him than we have though the blessedness of his corporeal personal presence is denied to us.

At that time, there was much backwardness in prayer even among the apostles of Christ. Just before our text, we read that Christ said to them, "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name." We read of our Master praying;—

"Cold mountains, and the midnight air
Witness'd the fervour of his prayer;"—

but we read very little about the prayers of the disciples. They did once get as far as to say, "Lord, teach us to pray;" but very little did any of them seem to

know then of the power of prayer. Now, the Lord has not only taught us to pray, but he has also given us the Holy Spirit to help our infirmities, and to make intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. In many other respects, upon which I need not now dwell in detail, we are far in advance of the highly-favoured twelve who remained with Christ, or the privileged seventy who were sent forth by him to teach, and to preach, and to heal the sick. It is a blessed period in which we live, and I want you, who are believers in Christ, to prize your privileges. If you have been lamenting your lot, I want you to feel that your birth could scarcely have been at a more auspicious period, and that, to be living in the time when the Spirit of God has been given, and his sacred influences are exercising their power in the Church, is a high honour which God has vouchsafed to you.

I am led to make these remarks because our text commences with the words “At that day,” which is the present period, the time when Christ has returned to his Father’s right hand after his terrible death-pangs on Calvary, the period when we are no longer full of sorrow because he died, but our sorrow is turned into joy on his account, and on our own, too. It is “at that day” that the blessings I am going to speak of are given to us, so that we are even now enjoying them, or ought to be doing so.

Taking the text as referring to the period in which we live, I notice, first, the believer’s daily exercise: “At that day ye shall ask in my name.” Secondly, we have the believer’s privileged position: “I say not unto you, that I will pray the

Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.” Then, thirdly, I shall try practically to suggest what should be the believer’s natural conclusion from the blessed truth which is here revealed to us.

I. First, then, let us notice the believer’s daily exercise. It is, to ask, and to continue asking: “At that day ye shall ask in my name.”

It is a very simple matter to ask; but how gracious it is, on the part of God, to append to such a simple thing as asking the promise of giving! He has not said, “Deserve the blessing,” but “Ask for it.” He does not say, “Purchase it,” but “Ask for it;” not “Labour until you at length procure it by your own toil,” but “Ask for it.” Brethren, if heaven is to be had for the asking, and if all that is needed to bring us to heaven is to be had for the asking, who would not ask? Whatever else a believer may fail to do, he should never fail, surely, in asking. If we have never asked God for anything at all, we may be quite sure that we were never converted. A prayerless soul must be a Christless soul; but if we are really in Christ, we must have practised the sacred art of asking, and we ought to go on continually with it. If there be any difficulty in our minds, let us ask, for the Holy Spirit can solve it. If there be any necessity in our homes, let us ask, for our Heavenly Father can supply it. If there be any weakness in our spiritual nature, let us ask, for God can strengthen us. If there be any longing desire of our soul, which even leads to great heaviness of spirit, let us ask, for our desire can be granted if it is a right one, and our heaviness can be removed. To ask, my

brethren, is very simple; and let the Lord's name be praised that, usually, the best asking is that which is the most simple.

To ask anything of God, does not require that you should use a set form of words. The children in your family do not read a collect to you when they want any favour at your hands; they state their need in childish language, you understand them, and grant their request if it is a right and proper one, and compliance with it is within your power. Act in just the same way with your God. We are often far too careful about picking and choosing the phrases that we use in prayer. Do you think that God is pleased with a display of oratory, or that he takes notice of your elocution when you come to the throne of grace? It may suit a teacher of English composition to criticize your sentences, but God thinks much more of your desires than of the words in which they are expressed. It may be natural for a scholar to consider the accuracy of your terms, but God specially marks the earnestness of your soul. There is no other place where the heart should be so free as before the mercy-seat. There, thou mayest talk out thy very soul, for that is the best prayer that thou canst present. Ask not for what some tell thee that thou shouldst ask, but for that which thou feelest the need of,—that which the Holy Ghost has made thee to hunger and to thirst for; ask thou for that.

Ask always; thy whole life should be spent in asking. When the morning breaketh, ask for the mercy needed during the day; and when the day has closed its eyelids, and thou goest to thy bed, ask for the protection and rest that thou

needest during the night. Ask when thy voice can be heard only by thy God in secret, and ask when thy tongue may not be able to move, but only thy spirit whispers into the ear of God. Never hesitate to ask because of the greatness of the blessing thou desirest. The Lord is a great God though thou art so little, and he delights to give great things to those who ask them at his hands. And be not backward to ask because of thine unworthiness. Thou never canst have any worthiness of thine own; therefore, if a sense of unworthiness would check thy prayer now, it might always hinder thee from praying; yet the Lord bids thee pray, so it must be right for thee to pray. Ask when thou hast fought for something, and canst not win it; ask when thou hast toiled for it, and canst not gain it, ask and have it. Come before thy God in all the rags of thy sinfulness and conscious ill-desert, and ask, for that is all thou hast to do. "Ask, and ye shall receive," is the message that shines out, with heavenly radiance, over the mercy-seat. Read it, and obey it; open thy mouth wide, for God will fill it.

Our Lord told his disciples that, in addition to asking, they were to ask in his name: "At that day ye shall ask in my name." That is the most delightful way of asking. We often say, at the end of our petition, "Lord, grant it, for Jesus' sake," and that is a very proper plea. It means, "Because of what Jesus did, wilt thou not deal well with me? I have done nothing that can ensure a favourable answer to my supplication, but wilt thou not give it because Jesus deserves it? For his sake, hear me, O Lord!" That is a good way to pray, but it is a still better way if you can use the name of Christ, and ask in his name. You know what

you do at a shop, when another bids you go there, and purchase goods in his name, and set them down to his account. Or suppose that you have authorized your servant to go to a certain shop, and you have said to the trader, "Whatever he comes for in my name, let him have it." Perhaps he has no money of his own; possibly, he is a very poor person; but, armed with your authority, he can get from that trader as much as you could get if you were yourself to go. His warrant carries him as far as your name has weight. So, Jesus says to us, "Use my name when you are speaking to my Father." "And how far may I go in using that name?" As far as Christ himself can go; whatever power there is about the name of Jesus, whatever influence it has in his Father's heart, that power and that influence we are permitted to exercise in prayer. My Lord, I used to ask thee to do certain things for thy Son's sake; but now I come with a still stronger plea, for he has bidden me use his name, and ask that thou wilt do for me even as thou wouldst do for him. My Father, if thou canst refuse thy Firstborn, then thou canst refuse me; and if I am asking for such a thing as he could not ask for, neither would I wish to ask for it, and I desire to make this the gauge of my prayer, both for its extent and for its acceptance. If he would have refused to pray it, so also would I; and if that which I ask at thy hands seems a blessing to me, but would not have seemed a blessing to him, I would say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt," that I may still be able to use his name. No right-minded man would use another person's name improperly; and if you are asking of God something for yourself merely with a selfish motive, you must not defile that blessed name of his by linking it with such a prayer as that. But, using his

name aright, you have great liberty, and a high privilege, in being permitted to come and pray, not only for the sake of Jesus, but also in the name of Jesus.

Our text tells us that this asking in the name of Christ is to be the constant exercise of Christians “in that day.” What is that day? According to the context, it is, the time of persecution: “They shall put you out of the synagogues, yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” At such a time as that, Christians are sure to pray. We have not, perhaps, in England, at the present day, a tenth of the prayer that used to go up in the dark days of Queen Mary. Ah, beloved! when brethren are in prison for the faith,—when they are likely to be laid on the rack,—when the little church has to be called together because the pastor is to be burned to-morrow morning, and the young people all want to be up early to stand round, and to cheer him with their weeping eyes if they cannot do anything more for him, and when the youngsters come home, and their fathers ask them why they went there, they say they went to learn the way if they should have to die in the same manner themselves,—ah! then, prayer is a reality. And when they gather together in out-of-the-way corners and in lonely caverns, when they dare not raise their voices lest the watchers should hear them, and take them to prison,—yet, in solemn undertones, they cry unto the Lord, it is real prayer then, it is that effectual fervent prayer of righteous men that availeth much. Then it is, if ever, that the Church of God does really pray. If any of you are, in your little way, at all subject to persecution, be sure to pray, for our Saviour said, “At that day ye

shall ask in my name.” Let that persecution be a sort of reminder to you of your duty and privilege. If you have been at all slack in prayer, and somebody treats you ill for Christ’s sake, say, “Now is the time for me to pray more earnestly than ever, for Jesus said, specially of the time of persecution, ‘At that day ye shall ask in my name.’ ”

If you read further on in the chapter, you will find that “that day” is when the Spirit of God has instructed the followers of Christ. “In that day,” said he, “ye shall ask me nothing.” That is, “You shall put no questions to me, for the Spirit of God shall instruct you. He shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.” Now, the more light and understanding a man gets from heaven, the more he will pray. If there is any so-called light that makes a man lax in prayer, that light is darkness. Some time ago, when there were a great many people about who professed to be perfect, I heard of one who had grown so conceited that she said her mind was so conformed to the will of God that there was no need for her to pray because her mind and God’s mind were so perfectly at one. Yes; and when a person imagines that he is so good that he need not pray, he had better begin by crying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” I daresay you have heard of those people who climb so high up the ladder that they fall down the other side; and that is exactly what people do when they begin to carry any truth to extravagance, and push a point beyond its legitimate issues. That which makes thee cease to pray is of the devil, so say to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” The very suggestion that you can do without prayer

must have come from beneath, it cannot have come from above. The more the Spirit of God teaches a Christian the things of God, the more it makes him ask in the name of Jesus Christ.

Once again, that day is a day of great joy: “your sorrow shall be turned into joy.... At that day ye shall ask in my name.” Perhaps someone says, “But sorrowful times are good times for prayer, are they not?” I grant you that they are; but, oh! when sorrow is turned to joy, and doubt gives place to faith, and hope herself becomes eclipsed by a measure of delightful fruition, then is the time to pray. When thy heart is ready to dance, and thy mouth is full of sweetness, then draw nigh to God in prayer. When he has given thee most, then ask all the more from him. Suppose this is a good day with thee,—a day of glad tidings; then seize such a good opportunity to pray. There is a high tide in thine affairs just now; then take thou it at the flood, that it may lead thee on to spiritual wealth, and wash thee up high, and nigh to thy God. O beloved, if ever in your lives you pray, let it be especially when the Lord reveals himself so graciously to you that your heart is glad, and your glory rejoiceth! Let that be a day of asking in the name of Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, I wish I could speak even more impressively upon this most delightful theme; for, if there is one point, more than others, that touches the very vitals of Christian existence, it is this prayerfulness,—this asking of God and receiving from him in answer to our earnest believing supplication. Is prayer a reality with you, dear friends, or is it a mere mockery? Is it a sort of re-

ligious rite that you feel bound to perform, or has it become as essential to your spiritual being as breathing is to your natural being? Is it now to you a matter of course that you should pray? Is it as natural for you to ask of your Father who is in heaven as it is for your little children to ask of you who are fathers on earth? I feel that it must be so with me;—not praying merely because I ought, but because I love the sacred exercise,—not praying at a certain hour because it is the set time for prayer, but praying because I want to pray, praying because I must pray. A man scarcely needs to be reminded that he must breathe. It is essential to his very life that he should breathe, and it is essential to our spiritual life that we should pray. I never thought it necessary to prepare a discourse to exhort you to eat, neither ought it to be necessary to exhort Christians to pray. It should be to you an instinct of your new nature, as natural to your spiritual being as a good appetite is to a man in health. There should be a holy hunger and thirst to pray, and the soul never prays so well as when it is reminded, not by the hour of the day or night, but by its real needs; and when it resorts to its place of private prayer, not because it thinks it ought, but because it feels that it must, and shall, and will go there, and is delighted at the privilege of having communion with its God.

My object, in the second part of my sermon, will be to stir you up to such a feeling as that, so I will say no more upon this first portion of my theme, the believer's daily exercise: "At that day ye shall ask in my name."

II. Well now, secondly, we have the believer's privileged position with

regard to praying.

Believers ought to be abundant in prayer because, first, they have the Holy Spirit to prompt them. Is that in the text? Yes; or, at least, it is implied in the text, for Jesus says, "At that day ye shall ask." But how could he affirm so positively that we should ask unless he intended to send his Spirit to lead us to ask? The promise is itself a guarantee that he will see it fulfilled. So we have the Holy Spirit to prompt us to pray; and not merely to prompt us to pray, but to tell us for what we should pray, "for we know not what we should pray for as we ought" until he teaches us. Someone perhaps asks, "Why do you pray, when everything is settled by the divine decree?" It is true that everything is so settled, and it is for that very reason that we do pray. The Spirit of God leads us to desire exactly what God has decreed, and though we cannot open and read the book of his decrees, the Holy Spirit can read that book, so he guides us to pray in accordance with its secret records, and he also maketh intercession for us "according to the will of God." "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God;" and what the Spirit of God knoweth to be the mind of God, he makes to be also our mind, and thus we also pray "according to the will of God." A true prayer is the echo of the eternal purpose. We say that "coming events cast their shadows before them;" and our prayers are the shadows before God's mercies. Who would not pray when prayer becomes to him a consecrated mystery in which one Person of the Sacred Trinity operates

upon his mind, and excites his desires? It ought to lead us to be much in prayer because our prayers are prompted by the Holy Spirit.

“Pray, always pray; the Holy Spirit pleads
Within thee all thy daily, hourly needs.”

Next, we ought to be much in prayer because we have the high honour of being allowed to use the name of Christ in our prayers: “At that day ye shall ask in my name.” If a king were to entrust us with his seal, or if that king had the power to make money as fast as he willed it simply by his signature, and he allowed us the use of that signature, I do not think many of us would remain poor. If he would only give us that privilege, we would take care to make considerable drafts before we had finished with his seal and signature. But our Lord Jesus does, as it were, take off the signet ring from his finger, and he says to his servants, “Ask in my name;” and, therefore, we issue drafts upon the infinity of God. There is no limit put to our requests except this, “All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” Oh, how this ought to encourage us to pray! Shall we allow such a golden opportunity as this to pass by unused? O believers, with the Holy Spirit to tell you what to ask, and the Lord Jesus to endorse your asking, will you not pray without ceasing?

But, beyond all this, there is the great encouragement to constant prayer which we derive from the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ is continually making intercession for us. Our poor prayers are blotted, and blurred, and stained with sin, but our great High Priest sprinkles them with his own most precious blood,

and so purifies them, and then, with his own dear hand, he lays them before the mercy-seat, and for his sake they are sure to be accepted. “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;” and he is always pleading for us. So, as we have a Divine Intercessor, within the veil, who never forgets to present our prayers before his Father’s throne of grace, how boldly ought we to come to the mercy-seat, and what large things we ought to ask of God in Christ’s name!

