

SERMON XXXVI.

And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.—ROM. viii. 27.

IN these words the former privilege is amplified. He had spoken of the assistance we have from the Spirit; now, acceptance. Those sighs and groans which are stirred up in us by the Spirit are not without fruit and success, for they are taken notice of and accepted by the Lord. If they were confused and unintelligible groans or hasty sighs, that die away and are gone like a puff of wind, the privilege were not so much; no, they are of greater regard than so; they are observed and rewarded by God—‘And he that searcheth,’ &c.

In the words we have—

First, A property of God mentioned, that *he searcheth the hearts.*

Secondly, An inference thence, or an application to the matter in hand—*He knoweth the mind of the Spirit.*

Thirdly, A reason why those groans are not unprofitable—*Because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.* God knoweth the meaning of them, and accepteth what is agreeable to his will.

First, Let us consider the property of God which is here mentioned—‘He that searcheth the hearts.’ God needeth no search, but knoweth all things by simple intuition; but it is spoken after the manner of men, who inquire and search into those things which they would know more accurately and exactly; and so it sets forth the infinite knowledge of God.

Doct. They that come to worship God had need have their hearts deeply possessed with a sense of his omniscieny.

I shall prove two things—

1. That God is omniscient, and in particular doth know the hearts of men.

2. That those that would worship before the Lord must soundly believe and seriously consider this.

1. That the hearts of men lie open to the view of God is a truth often inculcated in scripture, as in that speech of God to Samuel the prophet, 1 Sam. xvi. 7. When Eliab, Jesse’s eldest son, was brought before Samuel, surely the Lord’s anointed is before him; ‘And the Lord said, Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature, for I have refused him. The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.’ Man seeth things slightly and superficially, and judges of all things according to the show and outside, for his sight can pierce no deeper; but God searcheth the heart and reins, knoweth who is, and will continue to be, a faithful instrument of his glory: 1 Chron. xxviii. 9, ‘And thou, Solomon, my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts.’ A man cannot sincerely frame himself to the service of God unless he doth

first believe him to know all things, even our very thoughts, yea the imaginations of the thoughts; the first motions of the soul which set on men to do what they do; so Prov. xv. 11, 'Hell and destruction are before the Lord, how much more the hearts of the children of men?' He compareth two things which are most unknown to us,—the state of the dead, and the hearts of men. God knoweth all those that are in *Sheol*, the state of the dead, though they are unknown or forgotten by the most of men. We know not what is become of the bodies or souls of men, the number of the damned or the blessed; but God keepeth an exact account of all, he knoweth where their souls are, and their bodies also, what is become of their dust, and how to restore to every one their own flesh. And as he knoweth who are in the state of the dead, so what are the thoughts and hearts of men now alive. The thoughts of the heart are hidden from us till they be revealed by word or action. Who can know our thoughts? What more swift and sudden? What more various, what more hidden, than our thoughts? Yet he knoweth them, not by guess or interpretation, but by immediate inspection; he seeth them before they are manifested by any overt act; he knoweth with what hopes and confidences and aims we are carried on, in whose name we act, and upon what principles and ends. Again, Jer. xvii. 9, 10, 'The heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked; who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, and try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to his doings.' The heart of man is altogether unknown to others, and very hard and difficult to be discovered by ourselves; there are so many sleights and shifts and circuits and turnings to conceal and colour our actions. But there is no beguiling of God, who hath an eye to discover the most secret motions and inward intentions, and will accordingly deal with men according to their deserts. But the scripture doth not only assert, but argue this point—

[1.] From the immensity and greatness of God; God is in all, and above all, and beyond all; nowhere included, nowhere excluded. And so his omnipresence doth establish the belief of his omniscieny: Jer. xxiii. 23, 24, 'Am I a God at hand, and not a God afar off? do not I fill heaven and earth? can any hide himself where I shall not see him?' God is everywhere, here where you are; nearer and more intrinsic to us than our very souls. Therefore all we think, speak, or do, is better known to him than it is to ourselves; we do all as in his sight, speak all as in his hearing, think all as in his presence; that which can be absent is not God; you may be far from him, but he is not far from every one of you.

[2.] From creation. He hath made our hearts, and therefore knoweth our hearts: Ps. xciv. 9, 10, 'He that planted the ear, shall not he hear? He that formed the eye, shall not he see?' Surely he that made man knoweth what is in man, and observeth what they do. The same argument is urged, Ps. cxxxix. 13, 'Thou hast possessed my reins, for thou hast covered me in my mother's womb;' and again, Ps. cxxxiii. 15, 'He fashioneth their hearts alike, he considereth all their thoughts.' He that hath so much wisdom to give you the power to think, knoweth the acts; if he hath given knowledge to the creatures, he himself hath it in a more eminent degree. Nothing can be concealed from him who

hath creating power ; as he hath created all alike, he is able to discern them severally one by one, and to understand all the operations of their very hearts.

