

LECTURES

ON THE

PRAYER OF FAITH:

READ

BEFORE THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS AT AUBURN, N. Y. AND
PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST.

BY

JAMES RICHARDS, D. D.

NEW-YORK:

JONATHAN LEAVITT, 182 BROADWAY.

MDCCCXXXII.

JOHN T. WEST, PRINTER.

BV
213
.R52

Gift
Fayman Presb. Assn
3-14-1932

LECTURE I.

JAMES 1. 5, 6, 7.—“If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him; but let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.”

THIS is one of the many promises made to prayer; and, if properly understood, would teach us both how to pray and what to expect from the performance of this duty. It places distinctly before us not only the indispensable obligation but the peculiar importance of prayer. “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.” But if God will give wisdom to him that asks—and that because he is liberal and upbraideth not—no reason can be assigned why he should not give other needed blessings to those who duly solicit them. In this passage we are taught also the manner in which prayer should be offered, to make it acceptable and availing. “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 think he shall receive any thing of the Lord.” It is not every kind of prayer which is *prevalent*, but the prayer of faith only. The doubting or wavering man has no reason to expect any thing from the Lord. If he receive at all, it must be in a way of mere sovereignty, and not according to promise; for none of his prayers possess the character to which the promise of acceptance is made.

But to place this whole subject more distinctly before you, I shall direct your attention to the following inquiries:

- I. What is the great end or design of prayer?
- II. Wherein does the importance of this duty appear?

III. What are some of the characteristics of an acceptable prayer?

IV. What is to be understood by the *prayer of faith*, and how far has God bound himself to hear and answer such prayer?

I. What is the great end or design of prayer?

1. It is not, most surely, to inform the Most High of our situation or our wants. He surrounds us—He pervades us—He knows our up-rising and down-sitting, and understandeth our thoughts afar off, and before they are formed within us. All that we have, all that we are, is naked and open to him, and has been so from eternity. It is not, therefore, to *inform Him* that we pray.

2. Nor is it to excite Him to greater degrees of pity or benevolence, or to render our own case or the case of others more interesting to him than before. He is infinitely kind and benevolent always, and beholds the wants of his creatures with the same invariable compassion from everlasting to everlasting. The immutability of his character and attributes necessarily implies this.

3. Nor, in the third place, is it the design of prayer to effect any change in the purposes of God. This would be impossible, since he is of one mind, and who can turn him? What his soul desireth, that he doeth in heaven above and in earth beneath. And why should he not? His purposes are all infinitely wise and infinitely good, formed in view of the whole system of things, and of every possible event. They could not change but for the worse. But let no one infer from this that prayer is vain. Though it cannot change or persuade God, it may accomplish very important ends in relation to ourselves.

1. It may have, and is designed to have, a beneficial influence in preparing us for the mercies we implore. It gives us a *deeper sense of our dependence on God*—a benefit of no inconsiderable moment to creatures liable, as we are, to forget that dependence. It promotes *humility*, by bringing us to the foot of God's throne, where we can scarcely fail to contrast our littleness and vileness with his infinite greatness, purity, and glory. It engages us to put our trust in God for all that we need, as well as to thank him for all that we receive.

2. It is designed also as an act of homage to our Creator—of homage due to his infinitely glorious attributes, from creatures capable of perceiving them, and who, at the same time, are the daily recipients of his bounty. Prayer, in this view of it, is God's *right*, as well as our duty; and would it not be strange to say that the more perfect this right, the less are we obliged to regard it? But what else do they say, who refuse to pray, on the ground that God is so great and so good as to make prayer unnecessary?

3. Prayer, moreover, is designed as a mean of obtaining good, and of warding off evil. There is no reason to doubt that God, in the plans of his providence, may have connected important blessings with our prayers, just as in other instances he connects the end with the means. He may have determined that certain blessings shall be received only in answer to prayer—and all in accordance with his unchangeable purposes and designs. Prayer, in such cases, does not move God to alter his purposes—though it may be said that in view of prayer, prayer of a certain character, and flowing from the lips of certain individuals, and on certain occasions, his purposes from eternity were formed. There is no other and no greater difficulty in this case than in any other where the means and the end are conjoined, whether in the determination of the divine counsels or in the order of providence. And if any man will say, because God is fixed or unchangeable in his purpose, I will not pray—prayer can make no difference in my allotments, either here or hereafter—might he not with equal propriety add, neither will I work, nor eat, nor use any means whatsoever to prolong my days? for here also the divine purpose is fixed, and the *result*, for aught he knows, as much connected with his own agency in the one case as in the other.

It is enough for us to be assured that God has established a connexion between *asking* and *receiving*—a connexion more or less certain according to circumstances, but of sufficient moment to awaken our hopes, and to become a powerful stimulus to prayer. All the promises made to prayer imply this, as do also the many instances in which God has heard the cries of his people.

II. Our second inquiry is, Wherein does the great importance of prayer appear?

We shall do little more here than name some of the principal articles which may be regarded as an answer to this inquiry.

1. We mention first of all the *fact* that God is styled in his word a prayer-hearing God. "*O thou that hearest prayer,*" is the language of David, when moved by the Holy Ghost. This is God's name, and his memorial to all generations; and it carries with it a powerful argument for addressing his throne. It is virtually proclaiming to us that he is upon a throne of mercy—a throne accessible to us at all times, where we may bring our sins, our troubles, and our wants, with the joyful assurance that he will not turn away his ear from our prayer. Prayer is not then a useless but an important duty.

2. But this truth is more distinctly announced in the repeated commands given us to pray. It is not left to us to consider prayer as a mere privilege which we may *neglect* or *use* at our pleasure. God has enjoined it in a great variety of forms, and thereby intimated that it is a duty well pleasing to him, and of deep importance to ourselves. We are commanded to pray *always*—to pray without fainting—to pray with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints. We are commanded to pray in our closets—in our domestic circles—in our public assemblies—every where lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting, and for all men. Prayer must then be a duty of imperative obligation, and of the highest moment to ourselves and to others.

3. The same conclusion follows most obviously from the promises which God has made to prayer. Many of these are upon record; and though somewhat diversified as to character, they all go to establish an important connexion between asking and receiving the blessings we desire. "The Lord will hear when I call upon him; he will fulfil the desire of them that fear him; he will also hear their cry. He hath not said to the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain. Before they call I will answer; and while they are yet speaking I will hear. Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened

unto you. Ask and receive, that your joy may be full." This is the current language of the Bible. How strict the connexion is between asking and receiving, or under what circumstances God has pledged himself to hear and answer the prayers of his people, it is not my intention in this place to inquire. It is sufficient to have it understood that a connexion exists, of more or less strictness; for this fully establishes the importance of prayer.

4. We shall be still more impressed with this truth if we consider a moment what prayer has actually done.

The prayers of Abraham were effectual in removing divine judgments, and in procuring important blessings for himself and for his children; and if there had been ten righteous men in Sodom, his prayers would have saved that guilty city.

