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by
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DISSERTATION II

ON THE ADVANTAGE AND NECESSITY OF PRAYER.

WHAT we have said may suffice as to the definition of prayer. We are now to inquire into its ADVANTAGE and NECESSITY, or the nature of its obligation upon us. Here we must first dispose of the subtle, but delusive arguments of the flesh, and, next, establish the wholesome truth.

The flesh concludes that prayer is SUPERFLUOUS; for why should we lay before God a wearisome enumeration of our wants, which, in proportion to its length and frequency, must be the more offensive? The Divine Being knows much better than we ourselves do what we want. And such a conclusion, we are told, ought not to be considered as unfounded, for it is not unlike what is stated by our Lord, Matt. vi. 31, 32. "Take no thought, saying, what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly father knoweth that ye have need of these things."

It is also alleged that prayer is USELESS. Whatever shall happen to any man God has determined by an eternal and unchangeable decree. It is in vain, therefore, for you to weary him by a multitude of prayers. What has been decreed for you will happen whether you pray or not. What has not been decreed you will not obtain by thousands of prayers. It is the glory of God that he will not deviate a hair's breadth from a purpose which has once been formed. To importune him, and, for the sake of a feeble and wretched man, to make trial of his firmness, wears the aspect of impiety.

Prayer, it is thence argued, INSULTS the firmness of the Divine purpose. It insults, also, the *Majesty* of God, which we ought to hold in such reverence as not to venture to explain to him our desires. It is enough that we commit every thing to his disposal, and bow to his sovereign will. It insults even the *goodness* of God, for it is the glory of his goodness that he anticipates our wishes, and, out of the rich treasures of his kindness, bestows even on those who do not pray the enjoyment of himself and of his benefits, Isa. lxx. 1. "I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name." And, again, ver. 24, "and it shall come to pass that, before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking I will hear."

Plausible as these arguments may appear, they want solidity, and are at utter variance with true piety towards God. It is true that God knows our necessities, and needs not to be informed of them by us; but it is his will that we should acknowl-

edge them, and that our acknowledgment should be openly made in prayer. By an opposite course, we would expose ourselves to the charge brought against the church of Laodicea, "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." God sometimes acts as if he were ignorant of our affairs, and chose to remain in ignorance until we should lay them before him. A memorable passage of history, to this effect, occurs in Exodus ii. 23, 24, 25. "And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried; and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And GOD HEARD THEIR GROANING, and God REMEMBERED HIS COVENANT with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God LOOKED UPON the children of Israel, and God HAD RESPECT unto them." To the same purpose is the declaration of David, Ps. cvi. 44, 45. "Nevertheless, he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry: and he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies." Such expressions, no doubt, are applied to God after the manner of men, and must not be interpreted so as to lower the Divine perfections. But they clearly authorize us to conclude that an humble declaration of our wants is highly pleasing in the sight of God, that he commands us to draw them out in language, and that when they are properly presented, and then only, can they be regarded as worthy of the divine acceptance.

It must also be admitted, that prayer cannot alter the decrees of God. We must never subject ourselves to the imputation of asking that on our account a change should be effected in the Divine purpose. We must only supplicate that God will freely bestow, for our benefit, what is agreeable to his will, and thus our prayers will contribute to the fulfilment of his purpose. Whatever benefits he has decreed to bestow upon us, he has decreed to bestow in answer to prayer. We are not at liberty to employ foolish and sophistical reasonings in opposition to God himself. Let us hear his own declaration, Ezek. xxxvi. 36, 37, "Then the heathen that are left round about you shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it. Thus saith the Lord God, YET THIS WILL I BE ENQUIRED OF BY THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL THAT I MAY DO IT FOR THEM. The firmness of the divine purpose to bestow the favour is first declared, after which Jehovah makes known his will that, as the means of obtaining the favour, the prayers of his people shall be employed. Again, Jer. xxix. 11—13, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go, and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