[3.] From God's government, which is twofold. First, powerful, by his effectual providence, as he governeth all creatures ; secondly, moral, by his laws, as he governeth the reasonable creature. Both infer the point in hand.

(1.) The government of his effectual providence, which is necessary to all our actions ; ' for in him we live, move, and have our being,' Acts xvii. 28. All things move as he moveth them, in their natural agency ; the creature can do nothing without him, and actually doth all things by him ; his wisdom guideth, his will intendeth, his power moveth and disposeth all. This is urged, Ps. cxxxix. 10, his hand leadeth us, his right hand holdeth us up wherever we go ; that is, we are still supported by his providential influence, and therefore we cannot be hidden from him. Doth God support a creature whom he knoweth not, in an action he understandeth not ? Therefore he is not regardless of thy thoughts, words, and ways.

(2.) His moral government. He hath given a law to the reasonable creature, and he will take an account whether it be kept or broken. And therefore, since all persons and causes are to be judged by him, he doth perfectly understand them, and every one of us is clearly and fully known to God, both as to our hearts and actions, or else he were incapable to judge us. This is often urged : Ps. xciv. 10, ' He that chastiseth the nations, shall not be correct ? He that teacheth men knowledge, shall not he know ? ' He that giveth laws to men demandeth exact obedience to these precepts, and will chastise and punish men's disobedience.' So Heb. iv. 13, ' All things are naked to the eyes of him with whom we have to do ; ' that is, in the judgment.

2. That they that would worship God aright had need be deeply possessed with this.

[1.] From the nature of worship in general, which is a converse with God, or a setting ourselves immediately before the Lord. In solemn duties we come to act the part of angels, and to behold the face of our heavenly Father ; as in prayer we come to speak to God, and in the word we come to hear God speak to us, in the Lord's supper to be feasted at his table. God is everywhere with us, but we are not always and everywhere with God ; we profess to be with him when we come to worship, to turn back upon all other things, that we may stand before the throne of God. Prayer is the most familiar converse with God that we are capable of while we dwell in flesh, called therefore a visiting of God, and an acquainting ourselves with him, a drawing nigh to him, a calling upon God. It is unnecessary to cite places. Now none of this can be done unless we believe him to be present and conscious to all that we do or say, for all else is but an empty formality ; therefore, when we pray, we must remember that we converse with him that searcheth the heart, and knoweth what and how we ask ; as 1 Kings viii. 39, ' Hear thou in thy dwelling-place, and forgive, and do to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest ; for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men.' All the faith, the seriousness, the comfort of prayer, dependeth upon the belief of this ;

for who would call upon him of whom he is not persuaded that he heareth him, or be serious in a duty, that knoweth not whether God regardeth, yea or no? Or what comfort can be taken in having prayed and made known his desires to God, unless he be persuaded those prayers come unto the ears of the Lord of Hosts. So for hearing the word, that which bindeth us to reverence is that we are in the sight of God: Acts x. 33, 'We are all here present before the Lord, to hear all things which are commanded thee of God;' otherwise men will come to see and be seen rather than to be taught and instructed. God is everywhere, but he is especially there where his ordinances are. And we are to be so seriously attentive as if God himself did speak to us by oracles, when his message is brought to us; otherwise it will have no effect upon us: 1 Thes. ii. 13, 'Ye received it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe;' 2 Cor. v. 20, 'As though God did beseech you by us.' We lift up our hearts to him, and set him before our eyes, as having to do with God himself; this only begets seriousness in hearing. So for the Lord's supper, which is a middle duty between the word and prayer, and compounded of both; we hear God tendering his covenant, assuring us of his blessings promised, and commanding us to fulfil the requisite duties, that we may be capable of them. We, promising and praying, by resolving and promising testify our consent to the covenant thus stated; by prayers and groans, our dependence. Now there is no covenanting with one that is absent. You will say he is present in his institution; he is so, and that is a help to faith; therefore visible signs are appointed to be an instance of God's presence with us, but all his internal work is immediately transacted between our souls and God himself. We look on him as present that seeth and heareth all, Dent. x. 12. It is to the soul God speaketh, I am thy God: Ps. xxxv. 3, 'Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation;' and the soul spake unto God, 'Thou art my portion, saith my soul.' Either as to promise of obedience, Ps. cxix. 57, or dependence, Lam. iii. 24. Two outward witnesses are conscious to what is done between God and our souls; so Ps. xvi. 2, 'O my soul, thou hast said unto God, Thou art my God.' Upon this inward soul-covenanting do all our privileges depend; and if God knoweth not all things, nor engageth his heart to draw nigh unto him, how can this be?