The prayers of Moses suspended the plagues of Egypt and saved Israel at the borders of the Red Sea; and often did his prayers avert divine judgments from this guilty people, while in the wilderness and on their journey to the promised land. Behold him interceding for them when they made and worshipped the molten calf, and when they rebelled at the return of the spies. Never was the prayer of mortal more disinterested, or more ardent; and never perhaps did God answer in a manner more gracious and condescending. "I have heard thee," says God, "and pardoned thy people according to thy word." (Ex. 32: Num. 19.) I might refer you to the prayers of Joshua, of Gideon, of Barak, Samson, David, and others, which were graciously accepted and answered. Often has God heard his people in the very thing which they asked. "Elijah prayed, and it rained not for the space of three years and six months; he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain." The prayers of Elisha proved a surer defence to Israel, than thousands of chariots and horsemen. And what shall we say of *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Daniel*—all of whom had power with God, and prevailed? Their cries entered into the ears of the God of Sabaoth, and were honoured with signal interpositions of the divine mercy. *Prayer* saved the Jews from the murderous sword of Haman in the days of Esther and Mordecai; *prayer* rescued Peter from prison, when his life was in danger from the blood-thirsty Herod; and prayer released Paul and Silas

from their chains, and from a dungeon at Philippi: and was it not in answer to prayer, that the Holy Ghost descended on multitudes on the day of Pentecost, and so many thousands were turned to the Lord? The *efficacy* of prayer demonstrates the importance of prayer. But another circumstance which shows the high importance of this duty is,

5. God often suspends his favours upon the condition of our asking for them, and asking in a suitable manner. Thus God says to Ezekiel, "For this will I be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." He had spoken of bringing them back from the Babylonish captivity, and resettling them in their native land;—of giving them a new heart and a new spirit;—but this he would not do but in answer to prayer; and therefore in another place he declares, "*Then shall ye find me, when ye shall seek for me with all your heart, and with all your soul;*" implying that they would not find him until they sought him in this manner. Much the same thing is taught in God's answer to Solomon at the dedication of the temple, and which may be regarded as a general rule, at least, of his dealings towards that nation. "If I shut up heaven, that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; if my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land:" which implies that if they would not thus humble themselves under divine judgments, and pray, and make supplication, they had no reason to expect that their calamities would be removed. But the apostle appears for ever to settle this subject, when he says in direct terms, "ye have not, because ye ask not; ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss;" implying that the blessing is often withheld for want of prayer—and for want of prayer of the right kind. We would not assert that this is always the case—or, which is the same thing, that God never dispenses his favour to individuals, but through the instrumentality of prayer. He is a Sovereign, and may do what he has not promised to do—he may turn aside from the ordinary course of his providence, and magnify the riches of his mercy contrary to our expectations and hopes. We must

not limit *him*, where he has not limited *himself*. Still, if it be a fact, that he often suspends the blessing upon our asking for it, and our asking for it aright, what an argument is this for sincere, humble, and importunate prayer!

6. I mention but one consideration more to illustrate the necessity and importance of this duty—and that is the example of Christ. Christ not only prayed often with his disciples—but he prayed alone, offering up strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save. With him there was no negligence nor weariness in this duty. He rose up sometimes early in the morning, before the day dawned, that he might give himself to prayer; while on other occasions he spent the whole night in this duty. But what did he pray for? He had no sins to pardon, no heart to cleanse. No! but he had Satan and a malignant world to withstand—many labours to perform, and much suffering to endure—and it was one of the circumstances of his humiliation, that he who was naturally and originally possessed of all power, should be in a condition to ask and receive aid from on high. But we are not to suppose his prayers terminated chiefly on himself. His benevolent heart must have often looked abroad, and sent up many a fervent cry for enemies as well as friends. He who was disposed to say on his cross, “Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do,” cannot be suspected of having overlooked them on other occasions, especially when it is recollected how much he constantly laboured for their good. So great an example as this, cannot fail to impress us with the fact that prayer is a duty reasonable in itself, and of the deepest moment, both to ourselves and to others.

III. Shall we inquire in the third place what are some of the characteristics of an acceptable prayer? If the duty be important, we ought to know when it is so discharged as to secure the approbation of him to whom it is directed.

1. I name as one circumstance of acceptable prayer, that it must be the prayer of a *righteous* man;—in other words, of a true Christian. It does not seem possible that God should accept the prayer of the wicked, as it cannot flow from a right spirit. Besides, we are expressly told, that “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, while the prayer of the

upright is his delight." We will not say that God never *hears* the wicked, as he hears the young ravens when they cry. As a compassionate Being, he may so far regard their supplications as to deliver them out of their troubles. This is what the Psalmist intimates, when he celebrates the goodness of God towards "those who go down into the sea in ships, and do business in the great waters. They see the wonders of the Lord in the deep. For he commandeth the stormy wind and lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to heaven; they go down again to the depths; their soul is melted, because of trouble. Then they cry unto the Lord, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still."

This is a wonderful expression of God's mercy—but no proof that he accepts the prayers of those whom he thus delivers from a watery grave. God is *holy*, and it would be inconsistent with this attribute to approve or accept of an act in his creatures, which had in it no degree of moral worth. He may have compassion on a sinner, and deliver him from trouble when he cries;—but he cannot behold his character or his works with approbation. This has always been a stumbling-stone to many;—and not unfrequently furnished the ungodly with an excuse to withhold prayer altogether. The truth, however, must not be concealed, whatever abuses may be made of it. God hath said, "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall become sin." And David confesses, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." And will he *hear* others, who regard iniquity in their hearts, and whose prevalent disposition is opposition to God and his law? The prayers of such persons, as well as all their other acts, are destitute of love to God and love to man, and cannot be accepted in the sight of him who looks to the very springs of action, and who condemns whatever is not accordant with his law. It appears therefore to be a primary requisite of every acceptable prayer, that it should flow from the heart or lips of a righteous man.

2. But secondly, it must be *sincere*, expressing an unequivocal desire for the object prayed for. It must in truth be the language of the heart—not of the understanding or conscience

simply. Too many of the prayers, even of God's people, we have reason to believe, are deplorably wanting in sincerity. They ask, because they know they must ask ; and not because they truly *desire*. But this is only to play the hypocrite before God, and cannot, most certainly, secure his approbation. He requires *truth* in the inward parts. But we remark,

3. Thirdly, that prayer, to be acceptable and prevalent with God, must be *earnest* as well as *sincere*. No man can doubt that this is an important characteristic of the duty, when rightly performed. We find it entering very deeply into many of the prayers recorded in holy writ, and powerfully recommended by Christ himself. How fervent were the prayers of Abraham, when he pleaded in behalf of Sodom, and when he made supplication for Ishmael ! How did Jacob wrestle with the angel, when he interceded for the life of the mother and the children ! He saw them exposed, as he apprehended, to the destroying sword of Esau, who was coming out to meet him with four hundred armed men, and he said to the angel, the great angel of the covenant, "*I will not let thee go except thou bless me.*" Read the prayers of Moses, of David, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Ezra : with what ardour do they pour out their supplications before God ! With feelings excited and elevated, they take hold of his strength, and plead with an earnestness which shows the fulness of their expectation and desire. And Christ, in the parable of the importunate widow, and of the man who went to borrow three loaves of his friend at midnight, has very distinctly inculcated the necessity, not of sincerity only, but of *earnestness* in our supplications. Nay, he has expressly assured us that such earnestness is both acceptable and available with God. It is the *effectual, fervent* prayer of a righteous man, St. James tells us, that availeth much ; implying that little is to be hoped at any time from our prayers, unless they rise to a holy importunity.