Our text, however, seems to me to suggest that our Lord Jesus wished to prevent his disciples from making a mistake concerning his intercession; so, on this occasion, he said, “I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you.” There was no need that he should say that just then, for he had said it a great many times already, so needed not to repeat it. But, at that time, he seemed as if he meant to say, “I do not want you to exaggerate even my intercession at my Father’s expense. I will intercede for you, but you must not imagine that I do so because my Father is unwilling to hear you when you come to him in my name. You must not get into your minds the strange idea that, by my pleading, I shall make my Father willing to bless you, ‘for, the Father himself loveth you.’” This brings us to a very precious point, which is, that we should be greatly encouraged to pray, not only because the Spirit prompts us, and the Son intercedes for us, but because the Father himself loveth us. Oh, how we ought to pray now that we have the ear—nay, more, the very heart of the King! To have such a Teacher as the Holy Spirit, and such an Advocate as our Lord

Jesus Christ, ought to be a great encouragement to us; but to have the heart of the King himself, is best of all: “The Father himself loveth you.” You know, dear brethren and sisters, that shallow thinkers often make mistakes concerning the Father and the Son in relation to the atonement. They think that the atonement of Christ was necessary to make the Father love his people, whereas the truth is, that the Father, because he loved his people, gave his only-begotten Son to make propitiation for them. God was always love, as truly love as the Son was and is; we must make no mistake about that matter. So, concerning Christ’s intercession, there is a tendency, in certain quarters, to fall into the error of supposing that the Father is difficult to please, and that Jesus must pacify him before he will grant our requests. It is not so, “for the Father himself loveth you.” I think that, when a sinner is coming to God, he had better at first fix his eye wholly upon Jesus the Mediator; but as for those of us who have believed in Jesus, we are forgiven, we are in a totally different position from that in which the unbeliever stands. We have had our sins blotted out, and we may come to the Father himself,—of course, always coming through the Mediator,—yet all the while rejoicing in his gracious assurance, “The Father himself loveth you.”

“Pray, always pray, though weary, faint, and lone,
Prayer nestles by the Father’s sheltering throne.”

The text says that the Father loves us because we have loved Jesus, and have believed that he came forth from the Father. Do not make the mistake of imagining that the love of God to us is caused by our love to Christ. Oh,

no! “We love him because he first loved us.” The first love of God is a love of benevolence,—a love of compassion,—a love towards the unworthy and the undeserving. God, out of love, forgives us, and saves us; but there is another love, besides that, which we must never forget. When he has brought us to love his dear Son,—when he has brought us to trust in him because we believe that he came forth from the Father, then the Father has a love of complacency and delight toward us. You can easily see the difference between the two kinds of love, for it is often illustrated in human history. A man finds a poor child in the street, and he takes pity upon it, and carries it into his house, and clothes it, and cares for it. That is one kind of love,—the love of benevolence; but suppose that child should develop into a beautiful boy, or a lovely girl, who, with engaging manners, should ingratiate himself or herself into the very heart of the one who was so kind to it in earlier days, then there springs up a second sort of love. The man says, “I loved that child when I picked it up, a bundle of rags, and filth, and misery; but look at its loveliness now. See how this little one takes to the rest of the family,—see how grateful it is,—how it loves me; I cannot help loving it more than I did at the first.” That is another kind of love altogether, and the Lord has just such a love as that, only of an infinitely higher kind, toward all who trust and love his Son. You know that the Father loves Jesus Christ so much that, when he sees that you also love him, he loves you all the more for that reason. He had unbounded confidence in Christ when he sent him into the world; and when he sees that you also have confidence in him, he loves you, too, for you two are agreed upon that matter. Nothing binds

people together so much as a common love to the same object. If there is some one person who is dear to both, there is at once a tie between the two. How often a husband's heart is held firmly by the wife because, between the two, there is a little one who is dear to both of them! Perhaps, in some foolish fit of anger, they might have parted from one another, but their child is the bond that holds them together. And between us and our God, in a sense infinitely above my poor comparison, there is a wonderful union because he confides in Jesus, and we confide in him, too; he loves Jesus, and we love him, too; and now, because of this, our Saviour says to us, "The Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God."

I cannot explain this marvellous mystery, but I want you who know that you do love Christ, and believe that he came forth from God, just to open your whole souls, and try to take in this sublime truth, "The Father himself loveth you." Not "pities you"; not "promises to help you"; not "considers you"; but, "the Father himself loveth you." It is no use attempting to explain what love is; you must feel it if you would realize what it is. You did not doubt your mother's words when you were little, and she caught you in her arms, and said, "I love you." You believed her, you rested in her love, and you returned it as far as you could. So the great God says to you, "I love you because you love my Son. There are many faults and failings in you, but you love my Son, so I love you." Did you not say, just now, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee"? You said that to the Lord Jesus; and, because it is true, the Father

himself loves you. I recollect when one of the sweet passages in Solomon's Song came home to my heart with absolutely ravishing power,—it seemed to carry me right out of myself,—it was that verse in which the Heavenly Bridegroom says to his spouse, "Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee." That is what the Lord says to his people as he sees them in Christ. When he perceives that they love Christ, he calls them his Hephzibah, that is, "my delight is in her." "The Father himself loveth you." This little sentence is not so much a theme for preaching as for quiet meditation. You want to get alone into your chamber, and to sit down, and just ring that silver bell again, and again, and again, "the Father himself loveth you." Loveth me? Why should he love me? How can he love me? Yet Jesus knows; and, as he says it is so, then so it is, glory be to his holy name!

III. I have little time left to speak of the believer's natural conclusion, which he is to draw from these words of Christ.

He says, first, "If all this is true, then, what power I have! What power I have, at the mercy-seat, with the Spirit to prompt me, Christ to plead for me, and the Father himself smiling at me as I come, and saying to me, 'Come and welcome, for I love thee; none can be more welcome than thou art. Come, my child, ask what thou wilt, and it shall be done unto thee.'" But, beloved, have you ever really believed that you have this power? Have you not asked and hoped when you ought to have asked and believed? Have you not asked as if there was just a bare possibility that you might be heard? Have you not prayed as though your

many pleadings and your abundant tears might move the hard heart of God? Has not your supplication often been presented on some such theory as that? If so, I hope that, in future, you will be able to rise to the believer's true position, and say, "I am God's child, and he loves me; and coming to him, through Jesus Christ his Son, and moved by his Holy Spirit, I will ask of him whatsoever I need, for I know that I shall receive that which I have asked of him in the name of Jesus, and for his sake."

If you ever realize that you have that power, (and I earnestly hope that you will,) take care that you use it. Use it for your children, use it for all your relatives, use it for any of the seat-holders, who sit near you, and are unconverted. Pick them out, and pray for them by name, and be not content till you hear that they are saved. May I ask you also to use this power in prayer on my behalf? I shall be so rich if you, who have power with God, will pray for me. My preaching will be poverty-stricken if you cease to pray for me. You who can pray, I beg you to plead with God for his Church, for his truth, for his cause on the earth. These are dark days, but you can bring on a spiritual summertime if you know how to pray that effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man that availeth much. Truth seems for a while to be suffering defeat, and the battle for the right waxes hotter and fiercer; but the banner of victory will soon float in the breeze if you know how to pray aright. The praying legion is the conquering legion. Bring to the front the men and women who can pray, and the devil will tremble and flee, for well he knows that those who are mighty with God

are mightier even than he is. The history of the future depends very largely upon the prayers of the present. If you and other believers restrain prayer, you may help to bring on long, dark, chilly winters for the Church of God; but if you and they are aroused to go up, as Elijah went to Carmel, and if, with your face between your knees, you cry mightily unto the Lord God of Israel, surely, as the Lord liveth, you shall see the skies covered with clouds, and there shall be “a sound of abundance of rain.” I speak reverently, yet truthfully, when I say that the keys of heaven swing at the girdle of the man who knows how to pray. I mean not commonplace praying, such as some practise, but such prayer as I have been speaking of,—prompted by the Spirit of God,—first purified and then presented by the Saviour,—and offered by a man who knows that the Father himself loveth him. I am awestruck as I think of the tremendous power of which prayer is capable. It is not omnipotent, yet it commands omnipotence. It is not omniscient, yet prayer is as the very eye of God. He who can truly pray has first read the heart of God, and then spoken out what is there. Prayer overcometh the Eternal; what more can I say of it? When Israel sinned against the Lord, Moses pleaded for the guilty nation even after God had said to him, “Let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation;” and the prevailing prayer won the day, for “the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.” May God teach you, who are loved of the Father because you love the Son, to pray such a prayer as that of Moses!

In a specially-careful manner, my brethren in Christ, we ought to mention the answers to prayer which we have received. It would not be prudent, proper, or even possible, to mention all of them; for there are love-passages in prayer between Christ and the soul, which never must be told, unless it be in choice company, and on rare occasions. Some of our communings with the Lord Jesus are too sacred, too spiritual, too heavenly, ever to be spoken of this side the gates of pearl; but the bulk of the Lord's replies to our petitions are such as might be written athwart the skies, that every eye might read them. Make you sure that you do not coffin these gracious facts in the lead of ingratitude. Imitate David, who tells us in the fifth verse of Psalm 118, "I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place."

Yes, and do not only declare how God answers prayer, but tell of the power of faith in all the ways in which it moveth itself. Sit down at the fire-side, and talk of faith's doings to your children, that they may tell them to their children, and to the generations yet to follow, that all men may know that all things are possible to him that believeth. Recount the fulfilment of promises to faith, deliverance from trouble through faith, and the enjoyment of supreme happiness through faith. Sound it forth in all your neighbourhoods that "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes." Ring out clearly such words as these: "Trust ye in the Lord for ever; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." Tell everybody why you know that it is so, for you have turned to friends in the

time of trouble, and they have given you the cold shoulder. You have even been foolish enough to hope for help from great men, who had it in their power to aid you; but they have looked down upon you with disdain, and wondered how you dared to ask such aid from their high mightinesses. Let all men know that the majesty of heaven has never thus treated your humble appeals. From the throne of the Highest there has never come a harsh reply, or a contemptuous rejection of your lowly suit. No; the Lord has been better to you than even your hope expected or your faith believed. God has answered you richly, helped you efficiently, gladdened you abundantly, and filled your spirit with a sweet content. Truly, God is good to Israel. It is no vain thing to wait upon the Lord. The path of faith is the path of strength and safety.

How unhappy is the lot of some here present, who never pray! It matters little what other power you possess; if you have no power with God, you are powerless. To those who never pray, or who insult God with an empty form of prayer in which there is no heart, there will come a day when they will pray. As surely as they live and die as they now are, they will pray; but their prayers then will not be answered. Dives prayed for a drop of water to cool his burning tongue, but his request was refused, for it was too late to pray then, yet he might have had the Water of life to drink had he prayed while he was upon the earth. It is in hell that prayer, of a sort, abounds, but the answer to such petitions is, "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my

reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.” Ask now, I entreat you, for God will hear you if you call upon him now; but “when once the Master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door,” no knocking “at that day” will avail to get it open again. No pleadings, moanings, groanings, cryings, wailings will then prevail, for prayer will have had its day, and justice, with drawn sword, will stand before the mercy-seat, barring the way to it for ever.

The Lord bring you all to believe in Jesus, and to love him with a pure heart fervently, ere it be too late, for his dear name’s sake! Amen.

Prayer: Its Discouragements and Encouragements

Sermon on Matthew 15:23

Preached in the Summer of 1861

“But he answered her not a word.” — Matthew 15:23

With Christian men it is not a matter of question as to whether God hears prayer or not. There is no fact in mathematics which has been more fully demonstrated than this fact in experience—that God heareth prayer. About some other things in Christianity, young believers may have a question; but about the Lord’s answering prayer, even they cannot entertain a doubt; while, to the old and advanced believer, who has tested the power of the mercy-seat, and proved it thousands of times, it is a matter about which he never allows a question, for he knows that, as surely as that he himself exists, and that God lives in heaven, the prayers of puny but believing man have power to move the almighty arm of God.

Probably, in the course of the past week, some of us have met with as many as a dozen special answers to prayer. Sceptics spend their sneers in vain upon us. Facts are blessed, as well as stubborn, things. Men may say that it is not possible that the cries and petitions of man can move the heart of God. They may question it, they may raise doubts about it; but doubts upon this matter never enter our minds, they never touch our inner consciousness, for we know that answers to prayer are a fact; and until we can doubt that we are men, until we can doubt that we breathe the air or live on food, until we can doubt that which we see with our eyes and touch with our hands, we cannot doubt that God is, “and that he is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

Of course, our confidence that God answers prayer is not an argument to another man. He who has not tried it cannot have proved it for himself. But to those who have tried prayer, and proved it, we insist upon it that it amounts to a demonstration as clear as logic itself can make it, when, having called upon God, not merely once or twice, but thousands of times throughout their lives, they have invariably met with the same result, namely, a gracious answer from him who really does and will hear prayer. Yet there is, sometimes, a strange thing which puzzles the earnest believer. There are times when it does seem as if his prayer were not heard, for certainly it is not answered, or, at least, not answered as he expected. There are seasons, even with God’s true children,—

“When at his feet they groan,
Yet bring their wants away.”

They present their petition before the Lord, yet their request does not seem to be complied with there and then. To those who know that this is no strange thing which has happened unto them, it is not a matter which staggers their faith, for they can say, with Ralph Erskine, that—

“They’re heard when answered soon or late;

Yea, heard when they no answer get;

Are kindly answered when refused,

And treated well when harshly used.”

They understand that God’s delays are not denials, and that his denials to particular requests are only intended to let us know that he will give us something richer and better than we have asked. If he doth not pay thy prayers in silver, he will pay them in gold; and if thy prayers be long in coming back, they shall be like a richly-laden ship which is all the longer on its way because of its costly freight, and which shall amply repay for the time spent on the voyage by the richness of the cargo it brings from the far country.

Yet I must again remind you that to some, and especially to young seekers, it is a staggering experience when, having long cried to Jesus, he answers them not a word; when, having prayed to him, they have seen no smile upon his benignant face, and have heard no word of comfort from those lips of his, which drop like honeycombs to others, but seem to be as dry wells to them. I am going to discuss this matter now as God the Holy Ghost may enable me, and I pray that he may make it comforting to many a distracted spirit. May some be graciously

brought up out of the deep darkness of their prison-house, and be caused to rejoice in the liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free!

I shall speak of the text, first, in reference to those who have been praying for themselves; and, secondly, in regard to those who have been praying for others.

I. First, then, I am going to describe the case of some who have been praying for themselves, but to whom, as yet, Christ has answered not a word.

I can describe the case of these people experimentally, for I have felt the same. As some of you know, I passed through five years of agony, during which my young spirit was crushed almost to despair. During those five years, if ever a child prayed to God, I did; and if ever a lad groaned, out of a longing spirit, to Jehovah in heaven, I did. You may remember that part of John Bunyan's "Grace Abounding" where he speaks of the exercises of his soul, and especially of his terror because his prayers seemed to reverberate from a brazen heaven, and not to pierce the skies. Such, too, was my experience. I am sure that I was sincere in my prayers, and in my groanings that could not be uttered; but yet, answers to my supplications there were none. I can speak, therefore, I trust, with all the more power because I can speak, sympathetically, of something which I have known and felt.