[2.] From the danger of dissembling with God in acts of worship, or putting him off with feigned pretences. The scripture sets forth three phrases—a mocking of God, a lying to God, and a tempting of God. A mocking of God: Gal. vi. 7, 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked;' that is, *impune*, there is no escaping the accurate search of the all-seeing God. Ananias and Sapphira's sin was hypocrisy in keeping back part of what was devoted; they would seem liberal and pious as others who were joined to the church, and so, by a part of godliness, seek to be excused from the whole. And whilst they observe externals, neglect internals, own religion when profession is not costly, put on a garb of devotion at times, but lay it aside ordinarily; do what is plausible to men, but neglect what is acceptable to God; now this is called a lying to the Holy Ghost, Acts v. 3. Why to the Holy Ghost, rather than the Father and the Son? Because of his special precedence and inspec-

tion over church affairs: Acts xx. 28, 'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers;' Acts xv. 28, 'For it seemed good unto the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.' They pretended to do it by his iustinct; as all christians that pray, profess or pretend to pray by the Holy Ghost. Oh! observe this. Many make a false confession of faith, or promise of obedience; this is called a lying, not to men, but to God, Acts v. 4. Oh! then, we should be exceedingly fortified against hypocrisy in worship; it is to think to deceive God, whom we profess to be omniscient; nay, it is a tempting of the Spirit of the Lord: ver. 9, 'How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the spirit of the Lord?' a putting it to the proof whether he will discover us or no. Now, rather than run this hazard, it concerneth us greatly and thoroughly to be possessed of this truth, that God searcheth the heart.

[3.] There can be no true worship unless we be deeply possessed with a thorough sense of the infinite knowledge of God.

(1.) There can be no faith unless the worship be performed and tendered to God as an all-seeing spirit: Heb. xi. 6, 'Without faith it is impossible to please God; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.' If God know me not, nor in what manner I serve him, it is all one whether I serve him religiously, or with a cold, faint, formal worship; for he seeth not with what heart I go about it. If we pray, and think to be never the better for praying, there can be no life in prayer; for a persuasion to be heard and accepted must be at the bottom of all duties; therefore all that would serve him diligently must believe that he is omniscient, and knoweth all things.

(2.) There can be no reverence; for it is all one to pray to an idol, and to a God that heareth not and seeth not; yea, it is worse, for they were persuaded of a virtue or a divine power belonging to their idols; therefore all your worship will be but a conformity to the common custom and fashion: Ezek. xxxiii. 31, 'They come before thee as thy people cometh, and sit before thee as thy people; and they hear thy words, but they will not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness;' it is but a show of devotion.

Use 1. Is comfort to sincere worshippers.

1. God knoweth their persons; that there is such a man in the world, the desires of whose soul are to the remembrance of his name. It is an usual temptation which haunteth the children of God, that in the throng of his creatures he forgetteth us: Isa. xl. 27, 'My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over by my God;' God looketh not after me, taketh no notice of those things which concern me, or regardeth not my cause and complaint. How doth God know all things, and not know you? All things are under a providence, but his people are under a special providence. Christ saith of the sparrows, Luke xii. 6, 'Not one of them is forgotten before God;' and are his children forgotten? No, 'Christ knoweth his sheep by name,' John x. 3; and to Moses, Exod. xxxiii. 12, 'I know thee by name.' A father

cannot forget how many children he hath, though his family be never so large and numerous.

2. He knoweth their condition, and wants, and weaknesses: Mat. vi. 32, 'Your heavenly Father knoweth that you have need of these things;' and ver. 8, 'Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before you ask him.' Yet asking is necessary, solemnly to act your faith and dependence; but he will not neglect or forget us; his omniscience giveth all that have interest in him that hope.

3. Our prayers are heard, though never so secret: Mat. vi. 6, 'Thy Father which seeth thee in secret shall reward thee openly,' though confined within the closet of the heart: Acts ix. 11, 'And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Strait, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he prayeth.'

4. Our prayers shall be rightly understood. There are many good motions known to God which we either will not or cannot take notice of in ourselves; as many times large affection to God overlooketh that little good which is in us, but God doth not overlook it. It is well when we can say as Peter, John xxi. 17, 'And he said unto him, Lord thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee.' But he owneth sincerity where we can scarce own it; and many a serious soul hath his condition safe before God, when he cannot count it so himself. This is implied in this place.

