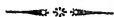


SERMON XVIII.*

The Most High a Prayer hearing God.



PSALM lxxv. 2.

O THOU THAT HEAREST PRAYER.

THIS psalm seems to be a psalm of praise to God for some remarkable answer of prayer, in the bestowment of some public mercy ; or else was written on occasion of some special faith and confidence which David had, that his prayer would be answered. It is probable that this mercy bestowed, or expected to be bestowed, was some great public mercy, for which David had been very earnest and importunate, and had annexed a vow to his prayer ; and that he had vowed a vow to God, that if he would grant him his request, he would do thus or thus, to praise and glorify God.

This seems to be the reason why he expresses himself as he does in the first verse of the psalm : “ Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Sion ; and unto thee shall the vow be performed ; ” i. e. that praise which I have vowed to give thee, on the answer of my prayer, waiteth for thee, to be given thee as soon as thou shalt have answered my prayer ; and the vow which I made to thee shall be performed.

In the verse of the text, is a prophecy of the glorious times of the gospel, when “ all flesh shall come ” to the true God, as

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to the God who *heareth prayer* ; which is here mentioned as what distinguishes the true God from the gods to whom the nations prayed and sought, those gods who cannot hear, and cannot answer their prayer. The time was coming when all flesh should come to that God who *doth hear prayer*.

DOCTRINE.

It is the character of the Most High, that he is a God that hears prayer.

I shall handle this point in the following method.

1. Show that the Most High is a God that hears prayer.
2. That he is eminently such a God.
3. That he is so distinguishingly, or that herein he is distinguished from all false gods.
4. Give the reasons of the doctrine.

I. The Most High is a God that hears prayer. Though he is infinitely above all, and stands in no need of creatures ; yet he is graciously pleased to take a merciful notice of poor worms of the dust. He manifests and presents himself as the object of prayer, appears as sitting on a mercy seat, that men may come to him by prayer. When they stand in need of any thing, he allows them to come to him, and ask it of him ; and he is wont to hear their prayers. God in his word hath given many promises that he will hear their prayers ; the scripture is full of examples of it ; and God, in his dispensations towards his church, manifests himself to be a God that hears prayer.

Here it may be inquired, What is meant by God's hearing prayer ? There are two things implied in it.

1. His accepting the supplications of those who pray to him. He accepts them when they come to him ; their ad-

dress to him is well taken, he is well pleased with it. He approves of their coming to him, and approves of their asking such mercies as they request of him, and approves of their manner of doing it. He accepts of their prayers as an offering to him ; he accepts the honor they do him in prayer.

2. He acts agreeably to his acceptance ; and that two ways.

(1.) He sometimes manifests his acceptance of their prayers, by special discoveries of his mercy and sufficiency which he makes in prayer, or immediately after. God is sometimes pleased to manifest his acceptance of his people's prayers : He gives them special communion with him in prayer. While they are praying, he as it were comes to them, and discovers himself to them ; gives them sweet views of his glorious grace, purity, sufficiency, and sovereignty ; and enables them, with great quickness, to rest in him, and leave themselves and prayers with him, submitting to his will, and trusting in his grace and faithfulness. Such a manifestation God seems to have made of himself in prayer to HANNAH, which so quieted and composed her mind, and took away her sadness. We read in the first chap. of the first book of Samuel, how earnest she was, and how exercised in her mind, and that she was a woman of a sorrowful spirit. But she came and poured out her soul before God, and spake out of the abundance of her complaint and grief ; then we read, that she went away, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad, verse 13, which seems to have been from some refreshing discoveries which God had made of himself to her, to enable her quietly to submit to his will, and trust in his mercy, whereby God manifested his acceptance of her.

Not that I conclude that persons can hence argue, that the particular thing which they ask will certainly be given them, or that they can particularly foretell from it what God will do in answer to their prayers, any farther than he has promised in his word ; yet God may, and doubtless does, thus testify his acceptance of their prayers, and from hence they may confidently rest in his providence, in his merciful ordering and disposing with respect to the thing which they ask.

(2.) God manifests his acceptance of their prayers, by answering them, by doing for them agreeably to their needs and supplications. He not only inwardly and spiritually discovers his mercy to their souls by his Spirit, but outwardly in his providence, by dealing mercifully with them in his providence, in consequence of their prayers, and by causing an agreeableness between his providence and their prayers.