Poor soul, you have been praying for these last few months; and your complaint is, that you have not had one gracious answer to your petitions, or one precious promise applied with power to your soul. Let me remind you that

the poor woman, of whom our text speaks, was in a similar condition. Indeed, not only did she not receive a promise, but she received a rebuff from Christ. Instead of a gracious invitation to come unto him, she had almost a command to go from him. When he did speak to her, he said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Yours, then, is not a singular case. You must not sit down in despair because no promise has come home to your soul. Still continue to cry unto the Lord, still be constantly in prayer unto him. He will, he must, hear you by-and-by, and you shall have your heart's desire.

"Yes," you say, "but not only have I not had a promise, but I have not had any comforting sign whatever. The more I pray, the worse I feel; and the more I groan, the more it seems that I may groan. If my prayers are arrows, they are arrows that fall downwards, and return into my own heart instead of flying up to God's ear. I must pray, I cannot help it; my soul would burst if it did not express itself in words; yet my prayer does me little or no good. I rise from my knees more distressed than ever, and I come out of my closet, not as a man released from prison, but as he that passes from one dungeon to another. The Lord hath refused to listen to my supplication; he hath forgotten to be gracious, in anger he hath shut up the bowels of his compassion." Perhaps you even go further than this, and say, "I feel as if my prayer never would be answered. Something within me tells me that I may pray, but that, after all, I shall perish; that there may be mercy for all others in the world, but not for me. I may lift the knocker of mercy's gate, but the sound shall be only like that of a

hammer upon my coffin; there shall be no music of hope as I rap at the golden gate. I know that God heareth prayer, but not the prayer of the wicked; that is an abomination unto the Lord. Such, I fear, is my prayer; and, therefore, he will not hear me.” Ah, poor soul! let me remind you that there is nothing that is so deluding as feelings. Christians cannot live by feelings, nor can you. Let me further tell you that these feelings are the work of Satan, they are not right feelings. What right have you to set up your feelings against the Word of Christ? He has expressly said, “For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” It is not a question whether a man who truly prays shall be saved. He is saved, though he may not know it; he has the germs of salvation in his prayer. “Behold, he prayeth,” means, “Behold, he liveth; behold, he is accepted; behold, heaven openeth its gates for him.” He prays; Jehovah hears; mercy answers; the man is blessed. I pray thee, then, let not thy feelings fly in the teeth of God’s promises, but hope on; for, though thy case be very sad, it is not a strange one, and there is hope for thee.

Having thus described your case, let me now warn you of a danger. There is a danger to which all those are exposed who have prayed for any length of time without consciously receiving an answer from God, and that is, either to get despairing thoughts of themselves or else hard thoughts of Christ. That poor Canaanite was a brave woman. She came of an accursed race, but certainly there was a special blessing resting upon her. If you or I had been there when Christ

spake to her so harshly, I wonder whether we should have taken his remarks so well as she did. Do you remember times when Christ has been silent to you? If so, you can imagine what her feelings must have been when “he answered her not a word.” Some of you, who have quick tempers, would have said, if that had been your experience, “Is this the Messiah of whom we have heard so much, and who is said to be so ready to relieve the distressed? Here have we been crying to him in tones that seemed piercing enough to make a heart of adamant melt for us, yet he has not deigned to answer us. He seems to be stone deaf; or, if he hears us, he does not condescend to give us any reply. Is this the kind and tender spirit of which we have heard so much?” And when at last he spake, and said, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs,”—some would have said, “If he would not grant us our request, he need not have used insulting epithets to us. Dogs, indeed! What means he by that term? He means that we do not belong to the favoured race of Israel; and a fine thing it would be for us if we did. Are they not oppressed under the Roman yoke, and cast off like withered branches?” The Canaanite woman might have said, “Why does he call me a dog? Am I not a woman, and an honest woman, too, and one who does not deserve such a title as that? I wish I had never asked for mercy at his hands. To get such an insult as to have the name of ‘dog’ thrown at me, is too bad; and I will not endure it.” That may be a strong way of putting the matter, but you and I have probably put it in just that way. Have we not thought, because Christ has not answered our prayers, that there was a mistake about his graciousness,—that he was not the Christ that some said he

was—that he did not mean his invitation when he said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest;” that he desired to tantalize poor souls, making them pray and cry to him while he meant to be deaf to their requests? Have you not had hard thoughts of Christ like those? If you have, I pray you to put them all away from you, and not to fall into this snare of Satan. Jesus is the good Christ still. Though he may seem to be stonyhearted, he is not so in reality; he is always tender, he hath bowels of compassion. Slander him not, then; but be of good courage, and still cry unto him.

Possibly, Satan says to you, “Your prayer is not of the right sort; and, therefore, you never will be heard.” Yes, but that Canaanitish woman’s prayer to Christ was of the right sort, yet “he answered her not a word.” Notice what her prayer was: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David.” She gave him the right name. She might have said, “Thou Son of Abraham.” That would have signified that he was the one in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. That was the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham; but this woman said, “Thou Son of David.” The covenant made with David related, not only to blessing and increase, but also to a kingdom, so this woman seemed to say to Christ, “Man of sorrows though thou art, thou art of royal blood; thy visage is more marred than that of any man, and thou wearest not a diadem, yet art thou King.” She did, as it were, pay him the homage which Pilate unwittingly paid him when he placed over his head the inscription, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.” “Thou Son of David,”—she knew how to address him.

Then notice how she pleaded with him; she appealed, not to his justice, but to his mercy, to the love of his tender and compassionate heart: “Have mercy on me.” This was the plea of the publican, the prayer by which he was justified, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” There was nothing wrong in this woman’s prayer to Christ, yet “he answered her not a word.” So then, poor heart, thy prayers also may be right and proper, and yet not be answered. If they are not answered, faint not; but continue to pray. The Lord will yet reply to thy petition; he will open the windows of heaven, and shower down his mercy upon thee, and thou shalt receive it with a gladsome heart.

Now, having reminded you of your danger, let me call to your recollection the grounds of your comfort. What had this woman to comfort her? Well, first, she had Jesus Christ’s face. He said to her, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs.” Now, my idea of the Saviour is that he could not utter that hard sentence without, somehow or other, letting the woman see, by the very expression of his countenance, that he was keeping something back, and that there was love yet in store for her. You know that your children can soon detect the meaning of what you say to them, for they can read your face as well as your words. So can poor beggars, and so could this poor woman who was begging of Christ so hard for her child. “Ay,” she seemed to say, “thy lips may utter hard words, but thy loving eyes flash not the fire that should go with such severe sentences. I see a tear lifting up thine eyelids even now. I believe the language of thy face; that marred face—marred with sympathy for others’

sorrows, marred with the cares and burdens of others, which have weighed thee down,—will not let me believe that thy heart is harsh.” So, sinner, for thy comfort let me beseech thee to look into the face of Jesus Christ. Dost thou believe that he—the Son of Mary, the Man of sorrows, grief’s acquaintance,—can reject thee? O Christ, when I picture thee before my eyes, especially when I see thy face bedewed with bloody sweat in Gethsemane, and listen to thine agonized groanings in the garden, I cannot, and I will not, believe that thou canst ever reject a supplicant who cries to thee, “Be merciful to me!”

Or, if that shall not be enough to cheer thee, remember that this poor woman had something more to comfort her, for she had heard the story of Christ’s good deeds. She had been told, even in Tyre, what he had done in Capernaum, and she had heard, though far away, what he had done in Chorazin, so she believed that he, who had done such good deeds to others, could not be hard to her. So, sinner, let me tell thee of the good deeds that Christ hath done to others. I could bring thee hundreds, or even thousands, who could truly say, with the psalmist, “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him.” Speak with your eyes, my brethren, and bear witness to the fact which I now testify,—has not God heard your prayers, though you were sinners even as others, as vile by nature, and as hopeless by depravity? Did he not bring us up out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set our feet upon a rock, and establish our goings? Sinner, he who did this for us will and must do the like for you if you plead for mercy through the precious blood of his dear Son.

But you have one comfort which this poor woman never had; she could not be told that Christ had died for her. Sinner, thou who art seeking Christ, say not that he is harsh, and that he will not hear thee. Come thou with me, and by faith look upon him on the cross. Canst thou behold his thorn-crown, with its lancets piercing his blessed brow, and the tears streaming down his cheeks already crimsoned with his bloody sweat? Canst thou see his hands and feet as, pierced by the nails, they become founts of blood? There he hangs, naked, despised and rejected of men. Yet he endured all this agony that he might save sinners; then, how canst thou think so wickedly of him as to suppose that he, who once died, the Just for the unjust, now that he lives again, has an adamant heart, and no bowels of compassion? No, by his wounds, I beseech thee to trust him; by his bloody sweat, I implore thee to continue thy supplication unto him; by his rent side, I urge thee to wrestle with him yet again, for he will hear thee, his mercy shall come unto thee, and thou shalt rejoice in it.

Lend me your ears while I give you a word of counsel as to what you ought to do. It is the Spirit of God who has taught you to pray. He has made you feel your need of a Saviour; it is he who has compelled you to fall upon your knees, and to cry for mercy. Now remember that it is your duty, as well as your privilege, to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit. What does that voice say to you? "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." That is to say, even though thy prayers be not answered, in the teeth of every hard thought and every harsh word, trust Christ with thy soul. If thou doest that, thou art saved

there and then. The way of salvation is not, “Pray, and be saved;” but, “Believe, and be saved.” Christ said, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Remember that your main business is not with answers to prayer, but with your answer to God’s call to you; and his call to you, poor conscience-stricken, awakened sinner, is, “Come unto me, and I will give you rest.” Come, then, to Christ just as you are, and so shall you find that answer to your prayers which has been so long delayed. Still keep on wrestling with God, until your prayers are answered. Jericho’s walls did not fall down the first day the hosts of Israel went round them; but they compassed the city seven days, and, on the seventh day, the walls fell flat to the ground. Elijah, on the top of Carmel, did not bring the rain the first time he prayed; but he said to his servant, “Go again seven times;” and there have been many other instances in which God has delayed the blessing, but has given it at the last.

I have thus preached, as God has enabled me, to poor seeking souls. O Spirit of God, apply the Word, and bring sinners to Christ, that they may find mercy in his wounds!

II. Now, for a few minutes, let us turn to the case of those believers, who have long been praying for others without any apparent result.

There is a father here, who has been pleading with God for his daughter; and though years of supplication have passed away, she is still unconverted, and as hardened as ever. There is a mother here, who has laid her children upon her bosom, in prayer, as once she did for nourishment when they were but babes;

and yet, though she cries day and night for them, they are not saved. My dear brothers and sisters, I beseech you never to give up praying for your children, or your other relatives, because, although God may not answer you for a while, you shall certainly yet have the desire of your heart. Let me just give you one or two instances in which the power of prayer has been distinctly proved.

There was a young man who, because of his love for sin, and his wish to be easy in it, became an infidel. As I have often said, infidelity is far more a matter of the heart than of the head. I am persuaded that men think there is no God because they wish there were none. They find it hard to believe in God, and to go on in sin, so they try to get an easy conscience by denying his existence. This young man was not only an infidel, but he was a very earnest one, and he used to distribute certain newspapers brought out by the infidel press. His employer was just as earnest a Christian as the young man was an infidel, and he used constantly to burn those papers whenever he could get hold of them; but the young man just as perseveringly procured others, and tried to lend them among the apprentices and journeymen, that he might advance his own views. He was always a bold blasphemer, and a desperate sinner. He cared little what others thought of him, and he was, at least, honest in his iniquities. One day, in a joke, he said to one of his companions, "I'll tell you what I will do. I'll show you that there is nothing in any of the Methodist cant and hypocrisy; the very first time there is a prayer-meeting at such-and-such a chapel, I'll go and offer myself to the minister to be prayed for by the members, and I shall get some fun out of

them.” He went; and, with all the impudence and coolness possible, told the minister that he was a poor troubled soul, who wished to find peace, and that he would be very glad if the brethren would pray for him. He did not know what he was doing; for, whether it was that the very deed awoke his slumbering conscience, or whether the Spirit of God was pleased to show the sovereignty of his grace at that moment, I cannot tell; but, as soon as one or two humble individuals had prayed for this young man, with tears in their eyes, he was down on his knees, with tears in his own eyes, praying for himself. Nay, not only did he pray then, but he never ceased to pray, and he is praying still, for he could not live without prayer. He found it no matter of fun, after all; he intended to tempt God, and to vex his people; but in that very act of sin he was arrested and converted. Do you think, then, if prayer only asked for in sport prevailed with God, that he will not hear your earnest cries for your own offspring? O Christians, be fervent in your supplications; for God will surely hear you, and your children shall be saved!

Another instance. There lived, in the village of Berwick St. John, in Wiltshire, a godly woman who had an ungodly husband. He not only hated good things, but he hated her for her goodness, for he turned her out of doors, on a Sabbath night, because she had gone to the meetinghouse. She, like a prudent woman, never told her neighbours, but walked the fields alone that she might not be noticed by others, and that her husband’s shame might not be discovered. She was sometimes driven to the greatest straits, and to a sadness which seemed as if

it would bring her to a premature grave. She resolved to pray for her husband, one hour a day, for a year. She did so; and, at the end of the year, he was as bad as before, if not worse. Then she thought she would try another six months; her faith was weak, and she was going to give her husband up then if her prayers were not heard. This was wrong, for we must not limit the Holy One of Israel. But it so happened that, ere the six months were over, her husband came home once, in the middle of the day, looking dejected and downcast. Like a true and tender wife, she asked what was the matter with him, but he could not tell her. He went upstairs, he did not want his dinner, and he did not return to his work that afternoon, for God was at work with him. When his wife got him to speak, he said, "O wife, I can't pray!" "Do you want to pray?" she asked, and he replied, "Oh, I must pray! I do not know how it was; but, about twelve o'clock to-day, such a strange feeling came over me. I feel that I am a lost man, for I cannot pray; will you pray for me?" You may guess what her feelings were when asked by that obdurate wretch to pray for him. She did pray, then they prayed together, and their united prayers were answered. The next Sabbath, they were both in God's house; and, in a few more Sabbaths, they were side by side at the Lord's table. The godly woman's prayers were heard at last, and God again proved that he has not said to the seed of Jacob, "Seek ye me in vain."