4. Let me remark, however, in the fourth place, that though importunate, they should not be dictatorial or presumptuous. On the contrary, they should ever be marked by the deepest humility. This is an important requisite of every acceptable prayer. It is to the great God that we pray, the dread Majesty of the universe, before whom all nations are as the drop of the

bucket, and as the small dust of the balance : it is to him in whose sight the heavens are not clean, and before whom cherubim and seraphim veil their faces. What are we, that we should speak to this great and glorious Being ! One would think that we should shrink into the very dust at the thought. Surely it becomes us to approach him with the profoundest reverence and humility, laying ourselves at his feet under a deep conviction of the awful distance between him and us. This was the temper of Abraham when he drew near to God in the plains of Mamre. We hardly know which to admire most, the humility of his address, or the persevering ardour with which it was urged. "Behold, now, I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord:" as if it was a great thing—a privilege, of which he felt himself wholly unworthy. And again: "O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but this once." Such also was the temper of the publican, who stood "afar off" from the mercy-seat, and "who dare not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but smote upon his breast, and cried, God be merciful unto me a sinner." And this is the temper, in a greater or less degree, of all acceptable worshippers. Their cry is the cry of the humble; and of them God hath said that he will not despise their prayer. His promise is that he will be nigh unto such as are of a broken heart, and that he will save such as be of a contrite spirit. Without some portion of this spirit transfused into our prayers, it is impossible they should find acceptance with God: while they who have most of it will stand highest in the divine favour, and secure the richest answer to their prayers. The Lord loves to fill the empty vessel—to raise the poor up out of the dust—to feed the hungry, starving soul, while the rich he sends empty away.

5. I add, as a further characteristic of acceptable prayer, that it must proceed from right motives. Nothing is more common than to ask for lawful objects from improper motives. "Ye ask and receive not," says the apostle, "because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." The object might have been right, but the motive was wrong. Something earthly or selfish gave birth to their prayers. Perhaps they desired the gift of miracles, that they might benefit their friends, or

raise their own credit in the world. Perhaps they desired to be saved from the violence of persecution, not that they might serve God with less distraction or extend farther the borders of the Redeemer's kingdom, but that they might be more at ease in their callings, and sink more quietly into the enjoyments of the present life. Perhaps they were divided into parties, and wished some advantage over their respective opponents. But whatever was the object, the motive was wrong. God's glory was not their end—nor their own best good—nor that of others. Whether it were temporal or spiritual blessings which they sought, some earth-born motive lurked beneath; and therefore their prayers were unavailing; as ours also will be, when the motive is such as the all-searching eye of God cannot approve. Then only will our prayers enter into his ears, when they flow from a heart deeply imbued with the spirit of the gospel; when his glory is uppermost with us, and the highest good of his kingdom. In such a state of mind, we shall ask for right things, in a right manner; and God, the unerring judge of our hearts, will accept the service and pronounce his blessing.

6. Finally, I might say, with the apostle in our text, that we should ask *in faith*, nothing wavering: for faith, no doubt, is an essential ingredient in every acceptable prayer.

But as I propose to make this a matter of somewhat extended discussion, I shall defer it till I take up the fourth general inquiry, viz: "What is to be understood by *the prayer of faith*, and how far has God bound himself to hear and answer such prayer?" In the mean time we shall conclude this lecture by remarking that much of the Christian character is developed in the article of prayer. "He that prays much," said the good Fenelon, "loves much; and he that prays little loves little." A prayerless Christian is a contradiction in terms; while he that prays not from a right spirit, how much soever he may abound in the duty, falls short of the Christian character. I know of no criterion more decisive of the *reality* and the *measure* of a man's piety than his prayers. Just so much as he has of the spirit of true devotion, just so much and no more has he of the love of God and the love of man in his heart, and just so much of reverence for God, of faith in God, and every other Christian grace. Tell me how much he prays—with what

sincerity, with what ardour, with what watchfulness, confidence, and perseverance, and for what objects, and I can tell you how much he loves and fears God—how much he loves his neighbour—what is his humility, his spirituality, and his deadness to the world—what his self-denial, his patience, meekness, and fidelity in the cause of his Master. All these virtues are but the modifications of holy love; and the strength of this is measured by the spirit of his devotions.

Judging then by this rule, how much religion have *we*? What is the character of our prayers? Let every one who is in the habit of praying, and praying in secret, answer this question for himself. If he can find what moves him in this duty, and especially what is the preponderating motive, he will find the master spring of his soul—that which settles his character in God's sight; and which, remaining as it is, will settle it in the day of final retribution. He may know both whether his piety be *real*, and whether it be in a declining or progressive state. I commend this subject, my young brethren, most earnestly to your attention. Soon you will be called to leave this sacred retreat, and to enter upon the work of the gospel ministry—a work full of labour, full of difficulty, full of self-denial. Much will you need *diligence*, and *fortitude*, and *patience*, and resignation to the divine will; but above all will you need the spirit of grace and of supplication. If you would be saved from worldliness, from pride, from sloth, and from whatever would dishonour Christ, or hinder the success of your labours, and if you would be eminently holy, or eminently useful, *cultivate a spirit of prayer*. Let this be an object with you *now* in all your preparations for the ministry: and when you shall enter upon this sacred office, do not forget, I entreat you, that *prayer—fervent and believing prayer*—is among the mightiest weapons of your spiritual warfare.

LECTURE II.

JAMES I. 5, 6, 7.—“If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him; but let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.”

IN remarking upon these words in a former lecture, we proposed the following inquiries :

I. What is the great end or design of prayer ?

II. Wherein does the importance of this duty appear ?

III. What are some of the characteristics of acceptable prayer ? and

IV. What is to be understood by the *prayer of faith*, and how far has God bound himself to hear such prayer ?

The first three inquiries have already been considered. We proceed now to the fourth, and ask

First—What is to be understood by the *prayer of faith* ?

This expression seems obviously capable of two senses, and must be understood differently according to the different kinds of *faith* employed in prayer. In the primitive church there is reason to believe that two kinds of faith were thus employed : one *extraordinary*, being peculiar to certain individuals, who had the gift of working miracles ; the other *common*, belonging to all Christians who truly embraced the gospel. Both were the result of divine teaching, though perhaps in a different way ; and both were founded upon the testimony of God ; still they were in various respects different from each other. The *first*, which we denominate *extraordinary*, and which was connected with miraculous operations, was not necessarily, it would seem, a gracious exercise. Certain it is that many wrought miracles, and miracles in Christ's name, who will be

disowned by him at last. Whether they wrought them *with* or *without* faith, is not expressly said; but as they wrought them in Christ's name, there is a fair presumption that it was through faith in that name. And this presumption is the stronger when we consider the language which the apostle holds on the subject of miraculous gifts in general. (1 Cor. 13.) "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal; and though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though *I have all faith*, so as to remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing." Here it is supposed not only that men might work miracles without being Christians, but that they might *work* them in the exercise of faith in the divine power and veracity: nay, that they might possess *all faith*, so as to remove mountains, or the highest degree of faith connected with miracles, and yet be destitute of *charity*, or love. Not so the faith common to all true believers. This in all cases is a gracious or holy exercise. Love is essential to its very being. It not only gives credence to the divine testimony, in whatever manner exhibited, but cordially approves of that testimony. It is not merely an intellectual but a moral exercise; and hence it is described as purifying the heart and overcoming the world. The faith of miracles might exist without a renovated heart; but this never exists except in those who are born of God and love God, and therefore it is placed among the fruits of the Spirit, and regarded as the grand condition of salvation. "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing," saith the apostle, "but *faith which worketh by love*."

It is not to our present purpose minutely to distinguish between these two kinds of faith, nor to inquire how often it is probable they were blended together in the same persons. It will be enough to have it distinctly understood that they were in some important particulars diverse from each other; and therefore that we cannot reason from one to the other as if they were radically and essentially the same.