I proceed now,

II. To show that it is eminently the character of the true God, that he is a God that hears prayer. This appears in several things.

1. In his giving such free access to him by prayer. God in his word manifests himself ready at all times to allow us to come to him. He sits on a throne of grace ; and there is no vail to hide this throne, and keep us from it. The vail is rent from the top to the bottom ; the way is open at all times, and we may go to God as often as we will. Although God be infinitely above us, yet we may come with boldness. Heb. iv. 14, 16. " Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." How wonderful is it that such worms as we should be allowed to come boldly at all times to so great a God !

Thus God indulges all kinds of persons, of all nations, Jews or Gentiles. 1 Cor. i. 2, 3. " Unto all that in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours ; grace be unto you," &c. God allows such access to all of all ranks ; none are so mean but that they may come boldly to God by prayer. Yea, God allows the most vile and unworthy ; the greatest sinners are allowed to come through Christ. And God not only allows, but encourages, and frequently invites them ; yea, God manifests himself as delighting in being sought to by prayer. Prov. xv. 8. " The prayer of the upright is his delight ;" and in Cant. ii. 14, we have Christ saying to the spouse, " O my dove, let me hear thy

voice; for sweet is thy voice." The voice of the saints in prayer is sweet unto Christ; he delights to hear it.

The freeness of access by prayer that God allows them, appears wonderfully in his allowing them to be earnest and importunate; yea, to that degree as to take no denial, and as it were to give him no rest, and even encouraging them so to do. Isa. lxiii. 6, 7. "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest." Thus Christ encourages us, as it were, to weary God out by prayer, in the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, Luke xviii. at the beginning. So, in the parable of the man who went to his friend at midnight, to borrow three loaves, Luke xi. 5, &c.

Thus God allowed Jacob to wrestle with him, yea, to be resolute in it. God allows men to use, as it were, a violence and obstinacy, if I may so speak, this way; as in Jacob, who, when God said, "Let me go," said, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." So it is spoken of with approbation, when men are violent for the kingdom of heaven, and take it by force. Thus Christ suffered the blind man to be most importunate and unceasing in his cries to him, Luke xviii. 38, 39. He continued crying, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me." Others who were present rebuked him, that he should hold his peace, looking upon it too great a boldness, and an indecent behavior towards Christ, for him thus to cry after him as he passed by. But Christ himself did not rebuke him, though he did not cease at the rebuke of the people, but cried so much the more. Christ was not offended at it, but stood and commanded him to be brought unto him, saying, "What wilt thou that I should do to thee?" And when the blind man had told him, Christ graciously granted his request.

The freedom of access that God gives in prayer, appears also in allowing us to come to him by prayer for every thing we need, both temporal and spiritual, whatever evil we need to be delivered from, or good we would obtain. Phil. iv. 6. "Be careful for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and

supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

2. That God is eminently of this character, appears in his hearing prayer so readily. He often manifests his readiness to hear prayer, by giving an answer so speedily, sometimes while they are yet speaking, and sometimes before they pray, when they only have a design of praying. So ready is God to hear prayer, that he takes notice of the first purpose of praying, and sometimes bestows mercy thereupon: Isa. lxxv. 24. "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." We read, that when Daniel was making humble and earnest supplication to God, God sent an angel to comfort him, and assure him of an answer, Dan. ix. 20....24.

And when God defers for the present to answer the prayer of faith, it is not from any backwardness in God to answer, but for the good of his people, sometimes that they may be better prepared for the mercy before they receive it, or because another time would be the best and fittest time on some other account. And even then, when God seems to delay an answer, the answer is indeed hastened, as in Luke xviii. 7, 8. "And shall not God avenge his own elect that cry unto him day and night, though he bear long with them? I tell you, that he will avenge them speedily." Sometimes, when the blessing seems to tarry, God is even then at work to bring it about in the best time and best manner: Hab. ii. 3. "Though it tarry, wait for it; it will come, it will not tarry."

3. That the Most High is eminently one that hears prayer, appears by his giving so liberally in answer to prayer: James i. 5, 6. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask it of God, who giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not." Men often show their backwardness and loathness to give to those who ask of them, both by the scantiness of their gifts, and by upbraiding those who ask of them. They will be sure to put them in mind of these and those faults, when they give them any thing; but, on the contrary, God both gives liberally, and upbraids us not with our undeservings, when he gives.