Those persons, accordingly, who have been most highly celebrated both for piety and for wisdom when they had been informed of any divine purpose in their favour, devoted themselves most earnestly to prayer. David and Daniel are instances. When David has heard of any remarkable promises of God, and believes that they will be accomplished, he does not simply offer thanksgiving for that manifestation of the divine kindness, but prays, with all possible earnestness, that God will be pleased to show kindness, "according to his word." "And now," says he, "O Lord God, the word that thou hast spoken concerning thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and do as thou hast said. For thou, O Lord of hosts, God

of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house; THEREFORE HATH THY SERVANT FOUND IN HIS HEART TO PRAY THIS PRAYER UNTO THEE," 2 Sam. vii. 25, 27. When Daniel had understood, by the prophecies of Jeremiah, that seventy years had been fixed for the duration of the Babylonish captivity, and perceived that that period was near a close, he immediately "set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications," that the restoration of his country might be accomplished, Dan. ix. 2, 3. In this manner these eminently wise and holy men thought themselves highly honoured in being permitted to contribute, by their prayers, to the execution of the divine purpose. So remote were they from the employment of those sophistical reasonings which we have undertaken to refute.

Equally unfounded is the pretence, that the prayers of believers are an insult to the Deity. He testifies that they are, in the highest degree, acceptable in his sight, Cant. ii. 14. "Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." And how should they be otherwise? They are *the mind of the Spirit*, suggested to us by himself, on account of which he chooses to be called the *Spirit of supplication*, Zech. xii. 10. And on what principle should prayers be disrespectful to the *Divine Majesty*? while every lawful prayer, such as that which Christ has taught us, contains an avowal of submission to the divine will. For we reckon no man to be at liberty so to narrow his prayer as to set limits to the Holy One of Israel.

The absurdity of this opinion must meet the convictions of Christians, when both Jews and Gentiles acknowledged it. Rabbi Simeon lays down this rule, *do not make thy prayer fixed*. An ancient poet, quoted by Plato in his Alcibiades, recommended to his friends this form of prayer, "Give us, O King Jupiter, what is good, whether we ask it or not; withhold what is evil, even though we ask it." Xenophon, in the first Book of the Memorabilia of Socrates, says, "He simply prayed to the gods to give what is good, because the gods know best what is good." We shall subjoin a quotation from Valerius Maximus, Lib. vii. cap. ii. "Socrates, who was a sort of earthly oracle of human wisdom, thought that no petition ought to be offered to the immortal gods beyond this, that they would bestow what is good; because they would know what was most advantageous to every one, while we, in most cases, ask what it would be better for us not to obtain. The minds of mortal men are shrouded in the thickest darkness. What mistakes, then, must you commit on every hand in scattering your blind prayers! You ask riches, by which many have been destroyed. You desire honours, by which vast numbers have been overthrown. You direct your views to political power, which has often led to most disastrous results. You resolve to make a splendid marriage, but this, too, if it has sometimes adorned, has often ruined families. Cease, then, foolishly to wish those possessions which, however desirable in themselves, will involve you in misery. Commit yourself wholly to the disposal of heaven, which is always ready to bestow blessings freely, and is competent to select what is most suitable." Juvenal had been indebted to this passage for what we find in his Tenth Satire. How much were it to be wished that his poetry had been always equally remarkable for wisdom and virtue.

Nil ergo optabunt homines? Si consilium vis,
Permittes ipsis expendere numinibus, quid
Conveniat nobis, rebusque sit utile nostris.

Nam pro jucundis aptissima quæque dabunt Dii.
Charior est illis homo, quam sibi.

The majesty of God, therefore, does not require that we shall present no prayers or desires, but that we shall lay them before him with reverence, and heartily submit them to his wisdom and to his will.