What has been denominated the *faith of miracles*, because *peculiar* to those who wrought miracles, and *necessary* to such extraordinary displays of the divine power, seems to have been

not only a firm persuasion of the divine power, by which all things possible are alike easy to God, but that the contemplated miracle, in any given case, *would certainly be performed*. *This*, it will be perceived, was more than simply believing that it was the pleasure of God that miracles should be wrought, in greater or less numbers, in the name of his Son, and on fit occasions, and in answer to prayer, and for important purposes, and by the hands of those to whom the gift of working miracles was imparted : for all these things might be believed, and firmly believed, without reaching the point that a particular miracle, in a particular case, would be wrought. Now what we believe and maintain is that the faith of miracles, whatever else it included, always involved a belief that the very miracle contemplated, in any given case, would be accomplished. It did not stop with the fact that God was able to accomplish it, or that he had promised to accomplish it on any supposed conditions, or that he was a God of truth and would not fail to redeem his pledge, but it went to the precise and definite fact that the miracle contemplated would be performed. How this point was reached will be an after consideration ; but that the faith in question did most certainly reach it, we think is evident from the manner in which Christ describes this faith in the eleventh of Mark. When his disciples expressed their surprise at seeing the fig-tree withered away, which he had cursed for its barrenness the day before, he says to them, “Have faith in God : for verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith, *shall come to pass*, shall have whatsoever he saith.” Words could scarcely be framed which should mark with more precision the fact that faith, in this case, was to *believe* that the miraculous events in question would certainly take place. Such a faith he describes both negatively and positively. “Whosoever shall say to this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, and *shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe*.” Believe what ? Why that those things which he saith, *shall come to pass*—in other words, that the predicted miracle should be performed, by the mountain’s being removed and cast into the sea. Doubt-

less such a faith implied an unshaken belief in God's power, by which the miracle was to be accomplished; but is it not certain that it implied more?—a *belief* that it was God's *will* or *pleasure* that the miracle predicted should take place? Keeping in view this kind of faith, and the miraculous events with which it stood connected, our Lord adds, in the very next verse: "Therefore I say unto you, whatsoever things ye desire, when ye pray, *believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.*" "*Believe that ye receive them*" is a description equally *precise* and *definite* with that which he had given in the preceding verse, and obviously implies a *belief* that the things desired and asked in prayer would certainly be received. Nor can it well be questioned that the "*all things whatsoever*" had an immediate and exclusive reference to the subject in hand, or to miraculous operations.

That a persuasion of the certainty of the event, or the miracle to be performed, was *essential* to this peculiar and extraordinary kind of faith, is manifest not only from these words of Christ, but from the *fact* that those who wrought miracles often intimated such a persuasion before the miracle was performed. They commonly, if not universally, prefaced these operations by some declaration of what they intended and expected to do, and thereby virtually predicted what was immediately to follow. Thus Peter, when he healed the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the temple, said to him: "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee:" (implying that he was going to do something;) "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, *rise up and walk.*" And when he cured Eneas, who for eight years had lain sick of the palsy, he said to him, "Eneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole," or is about so to do: "*arise and make thy bed; and he arose immediately.*" It is perfectly obvious in both cases, that the apostle had the *intention* and *expectation* of working a miracle antecedent to its being wrought; and if the miracle had not followed, all must admit that the apostle would have been disappointed; or, which is the same thing, that the event did not fall out according to his expectation and belief.

Another fact, which shows that a persuasion of the certainty of the miracle was essential to the faith by which it was

wrought, is, that those gifted with the power of working miracles did not always attempt to display that power; or, if they did, they failed through unbelief. *Paul*, it is said, left *Trophimus* at *Miletum* sick; which cannot be accounted for but upon one of two suppositions, either that he did not attempt to heal him, or attempted and failed. Whichever be true, it is certain he had no well-grounded persuasion that the thing would be done, otherwise it would have been done, God having bound himself to accomplish whatever his people, upon good and sufficient grounds, firmly believe. We say good and sufficient grounds, for neither the faith of miracles nor any other kind of faith ought to be considered as an unfounded conjecture—a mere persuasion, without cause or reason. On the contrary, this faith, whenever it existed, was a *firm* and *rational* persuasion that the divine power would interpose for a particular purpose. But if *rational*, it must be built on evidence; on evidence not only that the power of working miracles was imparted to men, to be employed on certain fit occasions, and for high and glorious purposes, but that it was the pleasure and purpose of God that a miracle of a particular kind should be wrought at the time and in the circumstances contemplated. This was an important fact to be believed, for nothing short of this would secure a *belief in the certainty of the event*, an essential characteristic of the faith of miracles. But it may be asked, how could it be known that it was the pleasure and purpose of God that a miracle should be wrought in any given case? Whether this question can be answered or not, let it be remembered that this fact of the divine purpose must have been known, or no sure ground for the certainty of the event could have existed. Our reply, however, is, that the purpose of God in the case might have been known by the immediate suggestions of the Holy Spirit. Nor is there any inherent improbability in the supposition that those who wrought miracles by the power of the Holy Ghost should receive intimations from him when and where these mighty works were to be performed. Did he preside over their thoughts and over their words whenever they opened their lips on the subject of their heavenly message, and can it be thought unreasonable or incredible that he should point out to them the fit occasions for those works

by which their message was to be confirmed? Without some supernatural intimation of this kind, it does not seem possible that any firm persuasion of the miraculous event could exist. For, can men believe without evidence? or could evidence be derived from any other quarter, as to the future occurrence of a miracle? But allow the intimation we have supposed, from that ever-present Spirit who was given to the primitive disciples, in his miraculous teaching and guidance, and all difficulty vanishes. What would otherwise appear a weakness or absurdity, becomes a plain and obvious duty. And thus the *faith* of miracles will have something to rest upon, as it is nothing else but giving credit to the divine testimony. It involves the belief that a miracle will be performed in a given case, how strange soever the miracle may be, agreeably to the suggestions of that Divine Spirit by whose agency it is to be accomplished.

Now, with regard to prayers which were offered in the exercise of this faith, we say, once for all, that there can be no doubt that the very thing which was asked was always granted, because this is agreeable to the import of the promise made in the case; and because the very nature of the faith thus exercised presupposed the known purpose of God in regard to the event. It was thus that "Elijah prayed, and it rained not for the space of three years and six months; he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain." But can it be supposed, that he made this prayer without a special intimation from the Divine Spirit that such a petition would be accordant with the will of God? In a manner similar to this, we understand that passage where it is said, "The prayer of faith shall save the sick:" God having promised that miraculous effects should follow a prayer offered up in the exercise of extraordinary or miraculous faith.

But there is another kind of faith employed in prayer, common to Christians of all ages—a faith which takes hold of the divine attributes and the divine promises, without any miraculous intimation concerning the result—a faith which rests distinctly and primarily upon *God's word*, making *that* the rule and limit of its expectations. Whatever is declared in the sacred volume, it stands ready to receive, and to employ as an argument in prayer. Beyond this it never goes. At the same time, it may be remarked that this faith is the fruit and effect

of divine teaching. It is wrought in the soul by that Almighty Agent who enlightens the understanding and sanctifies the heart; and it comprehends in it such a vivid belief of what *God is*, and of what he is ready to do for those who truly seek him, as no unrenewed man ever possessed. Nor is this all—it implies a cordial approbation of the divine character and will. For, as we have already heard, it is a faith which works by love.

How this faith is put forth in the duty of prayer may require some elucidation. I cannot better express my own views, than by saying that faith in this case is directed chiefly to two things—the attributes of God, and the promises which God has made in and through his dear Son.