God is plenteous and rich in his communications to those who call upon him. Psal. lxxxvi. 5. "For thou art good and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all that call upon thee;" and Rom. x. 12. "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him."

Sometimes God not only gives the thing asked, but he gives more than is asked. So he did to Solomon, 1 Kings iii. 12, 13. "Behold, I have done according to thy words: Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any rise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honor; so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee, all thy days." Yea, God will give more to his people than they can either ask or think, as is implied in that, Eph. iii. 20. "Now, unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

4. That God is eminently of this character, appears by the greatness of the things which he hath often done in answer to prayer. Thus, when Esau was coming out against his brother Jacob, with four hundred men, without doubt fully resolved to cut him off, Jacob prayed to God, and God turned the heart of Esau, so that he met Jacob in a very friendly manner; as in Gen. xxxii. So in Egypt, at the prayer of Moses, God brought those dreadful plagues, and, at his prayer, removed them again. When Samson was ready to perish with thirst, he prayed to God, and God brought water out of a dry jaw bone, for his supply, Judg. xv. 18, 19. And when he prayed, after his strength was departed from him, God strengthened him, so as to pull down the temple of Dagon on the Philistines; so that those whom he slew at his death were more than all those whom he slew in his life.

Joshua prayed to God, and said to the sun, "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon, and thou, moon, in the valley of Ajalon;" and God heard his prayer, and caused the sun and moon to stand still accordingly. The prophet "Elijah was a

man of like passions" with us ; " and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain ; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. . . And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit ;" as the Apostle James observes, James v. 17, 18. So God confounded the army of Zerah, the Ethiopian, of a thousand thousand, in answer to the prayer of Asa, 2 Chron. xiv. 15, &c. And God sent an angel, and slew in one night an hundred and eighty thousand men of Sennacharib's army, in answer to Hezekiah's prayer, 2 Kings xix. 14, 15, 16, 19.

5. This truth appears, in that God is, as it were, overcome by prayer. When God is displeased by sin, and manifests his displeasure, and comes out against us in his providence, and seems to oppose and resist us ; in such cases, God is, speaking after the manner of men, overcome by humble and fervent prayer. " The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," James v. 16. It has a great power in it. Such a prayer hearing God is the Most High, that he graciously manifests himself as conquered by it. Thus Jacob conquered in the wrestle which he had with God. God appeared to oppose Jacob in what he sought of him ; he did, as it were, struggle against him, and to get away from him ; yet Jacob was resolute, and overcame. Therefore God changed his name from Jacob to Israel ; for, says he, " as a prince thou hast power with God and with men, and hast prevailed," Gen. xxxii. 28. A mighty prince indeed ! to be great enough to overcome God : Hos. xii. 4. " Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed ; he wept and made supplication unto him "

So Moses, from time to time, did in this sense overcome God by prayer. When his anger was provoked against Israel, and he appeared to be ready to consume them in his hot displeasure, Moses stood in the gap, and by his humble and earnest prayer and supplication averted the stroke of divine vengeance. This appears by Exod. xxxii. 9, &c. and by Numb. xiv. 11, &c.

III. Herein the Most High God is distinguished from false gods. The true God is the only God of this character ; there is no other of whom it may be said, that *he heareth prayer*. Those false gods are not gods that hear prayer, upon three accounts.

1. For want of a capacity to know what those who worship them pray for. Many of those things that are worshipped as gods in the world, are things without life ; many are idols made by their worshippers ; they are mere stocks and stones, that know nothing. They are indeed made with ears ; but they hear not the prayers of them that cry to them, let them cry ever so loudly : They have eyes ; but they see not, &c. Psal. cxv. 5....9.

Others, though they are not the work of men's hands, yet are things without life. Thus, many worship the sun, moon, and stars, which, though glorious creatures, yet are not capable of knowing any thing of the wants and desires of those who pray to them.