Yet another instance. There was a captain, whose name I will not give in full just now; I will call him Mitchell, for that will suffice. This captain was a godly man, and he once went to sea, leaving his wife at home expecting soon to give

birth to their firstborn child. While he was at sea, one day, a time of deep solemnity came over him, in the course of which he penned a prayer. This prayer was for his wife and for his yet unborn child. He put the prayer into the oak chest in which he kept his papers. He never came home again, for he died at sea. His chest was brought home to his wife; she did not open it to look at his papers, but she thought they might be of use to her son when he should grow up. That son lived; and, at the age of sixteen, he joined a regiment at Boston. In that regiment, he became exceedingly debauched, profane, blasphemous, and sinful in every way. At the age of fifty-four, while he was living in sin with a wicked woman, it struck him that he would like to look through the contents of the old chest which his father had left. He opened it, and, at the bottom, found, tied up with red tape, a paper, on the outside of which was written, "The prayer of Mitchell K—— for his wife and child." He opened it, and read it; it was a most fervent plea with God that the man's wife and child might belong to Christ, written fifty-four years back, and before that child was born. He shut it up, and put it where it was before, and said that he would not look into "that cursed old chest" again. But that did not matter, for the prayer had got into his heart, and he could not lock his heart up in that chest. He became thoroughly miserable; and the wretched woman, with whom he lived, asked him what was the matter with him. He told her what he had read in that paper, and she said she hoped he would not become a hypocrite. All the jokes and frivolities of his companions could not take out the dart which God had sent into his heart; and, ere long, by true repentance and by living faith, that man was in Christ a

saved soul, married honourably to the woman with whom he had lived in sin, and walking in uprightness, serving his father's God, as the result of a prayer which had lain in an old chest for fifty-four years, but which God's eye had seen all the while, and which, at last, he had answered when the set time had come.

Be of good courage, all ye who are pleading for your children, for God will yet answer your supplications. As one of the old divines says, "Prayer is the rope which hangs down on earth, and there is a bell in heaven which it rings, and which God hears." Pull that rope again to-night, praying father and mother. Make the great bell in heaven ring again and again, and let its notes be, "Save my children; save my husband; save my wife; save my brother; let my sister live before thee." Your prayers shall be heard, and God shall yet grant your requests. The instances I have given you are authenticated, and I could give you more which have come under my own notice; but time fails, and I have said enough upon that matter.

Let me just preach the gospel at the close plainly and simply, and then I have done. The gospel is this—Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven. He came into the world to die for sinners; he hung upon the cross and bled for sinners. All that he died for will be saved: he died for sinners, and sinners will be saved. Your only question is, are you in the true Scriptural sense of the term a confessed and acknowledged sinner? If

so, Jesus died for you. On my door step the other night, when I reached home after preaching, stood a man. I asked him what he wanted, and he fell on his knees and cried, "I want to know what I must do to be saved." I thought the man was mad to be there at that time of night on such an errand; but he cried out concerning his sin, told me I did not know his guilt, that he had been near committing suicide, and that he dared not go home to rest till he was told the way of salvation. "Well," said I, "I will tell you;" but I could not make it plain to his poor darkened understanding until I told him a story which I have often told concerning an event which happened to me some time ago. One evening when sitting to see enquirers, there came an Irishman upstairs. "Well, Pat," I said. "How's your riverence?" said he. "Don't call me reverence," I said, "because I am no reverence at all: but how is it you have not gone to your priest?" Said he, "I have come here to ask you a question, and if you can answer it, that will do." "Well, what is the question?" "Why, you said, last Sunday, that God would forgive sin; what I want to know is how that can be, for I have been such a great sinner that if he doesn't punish me, he ought." Well, I thought I had got a sinner to deal with, and one who spoke from his heart what he felt. I said, "God pardons sinners for the sake of Jesus." But he replied, "I do not know what you mean." I told him that Jesus Christ died, and that for the sake of that, God pardoned sinners. Still he could not comprehend, and he said, "I want to know how God can be just: he ought to punish sin, and yet he does not; how can that be?" "Well," said I, "suppose you had been committing a murder, and the judge were to say you must be hanged." "I should deserve it," said he. "Well,

how is Pat to be got off, and yet the sentence to be carried out?" "Faith!" says he, "that's what I don't exactly see." "Well," I continued, "suppose I go to the Queen, and say, 'Please, your Majesty, I am very fond of this poor Irishman; I admit he ought to be hanged, but I want him to live: will you be so good as to have me hanged instead?' Well, she couldn't say, "Yes," Pat; but suppose she did, and suppose I went to prison and were hanged instead of you, the murderer, would the Queen be unjust in letting you go afterwards?" "Faith!" says he, "I shouldn't ask that; how could she meddle with me afterwards? because I should say a gentleman was hung for me, and sure enough I was free. But," he added, "I don't see what that has to do with the matter." "Why just this," said I,— "Jesus Christ loved sinners so much that rather than they should perish he was content to die himself instead of them; and now, since Christ died for sinners, can you not see how God can be just in letting sinners go free?" "Oh, yes," says he, "I see it now; but then how am I to know that Christ died for me, so that I cannot be punished? You say there are some people that Christ died for, so that God could not punish them; then how am I to know whether I belong to them?" "Why, by this—are you a sinner? Because if you are—not in the matter of compliment, but if you are really so, and feel it, then Christ died in your stead, and you cannot die because God will never enforce the sentence twice; he will not ask payment first at the bleeding Surety's hands and then at ours." I think I see that man putting his hands together, and saying, "There! that's Bible, I know, that's true, that must be true; no man could have made that up; that's wonderful; I know it's God's Bible, for it just fits me; I am a

poor sinner, and God has pardoned me.” And he went on his way rejoicing. Now, doesn’t that fit you, too? What would you give to-night if you could believe that Jesus Christ was punished instead of you, so that all your sins shall never be mentioned any more, but all be forgiven, because God punished Christ Jesus instead of you? I repeat, the only way you can tell is by answering this question—Are you a sinner? “Well, we are all sinners,” says one. No, no; you are all sinners, but you are not all the sort of sinners that I mean. Some people say they are sinners, but they don’t mean it. They are like the beggars in London apparently full of sores. Many a man we see in the streets with his leg tied up, and seeming desperately lame, will take off the bandage when he gets to his lodging house, and will dance before he goes to bed at night. Another man standing against the wall says he is stone blind; but he will see to count his money when he gets home, after begging all day. There are plenty of people of that sort. Now, if I invited the lame and the blind, do you think I should receive those who were only shamming? No, I would only have those who were really lame and blind. So Christ died only for those who are real sinners.

Restraining Prayer

Sermon on Job 15:4

Preached in 1863

“Thou ... restrainest prayer before God.” — Job 15:4

This is one of the charges brought by Eliphaz the Temanite against Job, “Yea, thou castest off fear, and restrainest prayer before God.” I shall not use this sentence as an accusation against those who never pray, though there may be some in this house of prayer whose heads are unaccustomed to bow down, and whose knees are unaccustomed to kneel before the Lord their Maker. You have been fed by God’s bounty, you owe all the breath in your nostrils to him, yet you have never done homage to his name. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib, but you know not, neither do you consider the Most High. The cattle on a thousand hills low forth their gratitude, and every sheep praiseth God in its bleatings; but these beings, worse than natural brute beasts, still continue to receive from the lavish hand of divine benevolence, but they return no thanks whatsoever to their Benefactor. Let such remember that that ground, which has long been rained upon, and ploughed, and sown, which yet bringeth forth no fruit, is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned. Prayer-

less souls are Christless souls, Christless souls are graceless souls, and graceless souls shall soon be damned souls. See your peril, ye that neglect altogether the blessed privilege of prayer. You are in the bonds of iniquity, you are in the gall of bitterness. God deliver you, for his name's sake!

Nor do I intend to use this text in an address to those who are in the habit of formal prayer, though there are many such. Taught from their childhood to utter certain sacred words, they have carried through youth, and even up to manhood, the same practice. I will not discuss that question just now, whether the practice of teaching children a form of prayer is proper or not. I would not do it. Children should be instructed in the meaning of prayer, and their little minds should be taught to pray; but it should be rather the matter of prayer than the words of prayer that should be suggested; and I think they should be taught to use their own words, and to speak to God in such phrases and terms as their own childlike capacities, assisted by a mother's love, may be able to suggest. Full many there are who, from early education, grow up habituated to some form of words, which either stands in lieu of the heart's devotion, or cripples its free exercise. No doubt there may be true prayer linked with a form, and the soul of many a saint has gone up to heaven in some holy collect, or in the words of some beautiful liturgy; but, for all that, we are absolutely certain that tens of thousands use the mere language without heart or soul, under the impression that they are praying. I consider the form of prayer to be no more worthy of being called prayer than a coach may be called a horse; the horse will

be better without the coach, travel much more rapidly, and find himself much more at ease; he may drag the coach, it is true, and still travel well. Without the heart of prayer, the form is no prayer; it will not stir or move, it is simply a vehicle that may have wheels that might move; but it has no inner force or power within itself to propel it. Flatter not yourselves that your devotion has been acceptable to God, you that have been merely saluting the ears of the Most High with forms. They have been only mockeries, when your heart has been absent. What though a parliament of bishops should have composed the words you use, what though they should be absolutely faultless, ay, what if they should even be inspired, or though you have used them a thousand times, yet have you never prayed if you consider that the repetition of the form is prayer. No! there is more than the chatter of the tongue in genuine supplication; more than the repetition of words in truly drawing near to God. Take care lest, with the form of godliness, you neglect the power, and go down to the pit, having a lie in your right hand, but not the truth in your heart.

What I do intend, however, is to address this text to the true people of God, who understand the sacred art of prayer, and are prevalent therein; but who, to their own sorrow and shame, must confess that they have restrained prayer. If there be no other person in this congregation to whom the preacher will speak personally, he feels shamefully conscious that he will have to speak very plainly to himself. We know that our prayers are heard; we are certain—it is not a question with us,—that there is an efficacy in the divine office of intercession;

and yet (oh, how we should blush when we make the confession!) we must acknowledge that we do restrain prayer. Now, inasmuch as we speak to those who grieve and repent that they should so have done, we shall use but little sharpness; but we shall try to use much plainness of speech. Let us see how and in what respect we have restrained prayer.

I. Do you not think, dear friends, that we often restrain prayer in the fewness of the occasions that we set apart for supplication?

From hoary tradition and modern precedents, we have come to believe that the morning should be opened with the offering of prayer, and that the day should be shut in with the nightly sacrifice. We do ill if we neglect those two seasons of prayer. Do you not think that often, in the morning, we rise so near to the time of labour, when duty calls us to our daily avocation, that we hurry through the wonted exercises with unseemly haste, instead of diligently seeking the Lord, and earnestly calling upon his name? And even at night, when we are very weary and jaded, it is just possible that our prayer is uttered somewhere between sleeping and waking. Is not this restraining prayer? And throughout the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, if we continue thus to pray, and this be all, how small an amount of true supplication will have gone up to heaven!

I trust there are none here present, who profess to be followers of Christ, who do not also practise prayer in their families. We may have no positive commandment for it, but we believe that it is so much in accord with the genius and spirit of the gospel, and that it is so commended by the example of the

saints, that the neglect thereof is a strange inconsistency. Now, how often this family worship is conducted in a slovenly manner! An inconvenient hour is fixed; and a knock at the door, a ring at the bell, the call of a customer, may hurry the believer from his knees to go and attend to his worldly concerns. Of course, many excuses might be offered, but the fact would still remain that, in this way, we often restrain prayer.

And then, when you come up to the house of God,—I hope you do not come up to this Tabernacle without prayer,—yet I fear we do not all pray as we should, even when in the place dedicated to God's worship. There should always be a devout prayer lifted up to heaven as soon as you enter the place where you would meet with God. What a preparation is often made to appear in the assembly! Some of you get here half an hour before the service commences; if there were no talking, if each one of you looked into the Bible, or if the time was spent in silent supplication, what a cloud of holy incense would go smoking up to heaven!

I think it would be comely for you and profitable for us if, as soon as the minister enters the pulpit, you engaged yourselves to plead with God for him. For me, I may especially say it is desirable. I claim it at your hands above every other man. With this overwhelming congregation, and with the terrible responsibility of so numerous a church, and with the word spoken here published within a few hours, and disseminated over the country, scattered throughout all Europe, nay, to the very ends of the earth, I may well ask you to lift up your hearts

in supplication that the words spoken may be those of truth and soberness, directed of the Holy Spirit, and made mighty through God, like arrows shot from his own bow, to find a target in the hearts that he means to bless.

And on going home, with what earnestness should we ask the Master to let what we have heard live in our hearts! We lose very much of the effects of our Sabbaths through not pleading with God on the Saturday night for a blessing upon the day of rest, and through not also pleading at the end of the Sunday, beseeching him to make that which we have heard abide in our memories, and appear in our actions. We have restrained prayer, I fear, in the fewness of the occasions. Indeed, brethren, every day of the week, and every part of the day, should be an occasion for prayer. Ejaculations such as these, "Oh, would that!" "Lord, save me!" "Help me!" "More light, Lord!" "Teach me!" "Guide me!" and a thousand such, should be constantly going up from our hearts to the throne of God. You may enjoy a refreshing solitude, if you please, in the midst of crowded Cheapside; or, contrariwise, you may have your head in the whirl of a busy crowd when you have retired to your closet. It is not so much where we are as in what state our heart is. Let the regular seasons for devotion be constantly attended to. These things ought ye to have done; but let your heart be habitually in a state of prayer; ye must not leave this undone. Oh, that we prayed more, that we set apart more time for it! Good Bishop Farrar had an idea in his head which he carried out. Being a man of some substance, and having some twenty-four persons in his household, he divided the day, and

there was always some person engaged either in holy song or else in devout supplication through the whole of the twenty-four hours; never was there a moment when the censer ceased to smoke, or the altar was without its sacrifice. Happy shall it be for us when, day without night, we shall circle the throne of God rejoicing; but, till then, let us emulate the ceaseless praise of seraphs before the throne, continually drawing near unto God, and making supplication and thanksgiving.

II. But, to proceed to a second remark, dear friends, I think it will be very clear, upon a little reflection, that we constantly restrain prayer by not having our hearts in a proper state when we come to its exercise.

We rush into prayer too often. We should think it necessary, if we were to address the Queen, that our petition should be prepared; but, often, we dash before the throne of God as though it were but some common house of call, without even having a thought in our minds of what we are going for. Now, just let me suggest some few things which I think should always be subjects of meditation before our season of prayer, and I think, if you confess that you have not thought of these things, you will also be obliged to acknowledge that you have restrained prayer.

We should, before prayer, meditate upon him to whom it is to be addressed. Let our thoughts be directed to the living and true God. Let me remember that he is omnipotent, then I shall ask large things. Let me remember that he is very tender, and full of compassion, then I shall ask little things, and be minute in

my supplication. Let me remember the greatness of his covenant, then I shall come very boldly. Let me remember, also, that his faithfulness is like the great mountains, that his promises are sure to all the seed, then I shall ask very confidently, for I shall be persuaded that he will do as he has said. Let me fill my soul with the reflection of the greatness of his majesty, then I shall be struck with awe; with the equal greatness of his love, then I shall be filled with delight. We should pray better than we do if we meditated more, before prayer, upon the God whom we address in our supplications.