1. Faith in the first place is directed to the attributes of God, and has much to do with these in the article of prayer. This is clearly implied in the declaration of the apostle, “He that cometh to God must believe that *He is*, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him,” as if there could be no acceptable worship without such belief. But to believe that *God is*, is not simply to believe that *God exists*;—it supposes and implies, that we believe him such a being as he has proclaimed himself to be;—in other words, that we distinctly recognise his glorious attributes as a foundation and encouragement to prayer. And hence it is that, in most of the prayers recorded in the Bible, faith is seen to fix upon some one or more of the divine attributes.

But to enter a little more into detail—let me say that faith *often*, if not *always*, takes hold of the divine power. It comes to God as the Almighty Father of the universe, who with infinite ease controls every event throughout his vast kingdom. Perceiving the whole energy of nature to be in his hands, and that creatures are but the instruments of his power, it acquires assurance that his purposes will stand and that he will execute all his pleasure. Let the day then be ever so dark, or the work to be accomplished ever so difficult, faith finds a refuge in the *power* of God, connected, as it always is, with his unsearchable wisdom and goodness. In truth, *faith* has much more to do with the divine power than we should readily imagine; and it is more frequently described in the sacred writings by its exercises in relation to this attribute than any other.

Thus it is said of Abraham, after he had received the promise of a son, that "he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was fully persuaded that what God had promised he was *able* also to perform." Thus, also, in that greater trial of his faith, when he was called to offer up his only begotten son, he appears to have kept his eye steadfastly fixed on the power of God, "accounting that God was *able* to raise him up, even from the dead."

The same thing is conspicuous in the *faith* of the blind men who followed Jesus in the way, and cried, saying, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on us. (Matt. 9.) When Jesus had come into the house and called them to him, he said, "Believe ye that I am able to do this?" He does not say, believe ye that I *will*? This was a point in his own breast, which they were unable to solve; but, believe ye that I *am able*? To which they replied, "yea, Lord." "And he touched their eyes, and said, according to your faith be it unto you; and their eyes were opened. They no doubt hoped in the mercy of Jesus—but their faith was primarily built upon his power; and this, for aught that appears, was all that was necessary to secure the blessing.

Similar to this was the case of the *leper* mentioned by the same evangelist, (Matt. 8.) and also of the centurion who besought Christ to heal his servant. The leper came to Jesus, saying, "Lord, if thou *wilt*, thou canst make me clean." He had no doubt, it seems, of Christ's power; here his faith was full and unwavering. But he had no *certain*—perhaps no preponderating belief of Christ's *will* or *intention* in the case. "Lord, if thou *wilt*, thou canst," was his prayer, fully recognising the power of Christ to grant his request, and referring the event to his sovereign pleasure.

As to the centurion, his faith was of so remarkable a character as to lead the Saviour to exclaim, "Verily, I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel." And yet his faith chiefly terminated on the power of Christ. For when Jesus proposed to go and heal his servant, the centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but *speak the word only*, and my servant shall be healed." Jesus said, "Go thy way, and *as*, (or since) thou hast believed, so be it

done unto thee ; and his servant was healed from the self-same hour.”

We cannot pursue this thought—but there are many things in the Scriptures which show that faith looks much to God’s power, and that its strength is often measured by the regard which it has to this attribute.

But as it is with the *power*, so it is with the other attributes of God ; faith directs its eye to them all, as they are severally and harmoniously displayed in the works and word of God. If God speak, let it be *where* and *what* it will, faith stands ready to hear, and to give an unqualified assent. Is it asserted in the Bible that God is *wise, infinitely wise* ? Faith fully accredits the assertion, and would do so, even if the characters of wisdom were less visibly inscribed on the works of God. This is a joyful truth on which it safely reposes at all times, and especially in seasons of darkness and calamity, when the aspects of providence are mysterious or foreboding.

Is it said that *God is gracious and merciful*, ready to forgive the penitent and believing ? Faith responds to it with confidence and joy, and flies to the bosom of eternal mercy as its only refuge ; yes, and to this same bosom it delights to carry the sins and the sorrows of others, while with humble, but importunate desires it pleads that they too may receive from this rich and overflowing fountain. It is easy to see, also, that faith looks strongly to the *purity* and *justice* of God—and no less to his *unchanging truth* and *faithfulness*. His truth, indeed, is that glorious attribute to which it necessarily cleaves, and on which it stands, as on a basis firm and immoveable. In nothing perhaps is faith displayed more than in taking God at his word, and in exercising an implicit confidence in his promises. But this brings us to inquire more particularly,

2. How faith regards the promises of God, all of which are made in and through his dear Son. Shall I say it regards them as they are, or according to their true intent and design ? In other words, that it makes them speak a language which the Holy Spirit intended they should speak, without narrowing them on the one hand, or giving them an improper latitude on the other ? These promises are different in their character, and faith knows how to distinguish them. Some are *absolute*, depending on no

condition to be performed, or none which is uncertain. Some are *conditional*, because the blessing promised is suspended on something which *may* or *may not* take place. Other promises are *local*, confined to certain individuals or times, and are of no further importance to believers in general, than as they furnish examples of the divine benignity and faithfulness. Others again are *universal*, because they apply to believers of all times and places. Such is the promise of the pardon of sin, and of the gift of eternal life; and the promise that God will never leave nor forsake his people. Other promises may be called *definite*, because they hold true of every individual, and of every case which comes within the purview of the promise. Such is the promise made to the *faith* of miracles. By the very tenor of the promise the divine veracity stands pledged to the very thing asked or believed, in every case where such faith exists. And such too, in effect, is the promise of eternal life to him that *believes*. But there are promises of a different character, and which cannot with any reason be interpreted with such undeviating strictness. Such are the promises made to believers in relation to their temporal support; and as to the *measure* of success which shall attend their worldly enterprises. These we call *indefinite*, because they are of that general and undefined character which leaves the special application of them to the sovereign pleasure of God. When Christ said to his disciples, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you," meaning food and raiment, and whatever was necessary to their earthly subsistence, they would greatly have mistaken the import of this promise, if they had interpreted it so strictly as to infer that his truth was pledged in all cases to keep them from suffering and want. "Godliness," we know, "hath the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come;" but who would think of inferring from this, that none that are *godly* shall suffer *hunger* and *thirst*, *cold* and *nakedness*—or even the want of all things? Look at the condition of the apostles, who were occasionally subjected to every privation and suffering; and to those ancient worthies, specially commended for their faith, "who were destitute, afflicted, tormented, who wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, in deserts

and in mountains, in dens and caves of the earth," God's word and providence must be the interpreters of each other. Keeping our eye upon this circumstance, we find no difficulty in understanding his promises which pertain to the temporal subsistence and comfort of his children. We all agree to consider them as *indefinite*, holding true in a sufficient number of cases to justify him who made them, and greatly to encourage those to whom they appertain—but not of such strict and undeviating application as to allow of no exception. We believe indeed that according to his promise, God will give every temporal good which he perceives to be best on the whole, and that nothing will be withheld which, in all the circumstances of the case, would not be an evil rather than a blessing. Why may it not be so with respect to things commonly sought in prayer? And why may not the promises which are made to this duty, be interpreted with the same generality? We can see no reason why this should not be done, except in those cases where the will or purpose of God as to the event is already known. In every such instance we cheerfully concede that the promise is to be interpreted *strictly*. Thus it is with the promise made to the faith of miracles, as we have already intimated, and with the promise of pardon and eternal life to the penitent; and thus it is with all those promises which relate to the ultimate spread of the gospel, and the universal reign of Christ. In all these cases the will of God is known, and we cannot doubt that these promises will be literally and strictly fulfilled. But where the will of God is not known, it would seem reasonable, and even necessary, to regard the promise as *indefinite*, holding out encouragement to hope and to prayer, but laying no foundation for certainty as to the particular result. It is in this manner, we suppose, that all those *general* and *comprehensive promises*, made to the believing suppliant in the Scriptures, are to be interpreted. Nor will it make any difference whether these promises relate to things temporal or things spiritual. They seem designed to comprehend whatever may be regarded as a proper subject of prayer. That there are promises of this description, which alike concern every true believer, and which he has a right to plead as often as he comes to the throne of grace for any legitimate object, will not pro-