Others worship some certain kinds of brute animals, as the Egyptians were wont to worship bulls, which, though they be not without life, yet are destitute of that reason whereby they would be capable of knowing the requests of their worshippers. Others worship devils, instead of the true God : 1 Cor. x. 20. " But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils." These, though they are beings of great powers and understandings, and great subtlety, have not that knowledge which is necessary to capacitate them fully to understand the state, circumstances, necessities, and desires of those who pray to them. No devil is capable of a perfect understanding of the circumstances and need of any one person, much less of attending to, and being thoroughly acquainted with, all who pray to them through the world.

But the true God perfectly knows the circumstances of every one that prays to him throughout the world ; he perfectly knows the needs and desires of every one. If there be millions praying to him at once, in different parts of the world,

it is no more difficult to him, who is infinite in knowledge, to take notice of all, and perfectly to be acquainted with every one, than of one alone. But it is not so with any other being but the Most High God.

God is so perfect in knowledge, that he doth not need to be informed by us, in order to a knowledge of our wants ; for he knows what things we need before we ask him. The worshippers of false gods were wont to lift their voices and cry aloud, lest their gods should fail of hearing them, as Elijah tauntingly bid the worshippers of Baal do, 1 Kings xviii. 27. But the true God hears the silent petitions of his people. He needs not that we should cry aloud ; yea, he knows and perfectly understands when we only pray in our hearts, as Hannah did, 1 Sam. i. 13.

2. False gods are not prayer hearing gods, for want of power to answer prayer. Idols are but vanities and lies ; in them is no help. As to power or knowledge, they are nothing ; as the apostle says, 1 Cor. viii. 4. "An idol is nothing in the world." As to the images that are the works of men's hands, they are so far from having any power to answer prayer, or to help them that pray to them, that they are not able at all to act : "They have hands, and handle not ; feet have they, but they walk not ; neither speak they through their throat." They, therefore, that make them, and pray to them, are senseless and sottish, and make themselves stocks and stones, like unto them : Psal. cxv. 7, 8, and Jer. x. 5. "They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not : They must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them ; for they cannot do evil ; neither also is it in them to do good." As to the hosts of heaven, the sun, moon, and stars, although mankind receive benefit by them, yet they act nothing voluntarily, but only by necessity of nature ; therefore they have no power to do any thing in answer to prayers. And devils that are worshipped as gods, they are not able, if they had disposition, to make those happy who worship them, and can do nothing at all but only by divine permission, and as subject to the disposal of divine providence.

False gods can none of them save those that pray to them ; and therefore, when the children of Israel departed from the true God to idols, and were distressed by their enemies, and cried to God in their distress, God reprov'd them for their folly in worshipping false gods, by bidding them go and cry to the gods whom they had served, and let them deliver them in the time of their tribulation, Josh. x. 14. So God challenges those gods themselves, in Isa. xli 23, 24. "Show us things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods ; yea, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and behold it together. Behold ye are of nothing, and your work of nought : An abomination is he that chooseth you."

These false gods, instead of helping those who pray to them, cannot help themselves. The devils are miserable tormented spirits ; they are bound in chains of darkness for their rebellion against the true God, and cannot deliver themselves.

3. False gods are not gods that hear prayer, for want of a disposition to help those who pray to them. As to those lifeless idols whom the Heathen worship, they are without both understanding and will. As to the devils, who in the dark places of the earth are worshipped as gods, they have no disposition to help those who cry to them ; for they are cruel spirits ; they are the mortal enemies of mankind, that thirst for their blood, and delight in nothing but their misery. They have no more disposition to help mankind, than a parcel of hungry wolves or lions would have to protect and help a flock of lambs. And those that worship and pray to them get not their good will by serving them : All the reward that Satan will give them, for the service which they do him, is to make a prey of them, and devour them.

I proceed now,

IV. To give the reasons of the doctrine ; which I would do in answer to these two inquiries : 1. Why God requires

prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies on men? 2. Why God is so ready to hear the prayers of men?

INQUIRY 1. Why doth God require prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies? To this I shall answer both negatively and affirmatively.

(1.) Negatively. 1. It is not in order that God may be informed of our wants or desires. God is omniscient, and with respect to his knowledge, unchangeable; his knowledge cannot be added to. God never is informed of any thing, nor gains any knowledge by information. He knows what we want a thousand times more perfectly than we do ourselves. He knows what things we have need of before we ask him; he knows our desires before we declare them by prayer.