Then, let me meditate also upon the way through which my prayer is offered; let my soul behold the blood sprinkled on the mercy-seat; before I venture to draw near to God, let me go to Gethsemane, and see the Saviour as he prays. Let me stand in holy vision at the foot of Calvary, and see his body rent, that the veil which parted my soul from all access to God might be rent too, that I might come close to my Father, even to his feet. O dear friends, I am sure, if we thought about the way of access in prayer, we should be more mighty in it, and our neglect of so doing has led us to restrain prayer.

And yet, again, ought I not, before prayer, to be duly conscious of my many sins? Oh! when I hear men pray cold, careless prayers, surely they forget that they are sinners, or else, abjuring gaudy words and flowing periods, they would smite upon their breast with the cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner;" they would come to the point at once, with force and fervency. "I, black, unclean, defiled, condemned by the law, make my appeal unto thee, O God!" What

prostration of spirit, what zeal, what fervour, what earnestness, and then, consequently, what prevalence would there be if we were duly sensible of our sin!

If we can add to this a little meditation upon what our needs are, how much better we should pray! We often fail in prayer because we come without an errand, not having thought of what our necessities are; but if we have reckoned up that we need pardon, justification, sanctification, preservation; that, besides the blessings of this life, we need that our decaying graces should be revived, that such-and-such a temptation should be removed, and that through such-and-such, a trial we should be carried, and prove more than conquerors, then, coming with an errand, we should speed before the Most High. But we bring to the altars bowls that have no bottom; and if the treasure should be put in them, it would fall through. We do not know what we want, and therefore we ask not for what we really need; we affect to lay our necessities before the Lord, without having duly considered how great our necessities are. See thyself as an abject bankrupt, weak, sick, dying, and this will make thee plead. See thy necessities to be deep as the ocean, broad as the expanse of heaven, and this will make thee cry. There will be no restraining of prayer, beloved, when we have got a due sense of our soul's poverty; but because we think we are rich, and increased in goods, and we have need of nothing, therefore it is that we restrain prayer before God.

How well it would be for us if, before prayer, we would meditate upon the past with regard to all the mercies we have had during the day, what courage that

would give us to ask for more! The deliverances we have experienced through our life, how boldly should we plead to be delivered yet again! He that hath been with me in six troubles will not forsake me in the seventh. Do but remember how thou didst pass through the fires, and wast not burnt, and thou shouldst be confident that the flame will not kindle upon thee now. Christian, remember how, when thou passedst through the rivers aforetime, God was with thee; and surely thou mayst plead with him to deliver thee from the flood that now threatens to inundate thee. Think of the past ages too, of what he did of old, when he brought his people out of Egypt, and of all the mighty deeds which he has done,—are they not written in the book of the wars of the Lord? Plead all these, and say unto him in thy supplications:—“O thou that art a God that heareth prayer, hear me now, and send me an answer of peace!” I think, without needing to point that arrow, you can see which way I would shoot. Because we do not come to the throne of grace in a proper state of supplication, therefore it is that too often we restrain, prayer before God.

III. Now, thirdly, it is not to be denied, by a man who is conscious of his own error, that, in the duty of prayer itself, we are too often straitened in our own bowels, and so restrain prayer.

Prayer has been differently divided by different authors. We might roughly say that prayer consists, first, of invocation: “Our Father, which art in heaven.” We begin by stating the title and our own apprehension of the glory and majesty of the Person whom we address. Do you not think, dear friends, that we fail here,

and restrain prayer here? Oh! how we ought to sound forth his praises! I think, on the Sabbath, it is always the minister's special duty to bring out the titles of The Almighty One, such as "King of kings, and Lord of lords!" He is not to be addressed in common terms. How should we endeavour, as we search the Scripture through, to find those mighty phrases which the ancient saints were wont to apply to Jehovah! And how should we make his temple ring with his glory, and make our closet full of that holy adoration with which prayer must always be linked! I think the rebuking angel might often say, "Thou thinkest that the Lord is such an one as thyself, and thou talkest not to him as to the God of the whole earth; but, as though he were a man, thou dost address him in slighting and unseemly terms." Let all our invocations come more deeply from our souls' reverence to the Most High, and let us address him, not in high-sounding words of fleshly homage, but still in words which set forth our awe and our reverence while they express his majesty and the glory of his holiness.

From invocation we usually go to confession, and how often do we fail here! In your closet, are you in the habit of confessing your real sins to God? Do you not find, brethren, a tendency to acknowledge that sin which is common to all men, but not that which is certainly peculiar to you? We are all Sauls in our way, we want the best of the cattle and the sheep; those favourite sins, those Agag sins, it is not so easy to hew them in pieces before the Lord. The right eye sin, happy is that Christian who has learned to pluck it out by confession. The

right hand sin, he is blessed and well taught who aims the axe at that sin, and cuts it from him. But no, we say that we have sinned,—we are willing to use the terms of any general confession that any church may publish; but to say, “Lord, thou knowest that I love the world, and the things of the world; I am covetous;” or to say, “Lord, thou knowest I was envious of So-and-so, because he shone brighter than I did at such-and-such a public meeting; Lord, I was jealous of such-and-such a member of the church, because I evidently saw that he was preferred before me;” and for the husband also to confess before God that he has been overbearing, that he has spoken rashly to a child; for a wife to acknowledge that she has been wilful, that she has had a fault,—this would be letting out prayer; but the hiding of these things is restraining prayer, and we shall surely come under that charge of having restrained prayer unless we make our private confessions of sin very explicit, coming to the point.

I have thought, in teaching children in the Sabbath-school, we should not so much talk about sin in general as the sins in which children most commonly indulge, such as little thefts, naughty tempers, disobedience to parents; these are the things that children should confess. Men in the dawn of their manhood should confess those ripening evil imaginations, those lustful things that rise in the heart; while the man in business should ever make this a point, to see most to the sins which attack business men. I have no doubt that I might be very easily led, in my confession, to look to all the offences I may have committed against the laws of business, because I should not need to deal very hardly with

myself there, for I do not have the temptations of these men; and I should not wonder if some of you merchants will find it very easy to examine yourselves according to a code that is proper to me, but not to you. Let the workman pray to God as a workman, and confess the sins common to his craft. Let the trader examine himself according to his standing, and let each man make his confession like the confessions of old, when every one confessed apart,—the mother apart and the daughter apart, the father apart and the son apart. Let each one thus make a clean breast of the matter, and I am sure there will not be so much need to say that we have restrained prayer before God.

As to the next part of prayer, which is petition, lamentably indeed do we all fail. We have not, because we ask not, or because we ask amiss. We are ready enough to ask for deliverance from trial, but how often we forget to ask that it may be sanctified to us! We are quite ready to say, “Give us this day our daily bread;” how often, however, do we fail to ask that he would give us the Bread which cometh down from heaven, and enable us blessedly to feed upon his flesh and his blood! Brethren, we come before God with such little desires, and the desires we get have so little fervency in them, and when we get the fervency, we so often fail to get the faith which grasps the promise, and believes that God will give, that, in all these points, when we come to the matter of spreading our wants before God, we restrain prayer.

Oh, for the Luthers that can shake the gates of heaven by supplication! Oh, for men that can lay hold upon the golden knocker of heaven’s gate, and make it

ring and ring again as if they meant it to be heard! Cold prayers court a denial. God hears by fire, and the God that answers by fire let him be God. But there must be prayer in Elijah's heart first—fire in Elijah's heart first—before the fire will come down in answer to the prayer. Our fervency goeth up to heaven, and then God's grace, which gave us the fervency, cometh down, and giveth it the answer.

But you know, too, that all true prayer has in it thanksgiving. "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever." What prayer is complete without the doxology? And here, too, we restrain prayer. We do not praise, and bless, and magnify the Lord as we should. If our hearts were more full of gratitude, our expressions would be far more noble and comprehensive when we speak forth his praise. I wish I could put this so plainly that every Christian might mourn on account of his sin, and mend his ways. But, indeed, it is only mine to speak; it is my Master's to open your eyes, to let you see, and to set you upon the solemnly important duty of self-examination. In this respect, I am sure even the prayers that you and I have offered to-day may well cry out against us, and say, "Thou hast restrained prayer."

IV. Yet, again, I fear also we must all join in acknowledging a serious fault with regard to the after-part of our prayers. When prayer is done, do you not think we very much restrain it?

For, after prayer, we often go into the world immediately. That may be absolutely necessary; but we go there, and leave behind us what we ought to carry

with us. When we have got into a good frame in prayer, we should consider that this is like the meat which the angel gave to Elijah that he might go on his forty days' journey in its strength. Have we felt heavenly-minded? Yet, the moment we cross the threshold, and get into the family or business, where is the heavenly mind? Oh, to get real prayer, inwrought prayer,—not the surface prayer, as though it were a sort of sacred masquerading after all,—to have it inside, in the warp and woof of our being, till prayer becomes a part of ourselves; then, brethren, we have not restrained it. We get hot in our closets,—when I say “we”, oh, how few can say so much as that!—but, still, we get hot in our closets, and go out into the world, into the draughts of its temptations, without wrapping ourselves about with promises, and we catch well-nigh our death of cold. Oh, to carry that heat and fervour with us! You know that, as you carry a bar of hot iron along, how soon it begins to return to its common ordinary appearance, and the heat is gone. How hot, then, we ought to make ourselves in prayer, that we may burn the longer; and how, all day long, we ought to keep thrusting the iron into the fire again, so that, when it ceases to glow, it may go into the hot embers once more, and the flame may glow upon it, and we may once again be brought into a vehement heat. But we are not careful enough to keep up the grace, and seek to nurture and to cherish the young child, which God seems to give in the morning into our hands that we may nurse it for him. Old Master Dyer speaks of locking up his heart by prayer in the morning, and giving Christ the key. I am afraid we do the opposite,—we lock up our hearts

in the morning, and give the devil the key, and think that he will be honest enough not to rob us. Ah! it is in bad hands when it is trusted with him; and he keeps filching all day long the precious things that were in the casket, until at night it is quite empty, and needs to be filled over again. Would God that we put the key in Christ's hands, by looking up to him all the day!

I think, too, that after prayer, we often fail in unbelief. We do not expect God to hear us. If God were to hear some of you, you would be more surprised than with the greatest novelty that could occur. We ask blessings, but do not think of having them. When you and I were children, and had a little piece of garden, we sowed some seed one day, and the next morning, before breakfast, we went to see if it was up; and the next day, seeing that no appearance of the green blade could be discovered, we began to move the mould to look after our seeds. Ah! we were children then. I wish we were children now, with regard to our prayers. We should go out, the next morning, to see if they had begun to sprout, and disturb the ground a bit to look after our prayers, for fear they should have miscarried. Do you believe God hears prayer?

I saw, the other day, in a newspaper, a little sketch concerning myself, in which the author, who is evidently very friendly, gives a much better description of me than I deserve; but he offers me one rather pointed rebuke. I was preaching at the time in a tent, and only part of the people were covered. It began to rain just before prayer, and one petition was, "O Lord, be pleased to grant us favourable weather for this service, and command the clouds that they rain not

upon this assembly!” Now he thought this very preposterous. To say the least, it was rash, if not blasphemous. He admits that it did not rain a drop after it. Still, of course, he did not infer that God heard and answered the prayer. If I had asked for a rain of grace, it would have been quite credible that God would send that; but when I ask him not to send a temporal rain, that is fanaticism. To think that God meddles with the clouds at the wish of a man, or that he may answer us in temporal things, is pronounced absurd. I bless God, however, that I fully believe the absurdity, preposterous as it may appear. I know that God hears prayer in temporal things. I know it by as clear a demonstration as ever any proposition in Euclid was solved. I know it by abundant facts and incidents which my own life has revealed. God does hear prayer. The majority of people do not think that he does. At least, if he does, they suppose that it is in some high, clerical, mysterious, unknown sense. As to ordinary things ever happening as the result of prayer, they account it a delusion. “The Bank of Faith!” How many have said it is a bank of nonsense; and yet there are many who have been able to say, “We could write as good a book as Huntington’s ‘Bank of Faith,’ that would be no more believed than Huntington’s Bank was, though it might be even more true.”

We restrain prayer, I am sure, by not believing our God. We ask a favour, which, if granted, we should attribute to accident rather than ascribe it to grace, and we do not receive it; then the next time we come, of course we cannot pray, because unbelief has cut the sinews of prayer, and left us powerless

before the throne.

You are a professor of religion. After you have been to a party of ungodly people, can you pray? You are a merchant, and profess to be a follower of Christ; when you engage in a hazardous speculation, and you know you ought not, can you pray? Or, when you have had a heavy loss in business, and repine against God, and will not say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord;" can you pray? Pity the man who can sin and pray, too. In a certain sense, Brooks was right when he said, "Praying will make you leave off sinning, or else sin will make you leave off praying." Of course, that is not meant in the absolute sense of the term; but as to certain sins, especially gross sins,—and some of the sins to which God's people are liable are gross sins,—I am certain they cannot come before their Father's face with the confidence they had before, after having been rolling in the mire, or wandering in By-path Meadow. Look at your own child; he meets you in the morning with a smiling face, so pleased; he asks what he likes of you, and you give it to him. Now he has been doing wrong, he knows he has; and you have frowned upon him, you have chastened him. How does he come now? He may come because he is a child, and with tears in his eyes because he is a penitent; but he cannot ask with the power he once had. Look at a king's favourite; as long as he feels that he is in the king's favour, he will take up your suit, and plead for you. Ask him to-morrow whether he will do you a good turn, and he says, "No, I am out of favour; I don't feel as if I could speak now." A Christian is not out of cove-

nant favour, but he may be experimentally under a cloud; he loses the light of God's countenance; and then he feels he cannot plead, his prayers become weak and feeble.

Take heed unto yourselves, and consider your ways. The path of declension is very abrupt in some parts. We may go on gradually declining in prayer till faith grows weak, and love cold, and patience is exhausted. We may go on for years, and maintain a consistent profession; but, all of a sudden, the road which had long been descending at a gradual incline may come to a precipice, and we may fall, and that when we little think of it; we may have ruined our reputation, blasted our comfort, destroyed our usefulness, and we may have to go to our graves with a sword in our bones because of sin. Stop while you may, believer; stop, and guard against the temptation. I charge you, by the trials you must meet with, by the temptations that surround you, by the corruptions that are within, by the assaults that come from hell, and by the trials that come from heaven, "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation." To the members of this church I speak especially. What hath God wrought for us! When we were a few people, what intense agony of prayer we had! We have had prayer-meetings in Park Street that have moved our souls. Every man seemed like a crusader besieging Jerusalem, each man determined to storm the Celestial City by the might of intercession; and the blessing came upon us, so that we had not room to receive it. The hallowed cloud rests o'er us still; the holy drops still fall. Will ye now cease from intercession? At the borders of the promised land, will ye

turn back to the wilderness, when God is with us, and the standard of a King is in the midst of our armies? Will ye now fail in the day of trial? Who knoweth but ye have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Who knoweth but that he will preserve in the land a small company of poor people who fear God intensely, hold the faith earnestly, and love God vehemently; that infidelity may be driven from the high places of the earth; that Naphtali again may be a people made triumphant in the high places of the field? God of heaven, grant this! Oh, let us restrain prayer no longer! You that have never prayed, may you be taught to pray! “God be merciful to me a sinner,” uttered from your heart, with your eye upon the cross, will bring you a gracious answer, and you shall go on your way rejoicing, for—

“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.”