bably be doubted. When Christ says in his sermon on the mount, (Matt. 7. 7, 8.) “*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened*”—it can hardly be made a question that this language authorizes every man, and especially every true Christian, to ask what he will for himself or for others, pertaining to this life or the next, and to ask with the hope that he shall receive, provided the object be lawful, and that he ask for it in a right manner. And to give the greater encouragement to prayer, Christ adds, “*What man is there of you, who, if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*” Here then is a promise that if we *ask*, we shall *receive*; if we *seek*, we shall *find*; if we *knock*, it shall be *opened unto us*; and it restricts us to no particular kind of blessings—but its language is broad enough to cover all our wants, and all our desires, which at any time we may have occasion to present to the throne of divine mercy.

A serious question now arises: how are we to interpret this promise, and other kindred promises alike comprehensive in their character? I know of but two general opinions which are entertained upon this subject. One is that which I have already suggested, that promises of this kind are to be regarded as *indefinite*, so far at least as they stand related to things where the will or purpose of God is not known; holding true in a sufficient number of cases to encourage hope and excite to prayer—but in no degree pledging the divine veracity that whatsoever we ask with the faith common to true believers, or if you please, in a right and acceptable manner, we shall certainly receive. The other opinion is, that God has bound himself in these promises to give to his children *whatsoever things* they ask *believing*, making no exceptions—but construing the promises as being strictly and universally true, applying to every case where the blessing is sought in the manner required. Thus, if a man were to ask for his daily bread, and to ask it with that faith which he is bound to exercise, the

truth of God stands pledged in the promise to grant it; or if he ask for any other favour, temporal or spiritual, for himself or for others, he may ask with an unwavering assurance that he shall receive, and receive the very thing he asks. Which of these opinions is true? To aid in determining this question, let me solicit your attention to the following remarks:

1. First, it is more desirable in itself, and a far greater privilege to the believer, to have the promise understood with the limitation we have suggested, than to suppose that God is pledged to give the very thing which is asked, be it *wise* or *unwise*, for his own glory or the contrary. Suppose a parent has two sons, and he should say to one, "I will give you *whatsoever* you ask, provided you ask with a dutiful and confiding spirit"—making no exceptions expressed or implied. And to the other, "I will give you *whatsoever* you ask, asking with a right temper—except in those cases where, from my superior wisdom, I perceive it would be better to withhold;" which is the most privileged son? Doubtless we should reply, *he* whose answer to his request is made to turn upon his *father's* wisdom, not *his own*. I hold this case to be precisely parallel with the one under consideration. Interpret the divine promise *strictly*, and the believer is sure to have all that he asks; but is it certain that he will have that which on the whole is most for God's glory, and his own best good? Take the promise with its proposed limitation, and all the attributes of God stand pledged that his petitions shall result in his highest welfare; he shall receive all that is good for him, and nothing shall be withheld but what eternal wisdom perceives would, in all its connexions, prove injurious. Does not this state of the case furnish a strong presumption, that the promise ought to be interpreted with such limitations as we have suggested?

2. Besides: who that is any measure sensible of his own weakness and fallibility, but must be compelled to acknowledge that, in a thousand cases, when he prays, he knows not *what*, all things considered, would be for the best. His desires may be ardent, and directed to an object lawful in itself, and apparently of great moment, when yet he cannot tell whether, in the whole view of the case, it would be better for God to *give* or *withhold*. Why then should he not refer the matter to one

who can tell? Is not this an act of submission which he owes to the all-wise and almighty Governor of the world? Why should he attempt to take a step beyond his proper sphere, and by an *unconditional* and *unqualified* request, affect to give direction to events the accomplishment of which he knows not, and cannot know without a special revelation, would be for his own good, or the good of God's kingdom? If there be any point certain, it would seem that, where our ignorance stands confessed, we ought to refer our petitions to the sovereign pleasure of God.

3. But farther: it has commonly been supposed that our prayers, for many things at least, should be offered with submission. But it is difficult to conceive of any case where this ought to be done, if we interpret the general promises made to prayer without any restriction. We do not ask God to raise the dead and judge the world at the last day *if it may please him*, because his pleasure in regard to those events is already known. Nor could it, as we conceive, with any propriety of language be said that in our prayers we *submit* these events to his sovereign pleasure; because, knowing what that pleasure is, there is no such alternative in the case as is always supposed when we refer an event to his sovereign disposal.

But if all the promises made to prayer are to be understood without any limitation or restriction, pledging God in every case to give the very thing which is asked, how could it ever be our duty to ask with *submission*? Our requests, it would seem, ought to be as unqualified and as absolute as the promise; and the only point to be aimed at would be firmly to believe that our requests would be granted.

4. Again: it is not unimportant to remark that the apostle John appears to have interpreted the promises made to prayer with the same limitations which we have done; in all cases, I mean, where the will or purpose of God is not known. (1 John 5. 14, 15.) "This," says he, "is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask any thing *according to his will* he heareth us." That is, as I understand the passage, he lends a gracious ear, and grants our requests: "*if we ask any thing according to his will.*" But when can this be said of us? If the *will* of God here be understood to mean his *sovereign pleasure* as well as his *preceptive will*—*what* he

wisely purposes as to the event, no less than what he commands as a matter of duty, (and we can see no reason why an interpretation thus comprehensive should not be given,) then it is obvious that we do not ask *according to his will*, in the full meaning of the apostle, unless three things can be affirmed of our petitions: first, that they are *authorized*, embracing proper subjects of prayer; secondly, that they are offered in the spirit which God requires; and thirdly, that they *coincide* with his purpose or his sovereign pleasure, being such requests as in his wisdom he will deem it proper to grant. When all these circumstances concur, no doubt can be entertained that God will hear our prayers, and answer us in the very thing we ask. But this is adopting the principle advocated in the preceding remarks, that God is no farther bound by his general promise to hear the prayers of his people, than to give such things as in his wisdom he shall judge most suitable in the case. Not a few commentators, both ancient and modern, have regarded *this* as the true sense of the apostle; and hence one remarks that the language here employed is a key to the promises made to prayer. But it may be asked if the very next words are not incompatible with this view: "And if we know that he hear us, *whatsoever we ask*, we know that we have the petitions we desired of him." The terms are universal—"whatsoever we ask." True: but let it be remembered it is whatsoever we ask *according to his will*. If the will of God, therefore, be taken to mean his *sovereign*, as well as his *preceptive* will, the limitation is the same as before. Still, it may be inquired, who shall decide this point? Perhaps the language intends no more than the *will of God* expressed in his commands; and then the declaration will be universal, that all things absolutely which we ask of God in prayer will be granted, provided they are things lawful, and sought in a right spirit. Let the appeal then be made to facts: does God grant all that his people ask, even when they ask for things which he has commanded and in the manner which he directs? He has commanded them to pray for the salvation of all men, and to pray with great fervency and importunity: and did never one of his children, not even prophet or apostle, obey this command? *perfectly* I do not ask, but *sincerely* and *acceptably*? Certain it is that, whatever

may have been their prayers, the world still lieth in wickedness.