2. Nor is it to dispose and incline God to show mercy: For though, in speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes in scripture represented as though he were moved and persuaded by the prayers and cries of his people; yet it is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers; for it is no more possible that there should be any new inclination or will in God, than new knowledge. The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by any thing in the creature; but the spring of God's beneficence is within himself only; he is self moved; and whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature, but in God's own good pleasure. It is the will of God to bestow mercy in this way, viz. in answer to prayer, when he designs beforehand to bestow mercy, yea, when he has promised it; as Ezek. xxxvi. 36, 37. "I the Lord have spoken it, and will do it. Thus saith the Lord, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be an antecedent to the bestowment of mercy; and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer, as though he were prevailed on by prayer.

Yet God is not in fact prevailed on or made willing by prayer. But when he shows mercy in answer to prayer, his

intention of mercy is not the effect of the prayer ; but that the people of God are stirred up to prayer, is the effect of God's intention to show mercy. Because God intends to show mercy, therefore he pours out the spirit of grace and supplication.

(2.) Affirmatively. There may be two reasons given why God requires prayer in order to the bestowment of mercy ; one especially respects God, and the other respects ourselves.

1. With respect to God, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgment of our dependence on God, to his glory. As God hath made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures ; and it is fit that he should require this of those who would be the subjects of his mercy. That we, when we stand in need of any mercy of God, or desire to receive any mercy from him, should go to God, and humbly supplicate the divine Being for the bestowment of that mercy, is but a suitable acknowledgment of our dependence on the power and mercy of God for that which we need, and but a suitable honor paid to the great Author and Fountain of all good.

2. With respect to ourselves, God requires prayer of us in order to the bestowment of mercy, because it tends to prepare us for the receipt of mercy. Fervent prayer many ways tends to prepare the heart for the receipt of the mercy prayed for. Hereby is excited a sense of our need of the mercy, and of the value of the mercy which we seek, and at the same time are excited earnest desires of it ; whereby the mind is more prepared to prize it, and rejoice in it when bestowed, and to be thankful for it. Prayer, with that confession which should be in prayer, may be the occasion of a sense of our unworthiness of the mercy we seek ; and the placing of ourselves in the immediate presence of God may make us sensible of his majesty, and we may be humbled before him, and be fitted to receive mercy of him. Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of

faith in God's sufficiency, that so we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received.

INQUIRY 2. Why is God so ready to hear the prayers of men? To this I answer.

1. Because God is a God of infinite grace and mercy. It is indeed a very wonderful thing, that so great a God should be so ready to hear our prayers, though we are so despicable and unworthy; that he should give free access at all times to every one; should allow us to be as importunate as we will, without esteeming it any indecent boldness; should hear all sincere prayers put up to him; should be so ready to hear, and so rich in mercy to them that call upon him; that worms of the dust should have such power with God by prayer; that God should do such great things in answer to their prayers, and should show himself, as it were, overcome by them. This is very wonderful, when we consider the distance between God and us, and consider how we have provoked God by our sins, and how unworthy we are of the least gracious notice.

And it can be resolved into nothing else but infinite mercy and grace. It cannot be from any need that God stands in of us; for our goodness extendeth not to him. Neither can it be from any thing in us to incline the heart of God to us: It cannot be from any worthiness in our prayers, which are in themselves very miserable polluted things. But it is because God delights in mercy and condescension. He is herein infinitely distinguished from all other gods: He is the great fountain of all good, from whom goodness flows as light from the sun.

2. We have a glorious Mediator, who has prepared the way, that our prayers may be heard consistently with the honor of God's justice and Majesty. Not only has God in himself mercy sufficient for this, but the Mediator has provided that this mercy may be exercised consistently with the honor of God. Through him we may come to God, and God may show mercy to us: He is the way, the truth, and the life; no man can come to the Father but by him. This Mediator

hath done three things to make way for the hearing of our prayers.

(1.) He hath by his blood made atonement for sin, so that our guilt need not stand in the way, as a separation wall between God and us, and that our sins might not be a cloud through which our prayers cannot pass; and by his atonement he hath made the way to the throne of grace open. God would have been infinitely gracious if there had been no Mediator; but the way to the mercy seat would have been blocked up. But Christ hath removed whatever stood in the way. The vail which was before the mercy seat "is rent from the top to the bottom," by the death of Christ. If it had not been for the death of Christ, our guilt would have remained as a wall of brass, to hinder our approach. But all is removed by his blood, Heb. x. 17, &c.