Comfort for Those Whose Prayers are Feeble

Sermon on Lamentations 3:56

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“Hide not thine ear at my breathing.” — Lamentations 3:56

Young beginners in grace are very apt to compare themselves with advanced disciples, and so to become discouraged; and tried saints fall into the like habit. They see those of God’s people who are upon the mount, enjoying the light of their Redeemer’s countenance, and, comparing their own condition with the joy of the saints, they write bitter things against themselves, and conclude that surely they are not the people of God. This course is as foolish as though the lambs should suspect themselves not to be of the flock because they are not sheep, or as though a sick man should doubt his existence because he is not able to walk or run as a man in good health. But since this evil habit is very common, it is our duty to seek after the dispirited and cast-down ones, and comfort them. That is our errand in this short discourse. We hear the Master’s words, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,” and we will endeavour to obey them by

his Spirit's help.

Upon the matter of prayer, many are dispirited because they cannot yet pray as advanced believers do, or because, during some peculiar crisis of their spiritual history, their prayers do not appear to them to be so fervent and acceptable as is the case with other Christians. Perhaps God may have a message to some troubled ones in the present address, and may the Holy Ghost apply it with power to such!

“Hide not thine ear at my breathing.” This is a singular description of prayer, is it not? Frequently, prayer is said to have a voice; it is so in this verse: “Thou hast heard my voice.” Prayer has a melodious voice in the ear of our Heavenly Father. Frequently, too, prayer is expressed by a cry. It is so in this verse: “Hide not thine ear at my cry.” A cry is the natural, plaintive utterance of sorrow, and has as much power to move the heart of God as a babe's cry to touch a mother's tenderness. But there are times when we cannot speak with the voice, nor even cry, and then a prayer may be expressed by a moan, or a groan, or a tear,—“the heaving of a sigh, the falling of a tear.” But, possibly, we may not even get so far as that, and may have to say, like one of old, “Like a crane or a swallow, so do I chatter.” Our prayer, as heard by others, may be a kind of irrational utterance. We may feel as if we moaned like wounded beasts, rather than prayed like intelligent men; and we may even fall below that, for, in the text, we have a kind of prayer which is less than a moan or a sigh. It is called a breathing: “Hide not thine ear at my breathing.” The man is too far gone for a glance of the eye,

or the moaning of the heart, he scarcely breathes, but that faint breath is prayer. Though unuttered and unexpressed by any sounds which could reach a human ear, yet God hears the breathing of his servant's soul, and hides not his ear from it.

We shall teach three or four lessons from the present use of the expression "breathing."

I. When we cannot pray as we would, it is good to pray as we can.

Bodily weakness should never be urged by us as a reason for ceasing to pray; in fact, no living child of God will ever think of such a thing. If I cannot bend the knees of my body because I am so weak, my prayers from my bed shall be on their knees, my heart shall be on its knees, and pray as acceptably as aforesaid. Instead of relaxing prayer because the body suffers, true hearts, at such times, usually double their petitions. Like Hezekiah, they turn their face to the wall that they may see no earthly object, and then they look at the things invisible, and talk with the Most High, ay, and often in a sweeter and more familiar manner than they did in the days of their health and strength. If we are so faint that we can only lie still and breathe, let every breath be prayer.

Nor should a true Christian relax his prayer through mental difficulties, I mean those perturbations which distract the mind, and prevent the concentration of our thoughts. Such ills will happen to us. Some of us are often much depressed, and are frequently so tossed to and fro in mind that, if prayer were an

operation which required the faculties to be all at their best, as in the working of abstruse mathematical problems, we should not at such times be able to pray at all. But, brethren, when the mind is very heavy, then is not the time to give up praying, but rather to redouble our supplications. Our blessed Lord and Master was driven by distress of mind into the most sad condition; he said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death;" yet he did not for that reason say, "I cannot pray;" but, on the contrary, he sought the well-known shades of the olive grove, and there unburdened his heavy heart, and poured out his soul like water before the Lord. Never let us consider ourselves to be too ill or too distracted to pray. A Christian ought never to be in such a state of mind that he feels bound to say, "I do not feel that I could pray;" or, if he does, let him pray till he feels he can pray. Not to pray because you do not feel fit to pray is like saying, "I will not take medicine because I am too ill." Pray for prayer: pray yourself, by the Spirit's assistance, into a praying frame. It is good to strike when the iron is hot, but some make cold iron hot by striking. We have sometimes eaten till we have gained an appetite, so let us pray till we pray. God will help you in the pursuit of duty, not in the neglect of it.

The same is the case with regard to spiritual sicknesses. Sometimes it is not merely the body or the mind which is affected, but our inner nature is dull, stupid, lethargic, so that, when it is time for prayer, we do not feel the spirit of prayer. Moreover, perhaps our faith is flagging, and how shall we pray when faith is so weak? Possibly we are suspicious as to whether we are the people

of God at all, and we are molested by the recollection of our shortcomings. Now the tempter will whisper, "Do not pray just now; your heart is not in a fit condition for it." My dear brother, you will not become fit for prayer by keeping away from the mercy-seat, but to lie groaning or breathing at its foot is the best preparation for pleading before the Lord. We are not to aim at a self-wrought preparation of our hearts that we may come to God aright, but "the preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, are from the Lord." If I feel myself disinclined to pray, then is the time when I need to pray more than ever. Possibly, when the soul leaps and exults in communion with God, it might more safely refrain from prayer than at those seasons when it drags heavily in devotion. Alas! my Lord, does my soul go wandering away from thee? Then, come back my heart, I will drag thee back by force of grace, I will not cease to cry till the Spirit of God has made thee return to thine allegiance. What, my Christian brother, because thou feelest idle, is that a reason why thou shouldst stay thine hand, and not serve thy God? Nay, but away with thine idleness, and resolutely bend thy soul to service. So, under a sense of prayerlessness, be more intent on prayer. Repent that thou canst not repent, groan that thou canst not groan, and pray until thou dost pray; in so doing God will help thee.

But, it may be objected, that sometimes we are placed in great difficulty as to circumstances, so that we may be excused from prayer. Brethren, there are no circumstances in which we should cease to pray in some form or other. "But

I have so many cares.” Who among us has not? If we are never to pray till all our cares are over, surely then we shall either never pray at all, or pray when we have no more need for it. What did Abram do when he offered sacrifice to God? When the patriarch had slaughtered the appointed creatures, and laid them on the altar, certain vultures and kites came hovering around, ready to pounce upon the consecrated flesh. What did the patriarch do then? “When the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.”* So must we ask for grace to drive our cares away from our devotions. That was a wise direction which the prophet gave to the poor woman when the Lord was about to multiply her oil. “Go, take the cruse,” he said, “pour out the oil, and fill the borrowed vessels;” but what did he also say? “Shut the door upon thee.” If the door had been open, some of her gossiping neighbours would have looked in, and said, “What are you doing? Do you really hope to fill all these jars out of that little oil cruse? Why, woman, you must be mad!” I am afraid she would not have been able to perform that act of faith if the objectors had not been shut out. It is a grand thing when the soul can bolt the doors against distractions, and keep out those intruders; for then it is that prayer and faith will perform their miracle, and our soul shall be filled with the blessing of the Lord. Oh, for grace to overcome circumstances, and, at least to breathe out prayer, if we cannot reach to a more powerful form of it!

Perhaps, however, you declare that your circumstances are more difficult than I can imagine, for you are surrounded by those who mock you, and, besides,

Satan himself molests you. Ah! then, dear brother or sister, under such circumstances, instead of restraining prayer, be ten times more diligent. Your position is pre-eminently perilous, you cannot afford to live away from the throne of grace, do not therefore attempt it. As to threatened persecution, pray in defiance of it. Remember how Daniel opened his window, and prayed to his God as he had done aforetime. Let the God of Daniel be your God in the chamber of prayer, and he will be your God in the lions' den. As for the devil, be sure that nothing will drive him away like prayer. That couplet is correct which declares that—

“Satan trembles when he sees
The Weakest saint upon his knees.”

Whatever thy position, if thou canst not speak, cry; if thou canst not cry, groan; if thou canst not groan, let there be “groanings which cannot be uttered;” and if thou canst not even rise to that point, let thy prayer be at least a breathing,—a vital, sincere desire, the outpouring of thine inner life in the simplest and weakest form, and God will accept it. In a word, when you cannot pray as you would, take care to pray as you can.

II. But now, a second word of instruction. It is clear from the text, from many other passages of Scripture, and from general observation, that the best of men have usually found the greatest fault with their own prayers.

This arises from the fact that they present living prayers in real earnest, and

feel far more than they can express. A mere formalist can always pray so as to please himself. What has he to do but to open his book, and read the prescribed words, or bow his knee, and repeat such phrases as suggest themselves to his memory or his fancy? Like the Tartarian Praying Machine, give but the wind and the wheel, and the business is fully arranged. So much knee-bending and talking, and the prayer is done. The formalist's prayers are always good, or, rather, always bad, alike. But the living child of God never offers a prayer which pleases himself; his standard is above his attainments; he wonders that God listens to him, and though he knows he will be heard for Christ's sake, yet he accounts it a wonderful instance of condescending mercy that such poor prayers as his should ever reach the ears of the Lord God of Sabaoth.

If it be asked in what respect holy men find fault with their prayers, we reply, that they complain of the narrowness of their desires. O God, thou hast bidden me open my mouth wide, and thou wilt fill it, but I do not open my mouth! Thou art ready to bestow great things upon me, but I am not ready to receive great things. I am straitened, but it is not in thee; I am straitened in my own desires. Dear brethren, when we read of Hugh Latimer on his knees perpetually crying out, "O God, give back the gospel to England," and sometimes praying so long that he could not rise, being an aged man, and they had to lift him up from the prison-floor, and he would still keep on crying, "O God, give back the gospel to poor England," we may well wonder that some of us do not pray in the same way. The times are as bad as Latimer's, and we have as great need to

pray as he had, “O God, drive away this Popery once again, and give back the gospel to England.” Then, think of John Knox. Why, that man’s prayers were like great armies for power, and he would wrestle all night with God that he would kindle the light of the gospel in Scotland. He averred that he had gained his desire, and I believe he had, and that the light which burns so brightly in Scotland is much to be attributed to that man’s supplications. We do not pray like these men; we have no heart to ask for great things. A revival is waiting, the cloud is hovering over England, and we do not know how to bring it down. Oh, that God may find some true spirits who shall be as conductors to bring down the fire divine! We want it much, but our poor breathings—they do not come to much more,—have no force, no expansiveness, no great-heartedness, no prevalence in them.

Then, how far we fail in the matter of faith! We do not pray as if we believed. Believing prayer is a grasping and a wrestling, but ours is a mere puffing and blowing, a little breathing,—not much more. God is true, and we pray to him as if he were false. He means what he says, and we treat his Word as if it were spoken in jest. The master-fault of our prayer is want of faith.

How often do we lack earnestness! Such men as Luther had their will of heaven because they would have it. God’s Spirit made them resolute in intercession, and they would not come away from the mercy-seat till their suit was granted; but we are cold, and consequently feeble, and our poor, poor prayers, in the prayer-meeting, in the closet, and at the family altar, languish and almost die.

How much, alas, is there of impurity of motive to mar our prayers! We ask for revival, but we want our own church to get the blessing, that we may have the credit of it. We pray God to bless our work, and it is because we wish to hear men say what good workers we are. The prayer is good in itself, but our smutty fingers spoil it. Oh, that we could offer supplication as it should be offered! Blessed be God, there is One who can wash our prayers for us; but, truly, our very tears need to be wept over, and our prayers want praying over again. The best thing we ever do needs to be washed in the fountain filled with blood, or God can only look upon it as a sin.

Another fault good men see in their supplications is this, that they stand at such a distance from God in praying, they do not draw near enough to him. Are not some of you oppressed with a sense of the distance there is between you and God? You know there is a God, and you believe he will answer you; but it is not always that you come right up to him, even to his feet, and, as it were, lay hold upon him, and say, "O my Father, hearken to the voice of thy chosen, and let the cry of the blood of thy Son come up before thee!" Oh, for prayers which enter within the veil, and approach to the mercy-seat! Oh, for petitioners who are familiar with the cherubim, and the brightness which shines between their wings! May God help us to pray better! But this I feel sure of,—you who plead most prevalently are just those who will think the least of your own prayers, and be most grateful to God that he deigns to listen to you, and most anxious that he would help you to pray after a nobler sort.

III. A third lesson is this,—the power of prayer is not to be measured by its outward expression.

A breathing is a prayer from which God does not hide his ear. It is a great truth undoubtedly, and full of much comfort too, that our prayers are not powerful in proportion to their expression; for, if so, the Pharisee would have succeeded, since he evidently had greater gifts than the Publican had. I have no doubt, if there had been a regular prayer-meeting, and the Pharisee and the Publican had attended, we should have called on the Pharisee to pray. I do not think the people of God would have enjoyed his prayer, nor have felt any kinship of spirit with him; and yet, very naturally, on account of his gifts, he would have taken upon himself to engage in public devotion; or, if that Pharisee would not have done so, I have heard of other Pharisees who would. No doubt the man's spirit was bad, but then his expression was good. He could put his oration so neatly, and pour it out so accurately. Let all men know that God does not care for that. The sigh of the Publican reached his ear, and won the blessing but the boastful phrases of the Pharisee were an abomination unto him.

If our prayers were forcible according to their expression, then rhetoric would be more valuable than grace, and a scholastic education would be better than sanctification; but it is not so. Some of us may be able to express ourselves very fluently from the force of natural gifts, but it should always be to us an anxious question whether our prayer is a prayer which God will receive; for we ought to know, and must know by this time, that we often pray best when we stammer

and stutter, and we pray worst when words come rolling like a torrent, one after another. God is not moved by words; they are but a noise to him. He is only moved by the deep thought and the heaving emotion which dwell in the innermost spirit. It were a sorry business for you, who are poor, if God only heard us according to the beauty of our utterances; for it may be that your education was so neglected that there is no hope of your ever being able to speak grammatically; and, besides, it may be, from your limited information, that you could not use the phrases which sound so well. But the Lord hears the poor, and the ignorant, and the needy; he loves to hear their cry. What cares he for the grammar of the prayer? It is the soul of it that he wants; and if you cannot string three words of the Queen's English together correctly, yet, if your soul can breathe itself out before the Most High anyhow, if it be but warm, hearty, sincere, earnest petitioning, there is power in your prayer, and none the less power in it because of its broken words, nor would it be an advantage to you, so far as the Lord is concerned, if those words were not broken, but were well composed. Ought not this to comfort us, then?