With as little truth is it alleged that prayers are an insult to the *goodness* of God. We do not press them on the notice of God as the meritorious causes of the blessings he bestows, but view them rather as the marks and consequences of divine grace acting on our minds. The knowledge we have of what is good and desirable; the desire we have to obtain it, and the expression of that desire, accompanied by proper dispositions towards God, are themselves gifts which are usually followed up by another gift, the granting to us of the things desired, according to the saying in the Psalms, (lxxxix. 10,) "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." The gifts of God become usually the more delightful to us in consequence of our obtaining them by our prayers. We then find that they came to us not by chance, but from the love of our heavenly Father, who keeps his ear open to our prayers. Hence arise comfort, joy, and filial love; Ps. cxvi. 1, "I love the Lord, because he hath heard the voice of my supplication." Meanwhile, it is certain that God bestows on us many blessings for which prayers have not been offered, which we did not even feel that we needed, and by his grace anticipates our application.

Having now refuted the sophistical objections of the flesh, we shall proceed to lay down the true arguments which convince us of the advantage and necessity of prayer. They are chiefly two, of which one respects *God*, and the other respects *ourselves*. With regard to God, prayer is a most important part of that worship by which he commands us to do him honour. Hence, the whole of worship is described to be, *calling on the name of the Lord*. An instance of this, if I mistake not, we have in the first age of the world; Gen. iv. 26, "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." These words are susceptible of a great variety of significations, which, in order to bring out the full meaning, may without impropriety be joined. "To call upon the name of" sometimes signifies to *pronounce a name*, and acknowledge it by open proclamation. In that sense, God said to Moses, Ex. xxxiii. 19, "I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee." Which God actually did, as the narrative informs us. Ex. xxxiv. 5. "The Lord descended in a cloud, and stood with him there, "and pronounced the name of the Lord." In what manner this was done we are told, v. 6,

And he proclaimed, "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious." Again, this phrase signifies *to call on the name of the Lord by prayer*, as in Gen. xiii. 4, where it is related of Abram, that he came "unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first and Abram called there on the name of the Lord." Lastly, it signifies *to call one's self by the name of a person*. Isa. xlv. 4, "One shall say, I am the Lord's, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob." Let us join all these, and we shall have the complete sense. At that time, the name of Jehovah began to be honoured by a public profession, and the true worshippers of God distinguished themselves, in this manner, from idolaters and carnal men. Again, they honoured that name by calling upon it in public assemblies, and, on this account, received their denomination from Jehovah, being called the sons of God in opposition to the

ungodly Cainites, and their followers, who are called *men*; Gen. vi. 2. But in later times the whole worship of God was included in this calling on the name of the Lord; Joel ii. 32. "And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered." Hence, a temple dedicated to the worship of God is called a *house of prayer* "For my house shall be called a house of prayer to all people." Isa. lvi. 7, compared with Luke xix. 46. In like manner, the ancient Christians designated their sacred buildings, *oratories, houses of prayer*.

As the pious observation of the duty of prayer is the most important of religious acts, so to omit it entirely is to banish all fear of God. Such a charge, though unfounded, Eliphaz brought against Job. (xv. 4.) *Thou castest off fear, and thou breakest off, or puttest away, fear before God*. Heathens are charged with ungodliness on this ground, that they did not call upon God. Jer. x. 25. "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name?"