(2.) Christ has, by his obedience, purchased that the prayers of those who believe in him should be heard. He has not only removed the obstacles to our prayers, but has merited a hearing of them. His merits are the incense that is offered with the prayers of the saints, which renders them a sweet savor to God, and acceptable in his sight. Hence the prayers of the saints have such power with God; hence the prayer of a poor worm of the dust had such power with God, that in answer God stopped the sun in his course for about the space of a whole day; hence such unworthy creatures as we are able to overcome God; hence Jacob as a prince had power with God, and prevailed. Our prayers would be of no account, and of no avail with God, were it not for the merits of Christ; for in themselves they are miserable worthless things, and might justly be odious and abominable to God.

(3.) Christ enforces the prayers of his people, by his intercession at the right hand of God in heaven. He hath entered for us into the holy of holies, with the incense which he hath provided, and there he makes continual intercession for all that come to God in his name; so that their prayers come to God the Father through his hands, if I may so say; which is represented in Rev. viii. 3. 4. "And another angel came and stood

at the altar, having a golden censor ; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar, which is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God, out of the angel's hand."

This was typified of old by the priest's offering incense in the temple, at the time when the multitude of the people were offering up their prayers to God ; as Luke i. 10. " And the whole multitude of the people were praying without, at the time of incense."

APPLICATION.

I. Hence we may learn, how highly we are privileged, in that we have the Most High God revealed to us, who is a God that heareth prayer. The greater part of mankind are destitute of this privilege ; they are ignorant of this God ; the gods whom they worship are not prayer hearing gods. Whatever their necessities are, whatever calamities or sorrows they are the subjects of, if they meet with grievous and heavy afflictions, wherein they cannot help themselves, and man is unable to help them, they have no prayer hearing God to whom they may go. If they go to the gods whom they worship, and cry to them ever so earnestly, it will be in vain. They worship either lifeless things, that can neither help them, nor know that they need help ; or wicked cruel spirits, who are their enemies, and wish nothing but their misery, and who, instead of helping them, are from day to day working their ruin, and watching over them, as an hungry lion watches over his prey.

How are we distinguished from them, in that we have the true God made known to us ; a God of infinite grace and mercy ; a God full of compassion to the miserable, who is ready to pity us under all our troubles and sorrows, to hear our cries, and give us all that relief which we need ; a God who delights in mercy, and is rich to all that call upon him ! How highly privileged are we, in that we have the holy word of

this same God, to direct us how to come to him, and seek mercy of him ! And whatever difficulties or distress we are in, we may go with confidence and great encouragement to him with all our difficulties and complaints. What a comfort may this be to us ! And what reason have we to rejoice in our own privileges, highly to prize them, and to bless God that he hath been so merciful to us, as to give us his word, and reveal himself to us ; and that he hath not left us to cry for help to stocks, and stones, and devils, as he has left many thousands of others !

OBJECTION. I have often prayed to God for these and those mercies, and God has not heard my prayers.

To this I shall answer several things.

(1.) It is no argument, that God is not a prayer hearing God, if he give not to men what they ask of him, to consume upon their lusts. Oftentimes, when men pray for these and those temporal good things, they desire them chiefly to gratify their lusts. They desire them for no good end, but only to gratify their pride or sensuality. They pray for worldly good things chiefly from a worldly spirit : It is because they make too much of an idol of the world ; and if so, it is no wonder that God doth not hear their prayers : James iv. 3. “ Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, to consume it upon your lusts.”

It is no argument that God is not a prayer hearing God, that he will not grant your request, when you ask him to give you something of which you will make an idol, and set it up in opposition to him ; or that he will not hear you, when you ask of him these and those things to use as weapons of warfare against him, or as instruments to serve his enemies. No wonder that God will not hear you, when you pray for silver, or gold, or wool, or flax, to offer them to Baal. If God should hear such prayers, he would act as his own enemy, in as much as he would bestow on his enemies the things which they desire out of enmity against him, and to use against him as his enemies, and to serve his enemies.