Even if we are gifted with facility of expression, we sometimes find that our power of utterance fails us. Under very heavy grief, a man cannot speak as he was wont to do. Circumstances can make the most eloquent tongue grow slow of speech; it matters not, your prayer is as good as it was before. You call upon God in public, and you sit down, and think that your confused prayer was of no service to the church. You know not in what scales God weighs your prayer;

not by quantity, but by quality, not by the outward dress of verbiage, but by the inner soul and the intense earnestness that was in it does he compute its value. Do you not sometimes rise from your knees in your little room, and say, "I do not think I have prayed, I could not feel at home in prayer"? Nine times out of every ten, those prayers are most prevalent with God which we think are the least acceptable; but when we glory in our prayer, God will have nothing to do with it. If you see any beauty in your own supplication, God will not; for you have evidently been looking at your prayer, and not at him. But when your soul sees so much his glory that she cries, "How shall I speak unto thee,—I who am but dust and ashes?" when she sees so much his goodness that she is hampered in expression by the depth of her own humiliation, oh, then it is that your prayer is best. There may be more prayer in a groan than in an entire liturgy; there may be more acceptable devotion in a tear that damps the floor of yonder pew than in all the hymns we have sung, or in all the supplications which we have uttered. It is not the outward, it is the inward; it is not the lips, it is the heart which the Lord regards; if you can only breathe, still your prayer is accepted by the Most High.

I desire that this truth may come home to any one of you who says, "I cannot pray." It is not true. If it were necessary that, in order to pray, you should talk for a quarter of an hour together, or that you should say pretty things, why then I would admit that you could not pray; but if it is only to say from your heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner;" ay, and if prayer is not saying anything

at all, but desiring, longing, hoping for mercy, for pardon, for salvation, no man may say, "I cannot," unless he is honest enough to add, "I cannot because I will not; I love my sins too well, and have no faith in Christ; I do not desire to be saved." If you will to pray, O my hearer, you can pray! He who gives the will joins the ability to it.

And oh! let me say, do not sleep this night until you have tried and proved the power of prayer. If you feel a burden on your heart, tell the Lord of it. Cover your face, and speak with him. Even that you need not do, for I suppose that Hannah did not cover her face when Eli saw her lips move, and supposed that she was drunken. Nay, your lips need not even move; your soul can now say, "Save me, my God, convince me of sin, lead me to the cross; save me to-night; let me not end another day as thine enemy; let me not go into the cares of another week unabsolved, with thy wrath hanging over me like a thunder-cloud! Save me, save me, O my God!" Such prayers, though utterly wordless, shall not be powerless, but shall be heard in heaven.

IV. We will close with a fourth practical lesson,—feeble prayers are heard in heaven.

Why is it that feeble prayers are understood of God and heard in heaven? There are three reasons.

First, the feeblest prayer, if it be sincere, is written by the Holy Spirit upon the heart, and God will always own the handwriting of the Holy Spirit. Fre-

quently, certain kind friends from Scotland send me for the Orphanage some portions of what one of them called the other day “filthy lucre,”—namely, dirty £1 notes. Now these £1 notes certainly look as if they were of small value. Still, they bear the proper signature, and they pass well enough, and I am very grateful for them. Many a prayer that is written on the heart by the Holy Spirit seems written with faint ink, and, moreover, it appears to be blotted and defiled by our imperfection; but the Holy Spirit can always read his own handwriting. He knows his own notes; and when he has issued a prayer, he will not disown it. Therefore, the breathing which the Holy Ghost works in us will be acceptable with God.

Moreover, God, our ever-blessed Father, has a quick ear to hear the breathing of any of his children. When a mother has a sick child, it is marvellous how quick her ears become while attending it. Good woman, we wonder she does not fall asleep. If you hired a nurse, it is ten to one she would. But the dear child, in the middle of the night, does not need to cry for water, or even speak; there is a little quick breathing,—who will hear it? No one would except the mother; but her ears are quick, for they are in her child’s heart. So, if there is a heart in the world that longs for God, God’s ear is already in that poor sinner’s heart. He will hear it. There is not a good desire on earth but the Lord has heard it. I recollect when, at one time, I was a little afraid to preach the gospel to sinners as sinners, and yet I wanted to do so, so I used to say, “If you have but a millionth part of a desire, come to Christ.” I dare say more than that now;

but, at the same time, I will say that at once,—if you have a millionth part of a desire, if you have only a little breathing,—if you desire to be reconciled, if you desire to be pardoned, if you would be forgiven, if there is only half a good thought formed in your soul, do not check it, do not stifle it, and do not think that God will reject it.

And, then, there is another reason, namely, that the Lord Jesus Christ is always ready to take the most imperfect prayer, and perfect it for us. If our prayers had to go up to heaven as they are, they would never succeed; but they find a Friend on the way, and therefore they prosper. A poor person has a petition to be sent in to some government personage, and if he had to write it himself, it would puzzle all the officers in Downing-street to make out what he meant; but he is wise enough to find out a friend who can write, or he comes round to his minister, and says, “Sir, will you make this petition right for me? Will you put it into good English, so that it can be presented?” And then the petition goes in a very different form. Even thus, the Lord Jesus Christ takes our poor prayers, fashions them over again, and presents the petition with the addition of his own signature, and the Lord sends us answers of peace.

The feeblest prayer in the world is heard when it has Christ’s seal to it. I mean, he puts his precious blood upon it; and wherever God sees the blood of Jesus, he must and will accept the desire which it endorses. Go thou to Jesus, sinner, even if thou canst not pray, and let the breathing of thy soul be, “Be merciful to me, wash me, cleanse me, save me,” and it shall be done; for God will not hear

your prayer so much as hear his Son's blood, "which speaketh better things than that of Abel." A louder voice than yours shall prevail for you, and your feeble breathings shall come up to God covered over with the omnipotent pleadings of the great High Priest who never asks in vain.

I have been aiming thus to comfort those distressed ones who say they cannot pray; but, ere I close, I must add, how inexcusable are those who, knowing all this, continue prayerless, Godless, and Christless! If there were no mercy to be had, you could not be blamed for not having it. If there were no Saviour for sinners, a sinner might be excused for remaining in his sin. But there is a fountain, and it is open; why then wash ye not in it? Mercy is to be had "without money and without price,"—it is to be had by asking for it. Sometimes poor men are shut up in the condemned cell, sentenced to be hanged; but suppose they could have a free pardon by asking for it, and they did not do so, who would pity them? God will give his blessing to everyone who is moved to seek for it sincerely at his hands on this one sole and only condition,—that that soul will trust in Jesus; and even that is not a condition, for he gives repentance and faith, and enables sinners to believe in his dear Son. Behold Christ crucified, the saddest and yet the gladdest sight the sun ever beheld! Behold the eternal Son of God made flesh, and bleeding out his life! A surpassing marvel of woe and love! A look at him will save you. Though ye are on the borders of the grave, and on the brink of hell, by one look at Jesus crucified your guilt shall be cancelled, your debts for ever discharged before the throne of God, and yourselves

led into joy and peace. Oh, that you would give that look! Breathe the prayer,

“Lord, give me the faith of thine elect, and save me with a great salvation!”

Though it be only a breathing, yet, as the old Puritan says, when God feels the breath of his child upon his face, he smiles; and he will feel your breath, and smile on you, and bless you. May he do so, for his name’s sake! Amen.

Prayer-Meetings

Sermon on Acts 1:14

Preached August 30, 1868

“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.” — Acts 1:14

In all those churches which are not altogether tied and bound by liturgies and rituals, it has been common to hold meetings for social prayer. We call them prayer-meetings. Now, it may be profitable now and then to look over some of our institutions, to see whether they are Scriptural, to notice their defects, to see in what respect they may be improved, or to observe their merits, that we may be induced still further to carry them on. The subject, therefore, this evening, suggested to me by the fact that we are going to meet for a day of prayer to-morrow, is that of prayer-meetings—assemblies of the people of God for worship of that peculiar kind which consists in each one expressing his desire before the Lord. Let us then go through very briefly:—

I. The apostolical history of meetings for prayer.

These meetings must have been very common indeed. They were, doubtless, every-day things; but still there are some few records of the facts connected

with them which may be instructive. The first meeting for prayer which we find after our Lord's ascension to heaven is the one mentioned in the text, and we are led from it to remark that united prayer is the comfort of a disconsolate church. Can you judge of the sorrow which filled the hearts of the disciples when their Lord was gone from them? They were an army without a leader, a flock without a shepherd, a family without a head. Exposed to innumerable trials, the strong, brazen wall of his presence, which had been round about them, was now withdrawn. In the deep desolation of their spirits they resorted to prayer. They were like a flock of sheep that will huddle together in a storm, or come closer each to its fellow when they hear the sound of the wolf. Poor defenceless creatures as they were, they yet loved to come together, and would die together if need were. They felt that nothing made them so happy, nothing so emboldened them, nothing so strengthened them to bear their daily difficulties as to draw near to God in common supplication. Beloved, let every church learn the value of its prayer-meetings in its dark hour. When the pastor is dead, and when it has been difficult to find a suitable successor; when, it may be, there are rents and divisions; when death falls upon honoured members, when poverty comes in, when there is a spiritual dearth, when the Holy Ghost appears to have withdrawn himself—there is but one remedy for these and a thousand other evils, and that one remedy is contained in this short sentence, "Let us pray." Those churches which are now writing "Ichabod" on their walls, and who sorrowfully confess that the congregation is slowly dwindling, might soon restore their numbers if they did but know how to pray. Brethren, though

they are dispirited now, defeat would then soon become success, their spirits being revived by drawing near to God. And if any of you be personally afflicted and troubled in your estate, you shall find that, after coming up to the House of God, your own private prayer-chamber will be peculiarly comforting to you, and after that, come and unite with the saints of God, who have all of them probably experienced assaults like yours, and as you hear them pouring out sighs similar to yours, and making requests such as you would make, but scarce know how to word them, you will see the footsteps of the flock, and by-and-bye you shall see the Shepherd himself. One of the first uses of the prayer-meeting, then, is to encourage a discouraged people.

Again, if you look at the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, you will perceive that the prayer-meeting is the place for the reception of divine power. "They were all with one accord in one place," making their prayer, and, as they waited there, suddenly they heard the sound as of a rushing, mighty wind, and the cloven tongues descended upon them, and they were clothed with the power which Jesus had promised them. And what a difference it made in them! Common fishermen became the extraordinary messengers of heaven. Illiterate men spake with tongues that they had never themselves heard. They began to reveal mysteries which had not been revealed to philosophers or kings. These men were lifted out of the level of ordinary humanity, and became God-inspired, filled with the Deity himself, who came to dwell in their hearts and minds. The result was that poor wavering Peter became bold as a lion, and the

impetuous John, who would have called fire from heaven upon the Samaritans, had another fire fall upon him; one not to destroy, but to rescue and bless.

Now, the great want of the Church in all times is the power of the Holy Ghost.

“I believe in the Holy Ghost,” says the Creed, but how many, or rather how few, are there who really do believe in him? There is a mysterious, supernatural energy which comes from the Third Person of the blessed Trinity which really at this day falls upon men, as really as when Peter spake with unknown tongues or wrought miracles; and though the power of working miracles be not given now, yet spiritual power is given, and this spiritual power is as manifest, and just as certainly with us to-day, if we possess the Spirit, as it was with the apostles. Now, if we want to get this, the most likely place in which to find it is the prayer-meeting. I will warrant you that the best teachers of the school, the men who are of the right spirit, are those who will be found here to-morrow evening. I will warrant you that the best ministers are those that do not despise the gathering of the people of God, and I am sure that the cream of the Christian Church will be found on the whole—of course, other things are to be considered, too—amongst those who most commonly assemble for prayer. Oh! yes, this is the place to meet with the Holy Ghost, and this is the way to get his mighty power. If we would have him, we must meet in greater numbers; we must pray with greater fervency; we must watch with greater earnestness, and believe with firmer steadfastness. The prayer-meeting, then, has this second use, that it is the appointed place for the reception of power.

The next incident in this apostolic history you will find in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, and there you will see that the prayer-meeting is the resource of a persecuted church. Turn to the thirty-first verse. Peter and John had been shut up in prison. The Scribes and Pharisees had persecuted the disciples of Christ. They resorted to prayer, and we read that “when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the Word of God with boldness; and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.” Yes, all the persecutions of the separate members should be recorded in prayer before God, and if the whole Church itself should fall into disrepute through misrepresentation, or through the natural hostility of all men to the Church of God, then should it resort to its Great Friend for its defence.

Persecuting times are hence often very good for the Church, because they compel her to pray. When the devil, like the wild boar out of the wood, would break up the vineyard, the vines seem to flourish the more, because they are watered with the dews of heaven in answer to prayer. Let the stakes smoke at Smithfield, and the saints of God go up to heaven in chariots of fire, and then the Word of God multiplies exceedingly, and the death of the martyrs brings down the blessing to themselves and the nation in which they dwell.

Anything that would make us pray would be a blessing, and if ever we should come to times of persecution again, we must fly to the shadow of the Eternal, and keeping close together in simple, intense prayer, we shall find a shelter from

the blast.

Still keeping to the Acts of the Apostles, in the twelfth chapter you find the prayer-meeting made a means of individual deliverance. You know the story well. Peter was in prison, and Herod promised himself the great pleasure of putting him to death. He was sleeping one night betwixt two soldiers, chained, and the keepers of the door kept the prison. But prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him. The walls of the prison were very thick, but prayer was made without ceasing. The soldiers were very watchful; there were sixteen of them appointed to watch him by turns—four at a time, and he was chained by both hands to two of them. Yet prayer was made without ceasing of the Church for him, and prayer laughs altogether at stone walls, and handcuffs, and iron bars, and gates of brass. And so in the middle of the night an angel smote Peter upon the side, and raised him up, and his chains fell off; he put his garments about him; every door opened as he advanced, and Peter found himself in the street, and wondered whether he was awake, or whether it was a vision. And when he got to the house where they were at prayer, they were all equally surprised, and thought it must be Peter's spirit, and that it could never be Peter himself. Yet there he was, in very flesh and blood, released from his prison in answer to their prayers. And so in the prayer-meeting the Church of God may plead for individuals. It may not be God's will, there may be no necessity for it, that every one of God's people should be brought out of prison, or raised up from sickness, or saved from want; but if it be the Master's

will, and be a right thing, he will grant it, and, anyhow, when we come together we may unite in particular and personal supplications. I do not doubt that many a life has been spared in answer to united prayer, that many a soul that has been, as it were, spirit-burdened, has obtained gracious liberty through the prayers of the brethren. It were well if we often put up our prayers for one another, remembering those who are in bonds as being bound with them. Observe here, then, another valuable use of the Christian prayer-meeting.