It is evident from the nature of the subject, that holy prayers render the highest possible honour to God. They contain an acknowledgment and declaration, *1st*, Of the Supreme MAJESTY of God, to which every knee in heaven and in earth ought to bow. He declares by an oath that he reserves this glory to himself as his peculiar right, Isa. xlv. 23. What a lovely sight, and how worthy of God, when ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands of angels, unite "with every creature which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea," and with one voice sing, "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever," Rev. v. 11—13. *2nd*, Of the ALL-SUFFICIENCY of God, who has in himself all that is necessary for his own happiness, and for that of all his creatures. Prayer necessarily implies that confession which the Psalmist has beautifully expressed, "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations. The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down. The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest their hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing," Psa. cxlv. 13—16; and again, in Psa. civ. 27—31. *3rd*, Of the OMNISCIENCE and perfect wisdom of God, by which he examines the wants of all his creatures, knows all the prayers of all suppliants, whether they are clothed in speech, or simply conceived in the mind, and has at his command all possible methods of assisting his people, in whatever difficulties they may be placed, Ps. cxxxix. 1—4, 17, 18. *4th*, Of the ALMIGHTY POWER of God. Whatever we ask from God we acknowledge that he is able to accomplish, and so we ascribe to him this glory, that He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us," Eph. iii. 20. *5th*, Of the inexhaustible GOODNESS of God. To this, as a perpetual fountain, all men, at all times and places, have liberty to approach, that "with joy they may draw water out of the wells of salvation," Isa. xii. 3. *Lastly*, In prayer we acknowledge that God is *all*, and we are *nothing*; that from him and in him is all that we are or have; and that in all things we are dependent on his will. All these views of prayer have a reference to God.

If, again, we look at ourselves, a wide view of the necessity and advantage of prayer is instantly opened. In ourselves we are in want of all things, so that, unless

supported by divine aid, we cannot subsist for a moment. We can do nothing that is not permitted to us by Him, whose "is the earth, and the fulness thereof," Ps. xxiv. 1, and who "giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not." For the most part, he does not choose to bestow blessings except in answer to prayer. "Ye have not," says James, "because ye ask not," Ja. iv. 2. And truly we receive them easily enough, if we obtain them by groanings, and wishes, and prayers; for what is this but to open our mouths that we may be filled?

But *on whom lies the duty of prayer?* We may confidently reply, *on all men without exception.* It is a part of the worship of God inculcated even by natural religion, and pronounced by the consciences of the heathens themselves to be just and necessary. Timeus in Plato, speaks excellently: "All who have the slightest claim to the reputation of wisdom, at the commencement of every undertaking, whether great or small, in every case will call upon God." From Plato's writings it is evident that Maximus Tyrius spake justly when he said, "The life of Socrates was full of prayer." Plato enjoins it as a universal duty on all men, "In all that we do or say we ought constantly to begin with God." Xenophon is of opinion that it ought to be observed publicly in the State. Having given some instructions as to arranging and establishing a commonwealth, he advises that they should begin by propitiating the favour of the gods; and assigns the reason, "for those transactions which are carried on in concert with the Deity will evidently succeed better and more advantageously to the State." Akin to this are the words of Pliny: "Well and wisely did our ancestors enjoin that every thing said or done should be commenced with prayer: for nothing would be begun by men in a right manner, or with proper foresight, without the assistance, advice, and favour of the immortal gods."

Still, although the duty of prayer is incumbent on all men without exception, none can discharge it aright but a believing and regenerate person, by the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit, who alone forms in their minds the prayers which God accepts. At the same time, the inability of unrenewed men to pray aright does not remove the obligation to prayer, which flows from man's natural inferiority to God. Nor yet must it be imagined that they are thus laid under a necessity to commit sin in their prayers. The same law which obliges them to pray obliges them to pray well. If they cannot do so, the fault is their own. And it is certainly much better that unrenewed men should pray in some manner, with a natural conviction of their wants, and an acknowledgment of the Majesty and goodness of God, than that they should not pray at all. The mere fact of their praying, so far as that is concerned, is not displeasing to God, though the sin which cleaves to it is justly condemned. Instances of this appear in Ahab,¹ and in the Ninevites.² To do a good thing in a defective manner is a smaller evil than to omit it altogether.

Thus it is the duty of parents to instruct and habituate their children, from their earliest childhood, to prayer, and not to wait till they can discover in them the marks of regeneration. For who knows at what time, and by what means, the Spirit will first exert his saving influence? One thing is certain, while believers alone can pray aright, their faith was bestowed on them for the express purpose that they may *continue in prayer.*

FOOTNOTES

1 Kings xxi. 27, 29. 2 Jonah iii. 8—10.