Look at another fact: the prayer of Moses that he might go over and see the good land which was beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain and Lebanon. This desire was natural, and, in itself considered, reasonable: he longed to see the inheritance of God's people, from the days of Abraham the subject of promise—the place where God would specially reveal his mercy, and fulfil his covenant with his chosen. But God would not hear his prayer: and why? Not because he was not sufficiently humble, or sufficiently in earnest; not because he did not take hold of the greatness of God's power, and the greatness of his mercy, for he plainly did both; but because God had otherwise determined. His prayer did not coincide with the divine purpose. He had sinned at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh, in not sanctifying the Lord in the presence of his people; and God had doomed him to fall short of the promised land; nor was it in the power of prayer to reverse this sentence. Doubtless there were reasons pertaining to the divine government which operated against the petition of Moses; but it is enough to say that God in his infinite wisdom did not see fit to grant it. Yet, as a proof of his acceptance of Moses, and that he was not displeased with his request, he sent him to the top of Pisgah, whence, with strengthened vision, "he showed him all the land which he swore unto his fathers," and said, "I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes; but thou shalt not go over thither."

Look at the case of David, when he prayed for the life of his child. He fasted, and wept, and lay all night upon the earth. Was he not truly humbled? was he not importunate? did he not go to God in the full belief that from his infinite benevolence he was disposed to hear prayer? For all that appears, he was never in a better frame of mind; and yet God did not grant the thing asked for. We may suppose indeed that God approved of his prayer as an act of worship, while it did not consist with his wise and holy purpose to grant the request. But it may be said that David had no *right* to pray for the life of the child, seeing its death had been denounced by the prophet. He had the same right, let it be remembered, that Hezekiah had to pray

for his own life after the prophet said to him, "Set thine house in order; for thou shalt *die* and *not live*." The truth is, neither David nor Hezekiah regarded the threatening as *absolute*. Had they done so, they would not have dared to interpose their supplications. But they supposed there was at least a peradventure in the case; and this encouraged them to pray. One, however, was heard, and the other was not. Can any other reason be assigned for this difference than that the prayer of one coincided with the divine purpose, while that of the other did not coincide?

How was it with Paul, who thrice besought the Lord that the thorn in his flesh might be removed, and received for answer, "My grace is sufficient for thee?" It cannot be pretended that he was answered in the very thing which he asked; and yet, from the answer which he did receive, it seems impossible not to conclude that his prayer was acceptable as an act of duty. What shall we say of his constant and earnest prayer for his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh? Did he not sincerely and fervently desire their salvation? Did he not plead for it with increasing importunity? and yet, as a nation, they perished in their unbelief. There is, however, a still stronger case in the history of this apostle: I mean the final perdition of some who enjoyed the benefit of his own ministry. Did he do his duty with regard to these men, or did he not? Most certainly he did not, unless he made their salvation the subject of solemn and earnest prayer. If he did his duty, why were they not saved, on the supposition that God has promised to grant whatsoever his people ask in a right manner? One of two things must be true, either that they perished through his unfaithfulness, or that, he being faithful, they perished notwithstanding. Which of these alternatives shall we take? If the first, we make the apostle guilty of their blood, contrary to one of his most solemn appeals, that he was "pure from the blood of all men;" if the second, we give up the principle that God has promised to grant every thing which his people ask, provided they ask in the manner which he has required.

From this extended view of the subject, what other conclusion can be drawn than that the promises made to prayer must be

understood with limitation in all cases where the will of God is not known.

If the question then return, how does faith regard the promises of God? our answer must be as before—it regards them as they are, and embraces them according to their true intent and design. *Absolute* promises it regards as absolute, *conditional* as conditional; those which are *definite* as holding true in every case, subject to no restriction or limitation; and those which are *general* or *indefinite* it regards as *indefinite*, and interprets them accordingly. Some of the promises it considers as specifically made to the apostles, and others in the primitive church, and not applicable to Christians in general; others as belonging to Christians of all ages, and designed to awaken hope and encourage prayer.

But it may be asked how can these promises encourage prayer unless we believe them? And if we believe them, do they not ensure to us the very things we ask? Is it not said, “All things whatsoever ye ask, *believing*, ye shall receive?” and again, “Whatsoever things ye desire, when ye pray, *believe that ye receive them*, and ye shall have them?” True: but these promises were made to the immediate disciples of Christ, who had the power of working miracles, and from the connexion, it appears, ought to be limited to them and to others gifted with the same power. Whenever they exercised the faith necessary to a miracle, the divine veracity stood pledged that the miracle should be performed. But as these promises were made to a peculiar kind of faith, it is evident that they cannot be applicable to Christians at large, by whom no such faith is exercised. But farther: suppose that these promises had respect to all true Christians equally, it is plain that they secure nothing until the events prayed for are believed. “*Believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them*,” is the promise. It is not enough of course to believe that God is *able* to grant our petitions, we must believe that he *will*, or the condition of the promise is not complied with, and God is not bound. But how shall we come to this belief? We cannot come to it through the medium of the promise, because the promise pledges nothing, and secures nothing, until we actually

believe. It affords no evidence that God will grant our requests, until we have first believed that he will grant them, and then the evidence comes too late to be the ground of our faith, because we have believed already. We cannot apply the promise until we have fulfilled the condition of the promise ; but in fulfilling this condition we have exercised the faith required, which is a fact prior to the application of the promise and not subsequent to it ; and consequently does not depend upon this application. It must be obvious, we think, to all, that faith in this case cannot depend on the promise, whatever else it depends on ; but the promise, as to its obligatory force, depends on faith—which must always be presupposed before the promise can be applied. To suppose, as some have done, that faith is founded on the promise, is to suppose that the effect exists anterior to the cause, or that the effect has no cause ; for until faith exists the promise avails nothing, as to the certainty or probability of the desired event, and cannot be the ground of faith, unless it be to believe that God will hear us, if we first believe that he will hear us. From what quarter then must the evidence be derived on which this prior faith is to be built ? It cannot be drawn from the promise, as we have seen, for that pledges nothing until this faith is in being ; nor from any other source, conceivable by us, short of an immediate and special revelation. That such a revelation is possible will readily be admitted, but it will be long, if we mistake not, before, in the judgment of the Christian world, it will be regarded as in any degree probable.

It is again inquired, however, if Christians do not draw near to God in the full assurance of faith, and if they are not required to ask in faith, nothing wavering ? Certainly ; this is their privilege, and this is their duty. But what is their faith *assured* of ? Not that they shall receive every thing they ask, whether it be best for them or otherwise ; but that God is a being of infinite perfection, ready to do for his people more than they can ask or even think, and who will do all that they desire, unless his eternal wisdom shall decide to the contrary. This is what their faith is assured of, when it is grounded upon the sacred oracles. And is not this enough ? Does not this place their hopes and expectations on the best possible foundation ? Besides, let us suppose that when they pray they refer

their petitions to the sovereign pleasure of God, as they ought most surely to do in all cases, where that pleasure is not known; what is the import of such reference? Is it not that God *should grant or not grant*, as it may seem good in his sight? Let the event then be as it may, their prayers are virtually answered, though they receive not the very things they desired. They receive what is best for them; and so far as they were sincere in submitting the matter to the will of God, they have what they ultimately chose.