Further on, in the next chapter, we find a prayer-meeting suggesting missionary operations. Whilst the servants of God were met together—see the second verse of the thirteenth chapter—fasting and in prayer, the Holy Spirit said, “Separate me, Barnabas and Saul, for the work whereunto I have called them,” and when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

We sit down, and we begin to figure away the expense of such-and-such a form of Christian service, and we think that would be a good plan, and the other, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth—all pieces of human machinery. But I think if we were oftener on our knees about God’s work, we should oftener do right, and the right methods, and the right men, and the right plans would come to us. Christ is the head of the Church—and who thinks so much about the Church as the head of the Church? And while we wait upon him I do not doubt but what fresh plans and fresh schemes will be marked out, and that different kinds of men will be called to the work as distinctly as if angels had touched their lips with a live coal from off the burning altar, and who may

be “separated” to teach the Word where, perhaps, it has never reached before. England needs many who shall shake her and waken her out of her sleep. She needs a new race of Whit-fields and of Wesleys, of men who are before their age only because they are more suited to its culture. She needs some Boanerges, who shall thunder out the Word, some men who shall be like lightning in carrying out their holy mission. She needs men who will preach the truth, and tell it to her poor men, ay, and to her rich men, too, and if ever we are to get these, it must be in answer to prayer. Oh! that we would but pray for such men, and, having got them, pray that God would make them full of himself, for they cannot run over with blessings to others, until they are full of blessing themselves. We should understand what the prayer-meeting is, if we did this. I look forward to to-morrow for a blessing of this kind. There may be sitting here now some young man to whom China may be under obligation, or of whom Hindustan shall be glad. I do not know who it may be, but there may be one here who shall yet bring up diamonds from the very depths, and who shall be inspired to do so in answer to our prayers.

Once more, I will remind you of a prayer-meeting which perhaps, you have forgotten, but which is recorded in the sixteenth chapter of the Acts. What was the first Christian service that was held in Europe? Do you know? Why, it was a prayer-meeting. The very first service was not an Episcopal ordination, nor even the preaching of a sermon, for Paul went to the place where prayer was wont to be made by the river-side, and there he met with Lydia, and preached

to her, and her heart was so opened that she received the truth. So, then, a prayer-meeting became in Europe the first foothold of the gospel. Europeans, you ought never to forget, disown, or think lightly of prayer-meetings. How you ought to value them. Very often, I do not doubt, in a Christian enterprise, the first foothold that a cause gets is the prayer-meeting. You, brethren, some of you live in some of the dark parts of this city, and you would like to see a cause for Christ there. Well, begin with a prayer-meeting, just as Paul did. Or you live in a small village, perhaps, where there is no church with whom you can worship. Well then, hold a prayer-meeting. This costs you nothing; this will enrich you; this will serve for a beginning, and although you may not be content with that as the only service on the Sabbath after some little time, yet begin with it. This, then, is the missionary's lever; he begins with the prayer-meeting.

Thus have I, as briefly as I could, gone through the early history of prayer-meetings, and shown you the extreme value of such to the Church of God. And now, secondly, and very briefly indeed:—

II. What are the uses of the prayer-meeting?

The prayer-meeting is useful to us in itself, and also very useful from the answer which its gets, and bring to us from God.

It is a very useful thing for Christians to pray with each other, even apart from the answer. God has made our piety to be a thing which shall be personal, but yet he looks for family piety. Happy is the household where the altar burns

day and night with the sweet perfume of family worship! He also gives us more extended views, and makes us feel that all the saints are our brethren and sisters, and that, therefore, our meetings as Christian families, and as Christian Churches in the prayer-meeting, become the exponents and natural outgrowth of social godliness. We sing together and pray together, and thus our Christian brotherhood is manifested to the world, and is the more enjoyed by ourselves.

The prayer-meeting serves this purposes, and sometimes it also generates devotion. Some of the brethren may be very dull and heavy, but others who are at that time in a lively state of mind may stimulate and excite them. I must confess very often to deriving much fire from some of our brethren who pray here on Monday evenings, when God gives them grace really to pray. When you have been busy all the day, and are not able to shake off the cares of business, you get warmed up by getting near to each other in your prayers. And, more than that, the united fires being placed together on the hearth, the fire-brands are made to burn with greater power. There is a kind of divine furore comes upon us sometimes at the prayer-meeting. I recollect in one of our meetings for fasting and prayer, the intense excitement there was, not fleshly, but deeply spiritual. How we felt ourselves bowed down at one time, and then lifted up again at another. I have sometimes sat side by side with a brother who has said, "Can you bear this much longer? I feel it is too much for my physical frame." Oh! the calm delight which springs from close communion with the invisible God! Such days as I have sometimes had have laid me prostrate all the next day from very joy,

from very excess of delight. Oh! this is good for us! This is good for you! Even though the outward man decay, yet shall not the inward man, but be renewed from day to day. Oh! it is a grand thing thus to be made fit again, with joints all oiled, and muscles all braced, and nerves all strung, for the battle of life. United prayer, then, serves this purpose, and therefore is it valuable.

But, again, united prayer is useful inasmuch as God has promised extraordinary and peculiar blessings in connection with it “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.” God asks agreement, and, once the saints agree, he pledges himself that the prayer of his agreeing ones shall be answered. Why, see what accumulated force there is in prayer, when one after another pours out his vehement desires; when many seem to be tugging at the rope; when many seem to be knocking at mercy’s gate; when the mighty cries of many burning hearts come up to heaven. When, my beloved, you go and shake the very gates thereof with the powerful battering-ram of a holy vehemence, and a sacred importunity, then is it that the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence. When first one, and then another, and yet another, throws his whole soul into the prayer, the kingdom of heaven is conquered and the victory becomes great indeed.

As I was sitting a little while and thinking over this text, I thought of the accumulated love of God which there is in a prayer-meeting, because God loves

every one of his children. Very well, then there is so much love for one, and here is another, and there is so much love for him, and then, if God's love to one of his people is a reason for answering his requests, if there be ten present, there is ten times the reason; and if there be a thousand such then surely there must be a thousandfold force of love to move our Heavenly Father to grant the accumulated desires of the assembly.

The prayer-meeting is an institution which ought to be very precious to us, and to be cherished very much by us as a Church, for to it we owe everything. When our comparatively little chapel was all but empty, was it not a well-known fact that the prayer-meeting was always full? And when the Church increased, and the place was scarce large enough, it was the prayer-meeting that did it all. When we went to Exeter Hall, we were a praying people, indeed; and when we entered on the larger speculation, as it seemed, of the Surrey Music-hall, what cries and tears went up to heaven for our success! And so it has been ever since. It is in the spirit of prayer that our strength lies; and if we lose this, the locks will be shorn from Samson, and the Church of God will become weak as water, and though we, as Samson did, go and try to shake ourselves as at other times, we shall hear the cry, "The Philistines be upon thee," and our eyes will be put out, and our glory will depart, unless we continue mighty and earnest in prayer. But now, once again, let us ask:—

III. What are the hindrances to the prayer-meeting?

Now listen, for perhaps some of you will hear something about yourselves.

What are the hindrances to the prayer-meeting? There are some hindrances before the people come. Unholiness hinders prayer. A man cannot walk contrary to God, and then expect to have his prayers heard. "If ye abide in my commandments, ye shall abide in my love." There is a promise made to those keeping the commands. Such shall have power with God; but, on the other hand, inconsistent Christians shall not be answered.

Discord always spoils prayer. When believers do not agree, and are picking holes in each other's coats, they do not really love one another, and then their prayers cannot succeed. Discord spoils prayer, and so also does hypocrisy: for hypocrites will creep in: you cannot help it, and the more a church flourishes, the more, I believe, do hypocrites get in, just as you see many a noxious creeping thing come and get into a garden after a shower of rain. The very things that make glad the flowers bring out these noxious things, and so hypocrites get in and steal much of the Church's sap away, and help spoil the prayer-meeting. Now, which among you does this belong to? I am not reflecting upon any person in particular, but God knows why some of you do not ever come to the prayer-meeting. Some of you, I know, have business that really prevents your coming, and others have service for him that keeps them away; but surely some of our friends who have no other imperative engagement or duty do constantly keep away from the prayer-meeting. I only wish that their consciences were even half-awake, for I am sure it would make them smart for neglecting this duty. I would that they would feel ashamed that they have missed this very

great privilege, for had they come with us they might have drawn near to God and been healed of their pretences.

But there are some things which hinder the prayer-meeting when we are at it. One is long prayers. It is dreadful to hear a brother pray us into a good frame, and then, by his long prayer, pray us out of it again. You remember what John Macdonald once said, "When I am in a bad frame I always pray short, because my prayer will not be of any use, and when I am in a good frame I pray short, because if other people are in a good frame too, I might, if I kept on longer, pray them into a bad frame." Long prayers, then, spoil prayer-meetings, for long prayers and true devotion in our public assemblies seem pretty much to be divorced from one another. And prayer-meetings are also hindered when those who get up to pray do not pray, but preach a little sermon, and tell the Lord all about themselves, though he knows their case better than they do, instead of asking at once for what they want. Prayer-meetings are often hindered by a want of directness, and by beating about the bush. I did admire a prayer I heard last Monday night, in which a brother said, "Lord, the orphanage wants £3,000; be pleased to send it." That was a straightforward application. Another brother would have said, "Lord, we have great difficulties in our work; do thou be pleased to help us"; but this brother just stated the case, and I think he believed that God would hear him. Another way never to grow weary in prayer is to do as a good Scotsman said he did. He said, "I never go to God unless I have business to do with him, unless there is something I want to praise for, to con-

fess, or to seek at his hands.” We must come not merely with well-rounded and polished periods, but really to pray, and really to praise, and really to confess and seek cleansing; and if we do this, the prayer-meeting shall not disappoint us.

Prayer-meetings are sometimes hindered by a want of real earnestness in those who pray, and in those who pray in silence. Ah! brothers and sisters, one warm, hearty prayer is worth a score of those packed in ice. I fear me that much of our prayer is lost because we do not sufficiently throw our hearts into it. It is possible for us to attend the meeting and all the while be thinking of the home, the infant in the cradle, or the shop, the field, the farm, the factory, the counting-house, the ledger, and I know not what beside. Is it any wonder then that prayer halts? The brother who prays may be burning with earnest desire, but his prayer lags because we are not backing it with silent fervour and passionate longing for God’s blessing. Oh! brethren and sisters, we have often spoiled our prayer-meetings thus. We have each, I fear, in our turn done something towards it; let us pray that we may never again so transgress.

But the prayer-meeting may also be spoiled after we have been to it. “How so?” say you. Why, by our asking a blessing, and then not expecting to receive it. God has promised that he will do to us according to our faith, but if our faith is nothing, then the answer will also be nothing. Inconsistency, too, in not practically carrying out your desires will also spoil the prayer-meeting. If you ask God to convert souls, but you will not do anything for those souls; if you ask God

to save your children, but you will not talk to them about their salvation; if you ask God to save your neighbours, and you do not distribute tracts amongst them, nor do anything else for them, are you not altogether a hypocrite? You pray for what you do not put out your hand to get. You pray for fruit, but you will not put out your hand to pluck it, and all this spoils the prayer-meeting. Earnest prayer, however, is always to be followed up by persevering efforts, and then the result will be great indeed. But for a moment will I occupy your time upon the next point, and then we have done. It is this:—

IV. What should be the great object of the prayer-meeting, and that for which we should seek the answer?

First, it must be the glory of God, or else the petition is not sufficiently put up. How much of the Lord's Prayer consists in prayers for God, rather than for ourselves! "Hallowed be thy name: thy kingdom come: thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth"; and then comes, "Give us this day our daily bread." Do we not often begin by asking for the bread, and leave the glory of God to be put into a corner? Pray that King Jesus may have his own. Pray that the crown-royal may be set upon that dear head, that once was girt with thorns. Pray that the thrones of the heathen may totter from their pedestals, and that Jesus may be acknowledged King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This is to be the grand object of our prayer. You recollect how David put it, "Let the whole earth be filled with his glory. The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended." For the coming of Christ in power, for the extension of his kingdom, for the downfall

of error, for the end of the times of darkness, for the ingathering of the Jews and the Gentiles—for all these things let us pray, in order that God may be glorified, and on that account alone.

And then, in subservience to that, let us pray for a blessing on the Church. We ought to exercise a little of our love for one another in praying for our fellow-members. Pray for the minister, for he needs it most; his necessities in that direction are the greatest, and therefore let him ever be remembered. Pray for the church-officers: pray for the workers in all organisations: pray for the sufferers: prayer for the strong, for the weak, for the rich, for the poor, for the trembling, for the sick, for the backsliding, for the sinful. Yes, for every part of the one great body of Jesus let our supplications perpetually ascend. Let our prayers be continual that the holy oil of which we read may run down from the head even to the skirts of the garment.

Then we should also pray for the conversion of the ungodly. Oh! this ought to be like a burden on our hearts; this ought to be prayed out of the lowest depths of a soul that is all aglow with sympathy for them. They are dying; they are dying; they are dying without hope. I stood yesterday at the grave's brink at the funeral of one of our brethren, an elder of the church. The place that knew him once will know him no more, and someone else now occupies the seat where he formerly sat. It was a great joy to know that he had rested on the rock so long, and that he had now entered into the rest which Jesus had promised him; but oh! to stand by those who die without hope is grim work; this is

to sorrow without alleviation, to mourn without any sweet reflection to wipe away the tears. Oh! my hearers, will you die in your sins? Will you live in your sins, for if you live in them you will die in them. My hearers, will you die without a Saviour? Will you live without a Saviour? For if you live without him, you will assuredly die without him. It is of no use my preaching to the people, my dear Christian brethren, unless you pray for them. It is of no use holding special services for the quickening of the spiritually dead unless the Holy Spirit be brought into the field by our prayers. It may be that you who pray have more to do with the blessed results than we who preach. I think I have told you of the old monkish story of the monk who had been very successful in his preaching, but a message came from heaven to him that it would not have been so if it had not been for the prayers of an old deaf brother monk, who sat upon the pulpit stairs and pleaded with God for the conversion of the hearers. It may be so. We may appear to the eyes of men to have the credit of success, but all the while the real honour may belong to someone else, and I do certainly myself always ascribe the conversions wrought in this house to the prayers of God's people. Let it always be so ascribed, and let God have the whole glory of it. But do pray for conversions. Never give up your unconverted wife, husband! Never cease to pray for your unconverted children. Never let the devil tempt you to be dumb concerning your ungodly neighbours, but day and night, in the house and by the way, lift up your hearts to God in real prayer, and say to him, "Oh! that Ishmael might live before thee!" He has given us his pledge that he will answer: believe it, and you shall see it, and you shall have the joy of it whilst his

shall be the glory. Amen.

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