(2.) It is no argument that God is not a prayer-hearing God, that he heareth not *insincere* and *unbelieving* prayers. How can we expect that God should have any respect to that which has no sincerity in it? God looketh not at words, but at the heart; and it is fit that he should do so. If men's prayers be not hearty, if they pray only in words, and not in heart, what are their prayers good for? And why should that God who searches the heart and tries the reins have any respect to them?

Sometimes men do nothing but dissemble in their prayers; and when they do so, it is no argument that God is ever the less a prayer-hearing God. that he doth not hear such prayers; for it is no argument of want of mercy. Sometimes men pray for that in words which they really desire not in their hearts. Sometimes men pray to God that he would purge them from sin, when at the same time they show by their practice that they do not desire to be purged from sin, but love sin, and choose it, and are utterly averse to parting with it. So they will pray for other spiritual blessings, of which they have no real desire. In like manner they often dissemble in the pretence and show, which they make in their prayers, of a dependence on God for mercies, and of a sense of his sufficiency to supply them. In our coming to God, and praying to him for such and such things, there is a show that we are sensible that we are dependent on him for them, and that he is sufficient to give them to us. But men sometimes seem to pray, who are not sensible of their dependence on God, nor do they think him to be sufficient to supply them. For some things that they go to God for, they all the while trust in themselves; and for other things they have no confidence in God.

Another way in which men often dissemble is, in seeming to pray and to be supplicants in words, when in heart they pray not, but challenge and demand. They show in words as though they were beggars; but in heart they come as creditors, and look on God as their debtor. In words they seem to ask these and those things as the fruit of free grace; but in heart they account it would be hard, unjust, and cruel, if

God should deny them. In words they seem humble and submissive, but in heart they are proud and contentious ; there is no prayer but in their words.

It doth not render God at all the less a prayer hearing God, that he distinguishes, as an all seeing God, between real prayers and pretended ones. Such prayers as those which I have just now been mentioning, are not worthy of the name of prayers ; and they are so accounted in the eyes of him who searches the heart, and sees things as they are. Nor would men account such things to be prayers, any more than the talk of a parrot, that knows not what it says, were it not that they judge by the outward appearance.

All prayer that is not the prayer OF FAITH, is insincere ; for prayer is a show or manifestation of dependence on God, and trust in his sufficiency and mercy. Therefore, where this trust or FAITH is wanting, there is no prayer in the sight of God. And however God is sometimes pleased to grant the requests of those who have no FAITH, yet he has not obliged himself so to do ; nor is it an argument of his not being a prayer hearing God, when he hears them not.

(3.) It is no argument that God is not a prayer hearing God, that he exercises his own wisdom as to the time and manner of answering prayers. Some of God's people are sometimes ready to think, that God doth not hear their prayers, because he doth not answer them at the times when they expected ; when indeed God doth hear them and will answer them, in the time and way to which his own wisdom directs.

The business of prayer is not to direct God, who is infinitely wise, and needs not any of our directions, who knows what is best for us ten thousand times better than we, and knows what time and what way are best. It is fit that God should answer prayer, as an infinitely wise God, in the exercise of his own wisdom, and not ours. God will deal as a father with us, in answering our requests. But a child is not to expect that the father's wisdom will be subject to his ; nor ought he to desire it, but should esteem it a privilege, that the parent who takes care of him, and provides for him, is wiser than he, and will provide for him according to his own wisdom.

As to particular temporal blessings for which we pray, it is no argument that God is not a prayer hearing God, that he bestows them not upon us ; for it may be that God sees the things for which we pray not to be best for us. If so, it would be no mercy in him to bestow them upon us, but a judgment. Such things, therefore, ought always to be asked with submission to the divine will.