Should the question then return, with which this lecture commenced, "*What is it to pray in faith, and how far has God bound himself to hear such prayer?*" the answer will be obvious. If the *faith* concerned be the faith of miracles, then it is to pray believing that the very thing which is asked will be granted; but if reference be had to the faith common to all true Christians, then it is to pray firmly believing in the being and attributes of God, in the truth of his gracious promises, and in the general fact that he is ready to hear prayer, and to grant to his people whatsoever they ask *according to his will*, withholding nothing which he perceives best for them, and most for his glory. In all this, however, it is to be understood that we ask in Christ's name, and expect a gracious hearing on his account solely, as the great Mediator of the new covenant, through whom all the blessings of that covenant are bestowed.

We conclude this long discussion with two remarks.

And first: if we have taken a right view of this subject, it is easy to perceive that they must labour under a mistake who imagine that their prayers shall infallibly be answered in the very thing they ask, provided they ask in the manner which God has prescribed, or in a way acceptable to him. They ask, it may be, for the conversion of an individual, or for many individuals; and if they ask with a certain degree of fervour, connected with confidence in God as the hearer of prayer, they suppose that he is bound by his promise to grant their requests; and hence it has been common for such persons not only to indulge the hope that their prayers will be literally answered—a circumstance which we do not condemn—but to predict with confidence that the thing prayed for will certainly be given. They are sometimes heard to say that they have gotten a

promise to this effect, because, as God has promised to hear prayer of a certain character, and believing that they themselves have offered such prayer, they conclude that God is now pledged by his promise, and will verify it to them. Their mistake, however, lies in this : God has made no such promise as they suppose to prayers which his people offer to him in the exercise of a true and living faith. They construe the promise as if it werè *definite*, or *universal*; holding true in every case, and subject to no limitation or restriction : whereas we believe, and have endeavoured to show, that the promise is *indefinite* in all cases where the will or purpose of God is not known : of course, that the veracity of God is not pledged to grant the very things we solicit ; but that he gives or withholds according to his sovereign pleasure. But, to prevent all misconception, let me explicitly state that there is the utmost encouragement to pray, and that the hopes of God's people may justly rise high that he will hear and answer their prayers, and often in the very things which they desire ; that they have cause to hope the more, the more their hearts are drawn out to him, the more they can see of his glory, and lie at his feet, and exalt his eternal majesty in their hearts ; the more they can take hold of his strength, and apprehend the truth of his promises ; the more they can see of Jesus, the great Mediator, at the right hand of God, and the stronger their reliance upon the fulness of his righteousness, and the preciousness of his blood. Nay, they may have so much hope, arising from these and other circumstances, that God intends to hear their prayers in the very things which they ask, as to indulge in a prevailing expectation that he will ; but they have no certainty, nor can they arrive at it by any process whatever. God is not bound, nor can they certainly tell what he will do until the event shall declare it, unless you suppose a special revelation.

But I hear it said, would God breathe into my heart such desires, so *sincere*, so *ardent*, unless he intended to answer them ? I may reply, it is not very probable, but still there is no certainty. Had not Paul very sincere and ardent desires for the salvation of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh ? and were not these desires the fruit of the Spirit ? These desires, however, though often expressed in prayer,

were not granted. And it may be so with respect to many who offer fervent prayers now. Besides, where has God said that he will not *move* his people to feel and pray as they ought to do, without giving them the very things which they ask? Are they not bound to plead for every blessing, and especially for spiritual blessings, with the utmost sincerity, and, where the blessing is supremely important, with all the strength and fervour of their souls? Would they not thus plead if they were perfectly sanctified? and would it not be a privilege to plead in this manner, though God should not always grant the very thing which they desire? Who can say that God does not often impart this spirit of prayer chiefly for the purpose of bringing his children near to him, and perfecting that holy fellowship which they have with the Father and the Son?

Far be it from us to dampen the faith and hope of Christians by these remarks, or in any degree to diminish the proper inducements to prayer. Would that they might feel a thousand times more confidence in the power, and wisdom, and grace, and covenant faithfulness of God than they do; and that they took a far deeper interest in the cause of truth and the salvation of their fellow men! But we desire to guard against a spirit of presumption, and to promote a correct mode of thinking and speaking on this deeply momentous subject.

2. We remark, secondly, that as we have no authority for predicting any particular event simply on the ground of our prayers, as though God had bound himself to grant whatsoever we desire, so, on the other hand, it is venturing too far to assert that we shall not have this or that mercy unless we pray for it. We must be careful not to limit God where he has not limited himself. There are many favours which he ordinarily gives in answer to prayer, and some perhaps which he will not give unless duly solicited at his hands. But it is wise in us not to invade his sovereignty, nor to set bounds to his goodness where *he* has set none. It is usual for God to connect the salvation of children with the fidelity of parents; and if a parent is unfaithful, and neither prays nor labours for the conversion of his children, as he ought to do, it might justly be said that he has little or no reason to expect their conversion. It is God's usual method to connect revivals of religion with

the prayers and fidelity of Christians in those places where revivals occur; and it might be proper to say that Christians have no reason to expect a revival in such places, while they remain in a great measure indifferent to this object, and neither pray nor labour for it with becoming zeal. But is it not going too far to assert that this is God's only method of building up his cause? that a revival will never be experienced and sinners converted until Christians awake and cry mightily to God for the descent of his Spirit? In other words, that God will not pour out his Spirit upon a congregation but in answer to solemn and special prayer by his people for this object? Such language is often employed, but we think it *unguarded*: it is warranted neither by the tenor of God's promises nor by the events of his providence. He does more for his people often than they ask, and sometimes surprises them by a mercy which they neither looked for nor requested. I could mention several important revivals of religion, (nearly twenty,) if an ingathering of souls into the Redeemer's kingdom ought to be so denominated, which were not preceded, so far as human eyes could discern, by any special spirit of prayer on the part of the Lord's people. They were manifestly asleep when the heavenly bridegroom came, and were roused into action only by his almighty voice calling dead sinners from the tomb.

Such events do not happen to exculpate the *unbelief*, the *slothfulness*, and *stupidity* of Christians, but to display God's sovereignty, and to overwhelm us with the boundless riches of his mercy.

I know it may be said that it is not easy to determine whether such revivals as I have alluded to were not, after all, the immediate answer to prayer. Some person, however obscure or unheeded, may have prayed for them some time or other, if not immediately preceding their commencement. This, indeed, is possible; though no evidence can be produced of the fact. But, were this admitted, one thing is certain: the churches, as collective bodies, were asleep; and this is enough for our purpose. It shows that the blessing was not necessarily suspended on their prayers—at least those solemn and earnest prayers to which the promise of God is evidently made. God has promised, for the purpose of encouraging his people

to pray ; and he fulfils his promises in such circumstances, and often with such particularity, as to inspire his people with confidence and joy ; but this hinders not the display of his sovereign mercy towards individuals and communities whenever and wherever he may judge it will subserve the purpose of his glory. Let us beware then of taking ground which he himself has not taken, and of dealing out assertions concerning the operations of his grace which neither his word nor his providence will sustain. At the same time, let us also beware, that our very caution do not betray us into lukewarmness and unbelief ; and that, under a pretext of divine sovereignty, we excuse our want of zeal in the cause of man's salvation. We act under a fearful responsibility, and danger awaits us on every side. Our only safety lies in making God's word the rule of our faith, and his glory the end of our actions. May he give to us that *humble, inquisitive, and impartial* spirit which is intimately connected with successful investigation, and which will be the surest pledge of our understanding and obeying the truth.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



3 9015 07463 2749