Use 2. Caution. Let us take heed of all hypocrisy in prayer, or putting ourselves into a garb of devotion when the temper of our hearts suiteth not; let not your lips pray without or against your hearts.

[1.] Without your hearts. That may be done two ways—

(1.) When you pray words by rote, and all that while the tongue is an utter stranger to the heart; as some birds will counterfeit the voice of a man, so many men do that of a saint, saying words prescribed by others or invented by themselves, without life and affection; this is to personate and act a part before God, complaining of burdens we feel not, and expressing desires we have not. In these is verified that of our Saviour: Mat. xv. 8, 'This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;' or that of the prophet: Jer. xii. 2, 'Thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins;' they do but compliment God with empty formalities.

(2.) When we pray cursorially, or use a few general words that serve all turns and persons alike, but are not suited and fitted to our case. Unless all your confessions and desires be particular, they do not affect the heart; for generals are but notions, and pierce not very deep: 1 Kings viii. 38, 'What prayer and supplication shall be made for any man, or by all the people, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart;' that is the sin whereby his own conscience and heart is smitten, and thereby moved to pray. It is easy to spend invectives against sin in the general; this doth not come close enough to stir up deep compunction and holy desires. We pray of course, but do not bemoan ourselves, and draw forth our earnest requests for the things we stand in need of. Names are prized when we hate the thing, and names are hated when we love the thing.

[2.] Against the heart; when you are loath to leave the sin which you seem to pray against; or ask that grace which you have no mind to have: Ps. lxxvi. 18, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.' He that asketh for that grace he would not have, doth but lie to God.

Now, to quicken you to this caution, take these considerations—

(1.) No wandering thought in prayer is hidden from God: Job xlii. 2, 'No thought can be withholden from thee;' from his notice and knowledge: Ps. cxxxix. 2, 'Thou knowest my thoughts afar off;' your thoughts are as visible to God as your words are audible to men.

(2.) God most abhorreth our prayers when we pray with an idol in our hearts: Ezek. xiv. 3, 'These men have set up idols in their hearts, should I be inquired of them?' saith the Lord.' They were resolved what to do, yet would ask counsel of God; as many now would keep their lusts, yet pray against them; as if the very complaining were a discharge of their duty, without detesting, without endeavouring.

(3.) Above all things, God looketh to the spirit, what the poise and bent of the heart is: Prov. xvi. 2, 'God weigheth the spirit.' The Spirit puts us in the balance of the sanctuary; therefore look to principles, ends, and aims.

(4.) That in covenanting with God there may be a moral sincerity where there is not a supernatural sincerity: Deut. v. 28, 29, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee; they have well said all that they have spoken. Oh that there were such an heart in them that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always!' They dissembled not for the time, which may happen in two cases—by some impendent or incumbent judgment, as when people are frightened into a little religiousness, or in a pang of devotion or solemn worship. Now this should make us cautelous. Bring to God the best desires and purposes that you have, but rest not in them, but get them strengthened yet more and more, that our sincerity may be verified and evidenced.

Secondly, I come now to the second thing—God 'knoweth the mind of the Spirit.'

Doct. That it is a comfort to God's children that the Lord knoweth what kind of spirit is working in prayer.

Here I shall do three things—

1. Show the different spirit that worketh in prayer.
2. In what sense God is said to know the mind of the Spirit.
3. Why this is such a comfort to God's children.

1. The different spirit that may work in prayer. I shall take notice of a fourfold spirit—

[1.] The natural spirit of a man, seeking its own welfare, which is not a sin; for God put it into us; and such an inclination there was in Christ himself: Mat. xxvi. 39, 'O my Father! if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt;' and John xii. 27, 28, 'Father, save me from this hour; but for this cause came I to this hour.' There was the innocent desire of his human nature to be freed from the burden; but his greater respect to God's glory and the public benefit of mankind made him submit to it. His human nature was to show a reasonable aversation from what was

destructive to it; but his resolved will was to submit to God, and overcome all impediments. Take the instance lower. Nature prompted Paul to ask freedom from the thorn in the flesh; but grace taught him to submit to God's will. Paul sinned not in having or giving vent to the natural inclination; but the spiritual instinct must guide and overrule it. So when we ask natural conveniences we sin not, but yet this is not the spirit which God heareth in prayer. 'Christ was heard, in that he feared,' Heb. v. 7; yet the cup did not pass away, but he was supported; so Paul was heard, not for the removal of the thorn in the flesh, but for sufficient grace: 2 Cor. xii. 9, 'And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.'