But God can answer prayer, though he bestow not the very thing for which we pray. He can sometimes better answer the lawful desires and good end we have in prayer another way. If our end be our own good and happiness, God can perhaps better answer that end in bestowing something else than in the bestowment of that very thing which we ask. And if the main good we aim at in our prayer be attained, our prayer is answered, though not in the bestowment of the individual thing which we ask : And so that may still be true which was asserted in the doctrinal part, viz. *that God always hears the prayer OF FAITH.* God never once failed of hearing a *sincere* and *believing* prayer ; and those promises for ever hold good, “ Ask, and ye shall receive ; seek, and ye shall find ; knock, and it shall be opened to you : For every one that asketh, receiveth ; and he that seeketh, findeth ; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

2. The *second use* may be, of reproof to those that neglect the duty of prayer. If we enjoy so great a privilege as to have the true God, who is a prayer hearing God, revealed to us, how great will be our folly and inexcusableness, if we neglect the privilege, make no use of it, and deprive ourselves of the advantage of it, by not seeking this God by prayer. They are hereby reprov'd who neglect the great duty of secret prayer, which is more expressly required in the word of God than any other kind of prayer. What account can those persons give of themselves, who neglect so known a duty ? It is impossible that any among us should be ignorant of this command of God. How daring, therefore, is their wickedness, who live in the neglect of this duty, if any such there be among us ! And what can they answer to their Judge, when he shall call them to an account for it ?

Here I shall briefly say something to an **EXCUSE** which some may be ready to make for themselves. Some may be ready to say, *If I do pray, my prayer will not be the prayer of faith, because I am in a natural condition, and have no faith.*

ANSWER 1. This excuses not from obedience to a plain command of God. The command is to all to whom the command shall come. God not only directs godly persons to pray, but others also. In the beginning of the second chapter of Proverbs, God directs all persons to cry after wisdom, and to lift up their voices for understanding, in order to their obtaining the fear and knowledge of God; and in James i. 5. the apostle says, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask it of God;" and Peter directed *Simon Magus* to repent and pray God, if perhaps the thought of his heart might be forgiven him, Acts viii. 22. Therefore, when God says, do thus or thus, it is not for us to make excuses, but we must do the thing required.

ANSWER 2. God is pleased sometimes to answer the prayers of unbelievers. Indeed he hears not their prayers from any goodness or acceptableness that there is in their prayers, or because of any true respect to him manifested in them, for there is none; nor has he obliged himself to answer such prayers; yet he is pleased sometimes, of his sovereign mercy, to pity wicked men, and hear their cries. Thus he heard the cries of the Ninevites, Jonah chap. iii. So he heard the prayer of Ahab, 1 Kings xxi. 27, 28.

Though there be no regard to God in their prayers, yet God, of his infinite grace, is pleased to have respect to their desires of their own happiness, and to grant their requests. God may, and sometimes does, hear the cries of wicked men, as he hears the hungry ravens, when they cry, Psalm cxlvii. 9. and as he opens his bountiful hand, and satisfies the desires of every living thing, Psalm cxlv. 16. Besides, the prayers of sinners, though they have no goodness in them, yet are made a means of a preparation for mercy.

3. The *last use* shall be of exhortation. Seeing we have such a prayer hearing God as we have heard, let us be much

employed in the duty of prayer : Let us pray with all prayer and supplication : Let us live prayerful lives, continuing instant in prayer, watching thereunto with all perseverance ; praying without ceasing, praying always, and not fainting ; and not praying in a dull, cold, and lifeless manner, but *wrestling* with God in prayer. I shall particularly at this time exhort to two things.

(1.) Let us pray for others, as well as for ourselves. God hath in his word manifested himself to be especially well pleased with hearty intercessory prayers, or prayers for our fellow creatures : 1 Tim. ii. 1, 2, 3. " I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for *all men* ; for kings, &c. ; for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour." It is especially acceptable to God, as such prayers, when sincere, are an expression of a spirit of Christian charity, which is a grace peculiarly becoming Christians, and acceptable to God, as may be seen by what is said of it in 1 Cor. xiii.

(2.) Let us especially be earnest with God in our prayers, for the outpouring of his Spirit both on ourselves and others. We have not such encouragement in scripture to pray for any other blessing, as we have to pray for this blessing. It is the greatest of all mercies ; yet God hath given such encouragement to pray for no other mercy ; as he hath for this mercy. See Luke xi. 13. " If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father *give the Holy Spirit* to them that ask him ?" Though it be the greatest mercy, yet God is most ready to bestow it of any whatsoever. We ought therefore most earnestly to pray for the outpouring of God's Spirit on our own souls, on others in whom we are particularly concerned, on the people among whom we dwell, and on the whole land and whole earth. We are directed to pray for this with the greatest possible importunity in the forementioned place, Isaiah lxii. 6, 7. " Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth."