

FRAGMENT OF A SERMON.

**T**HE fragment out of Mr. Howe's notes, about a particular faith in prayer, contains only brief hints, which he enlarged on in discourse : but I thought it worth preserving ; and I believe there will be several of my mind. It is very concise ; and the writing being a mixture of long-hand and short-hand, and the ink in some places almost worn out, it is a very difficult thing to read it : but having got what assistance I could in order to the right reading it, I shall here subjoin it.—Dr. Calamy.

*James 5. 15. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick ; and the Lord shall raise him up.*

It is to be inquired how this is to be understood and applied.

1. How to be understood. Where in the general we must know, it is not to be looked upon as a universal maxim, admitting of no restriction or limitation ; for then prayer might make a man immortal, if in every case wherein life were in hazard, any could be procured to employ their faith in prayer on his behalf. Unless we should say, that wherever the desired effect follows not, the faith was wanting, which ought to have been exercised in the case. To say that every prayer that has faith in it, shall save the sick, is false : but that every prayer that has this special faith in it, shall save the sick, is true.

That therefore we may speak the more distinctly, we must understand,

1. That there was somewhat in this matter extraordinary, and appropriate to that time.

2. Somewhat ordinary, and common to all times. We are to distinguish the one and the other.

1. There was somewhat extraordinary in this matter, and appropriate to that time : and that both as to the faith to be exercised, and the effect thereupon.

1. As to the faith to be exercised. The prayer of faith shall save the sick : that is, in those days, when the state of things did to the divine wisdom make it necessary, that frequent miracles should be wrought for the confirmation of christianity, faith was necessary to be exerted in prayer, that should according to the tenour of the promise made in reference to those times, engage Omnipotency, in reference to the thing prayed for : the promise then was, whatsoever ye pray, believing, ye shall receive ; or it shall be done.

2. As to the effect,—that also was supernatural.

Ques. But it may be said, What ! universally ? What work might the disciples have made in that case !

Ans. The divine power did go forth two ways.

1. In working the faith to be exercised : and,

2. In effecting the thing. So that the matter was always in God's own hand. The Spirit of God could be the author of no vain or imprudent faith, or consequent of it.

This faith of miracles was such a fiducial recumbence on the divine power, in reference to this or that particular work, as whereby that was by his rule engaged to go forth, in saving the sick. This and common faith differ, in respect of the end, and the nature of the influence:—not holy, but physical.

2. There was here also somewhat that was ordinary. The instance of Elias is mentioned, who, ver. 17, 18. it is said, Was a man subject to like passions as we are, and yet 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 her fruit. There is somewhat from that extraordinary case to be learnt for common use, namely, that what the promise says to us now, we ought as confidently to believe, as they then, what it said to them.

Therefore take some propositions, concerning the nature and operation of the faith to be exercised in such a case, and the way wherein prayer ought to be managed and guided, so as that it may be expected to have influence in reference thereto.

1. Prayer is a great and indispensable duty. (There is here some reference in the manuscript: but after the utmost search, I know not what to make of it.)

2. That therefore we must conclude, whatsoever tends to render it an impertinence, must either be false or misapplied. For it is most plainly a great part of our duty; and it could not consist either with the wisdom or truth of God, to have us enjoined such a duty, and have put energy incessant into the nature of it in vain. We must therefore resolve what is doubtful, by what is plain. It is more plain that prayer is a duty, and more known, than what changes the nature of God can admit.

3. The argument from God's unchangeableness, would conclude as well against the usefulness of any other duty, that never so directly concerns our salvation.

4. Prayer is to be considered, not only as a means to obtain from God what we would have, but as a becoming homage of an intelligent creature.

5. Whatsoever unchangeableness we can suppose in the nature of God, (here there is something added in the manuscript which I can make nothing of; and then it follows) and it is unreasonable he should lose his right, by his perfection.

6. Yet also it is to be considered as a means to obtain good things, Job 21. 15. (by which I suppose, it was intended to be intimated, that it would be very wicked language in any, to offer to say with those whom Job speaks of in the text cited;

What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?)

7. We are not to think prayer, though never so qualified, hath any proper efficacy, to move God this way or that: not so much as instrumental.

8. It is only a condition, upon which it seems good to God to put forth his power.

9. It is a condition that hath not always equally certain connexion with the thing we pray for, or other than the promise hath made.

10. The promises of God are or must be understood, proportionally to the nature of the things promised: which may be either of such a nature, as &c. (Here the sense is incomplete. I suppose that which may be meant, is, that the things which God has promised, may either admit, or exclude a change. And then it is added "make men immortal." That is, I suppose, as to this present life.) And then the manuscript goes on, Things of a variable goodness cannot be the matter of a universal absolute promise. Miracles, &c.

11. Prayer may yet be the prayer of faith that God will do what is best. We should not make light of this more valuable object of faith. Suppose two children, which is the most privileged. (This I apprehend refers to the case of Esau and Jacob, so often taken notice of in Scripture.)

12. If God will do the thing, prayer in reference to it is not vain. For perhaps he hath wisely and rightly determined, that he will not do it but upon trust of his being acknowledged. This is a great piece of his sovereignty: his dominion and power over lives. I kill, and make alive, as though he had said, God of every life: universal cause.

13. It is very absurd to think, it were vain to pray unless we were certain it contradicts the nature of prayer. For that supposes the thing in the power of them to whom we pray, and implies a referring it to their pleasure.

14. It must be submitted to him to judge what is most honourable for himself. It argues base thoughts of the invisible world, to think, &c. (that is, I suppose, to think we should be able to keep people from thence at our pleasure.)

15. What if he had said, pray not. (I take this to be designed for an intimation, that had intercourse between an all-sufficient God and us, by prayer, been prohibited, we should have been left in a very helpless and hopeless, miserable and destitute condition.)

END OF THE FOURTH VOLUME.