[2.] There is a carnal, sinful spirit, which may be working in prayer; as when the disciples called for fire from heaven, Christ telleth them, Luke ix. 55, 'Ye know not of what spirit ye are of.' Men often miscarry in prayer, being blinded either by an erring judgment, or their carnal passions.

(1.) By an erring judgment. They put their false conceits and opinions into their prayers, and so would engage God, as Balaam sought by building altars, against his own people. This kind of praying, it is a begging of God to do the devil's work, to destroy his own kingdom, and suppress his most serious worshippers to gratify the faction that opposeth them. Nothing is so cruel and bloody but false and partial zeal will put men upon, if their judgments be once tainted; they think the killing of others is doing God good service, John xvi. 2. Their devotions will be soon tainted also; for men that follow a blind conscience will hallow and consecrate their rage and cruelty by prayer and solemn worship: Isa. lxvi. 5, 'Your brethren that hate you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified;' thence the old by-word, *In nomine Domini incipit omne malum*; prayer is made a preface to cruelty. Now it is a comfort to the faithful that God will not hear these prayers; he knows what is the mind of the Spirit.

(2.) By carnal passions and desires. Fleshly interest breedeth partiality; and men think God should hear them in their worldly requests. The motions of the flesh are very earnest, for corrupt nature would fain be pleased: James iv. 3, 'Ye ask and have not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts;' it is the flesh prayeth, and not the spirit—'You ask meat for your lusts,' Ps. lxxviii. 18. When their wants were abundantly supplied, yet they remained querulous and unsatisfied; they must have dainties as well as necessaries, as if God's providence must serve their carnal appetites. In these and such like cases the flesh prayeth, and not the spirit; but Christ will not put this dross into his golden censer, nor perfume our lusts with his sweet incense.

[3.] The new nature, called also spirit, which inclineth us to God and heaven: Zech. xii. 10, 'I will pour upon them the spirit of grace and supplication.' This prompteth and urgeth us to ask spiritual and heavenly things; and such kind of requests are most pleasing to God, 1 Kings iii. 10; those things which are necessary to God's glory and our salvation. There is what the flesh savoureth and what the spirit

savoureth. The wisdom of the flesh perverteth and diverteth hearts from God and heaven to base, low things, such as the good things of this world—pleasures, riches, honours. But the spirit, or the renewed part, savoureth other things. What is the savouring of the spirit? What the new nature would be at, or chiefly desireth. And it is a truth that the same spirit which is predominant at other times will work in prayer; for the desires follow the constitution and frame of the heart: Rom. viii. 5, 'For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the spirit.' As their constitution is, so will their gust be; and this taste and relish will show itself in all things, even in their prayers and devotions; and whatever their words be, the working of their hearts are according to their universal bent and temper.

[4.] The Holy Spirit of God: Jude 20, 'Praying in the Holy Ghost.' His assistance is necessary to prayer, not only to sanctify our hearts, but to excite our desires and direct our addresses to God; so that we are enabled and raised to perform this duty with more ardency and regularity than we of ourselves could attain unto. A christian hath both flesh and spirit in him, and they remain in him as active principles, always lusting against each other, Gal. v. 17. In prayer we feel it; for the saints speak sometimes in a mixed dialect, half the language of Ashdod and half of Canaan, both of the flesh and of the spirit, only the one overruleth the other by the power of the Holy Ghost. Take it in either property of prayer—confidence, or fervency of desire.

(1.) For confidence: Jonah ii. 4, 'I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again to thy holy temple.' There is a plain conflict between faith and unbelief; unbelief's words are first out, as if we were utterly rejected out of God's care and favour; yet faith will not suffer us to keep off from God, and therefore corrects and unsaith again what unbelief had said before; 'Yet I will look again to thy holy temple,' try what God will do for me. So Ps. xciv. 18, 'When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O Lord, held me up;' yet there is relief in God when all their own confidence and courage faileth them.

(2.) In point of fervency. The flesh valueth, esteemeth, earnestly craveth temporal mercies; fancieth a condition of health, wealth, liberty, and worldly conveniencies, as best for us. We admire carnal happiness, Ps. cxliv; but the spirit corrects the judgment of the flesh. There is a higher and better happiness; and that we should mainly seek after, and all our worldly interests should be subordinated thereunto. Now it is not merely the spirit or new nature in us which doth hold out in these conflicts, but the new nature assisted by the Spirit of God, who helpeth us in all our infirmities, and to whom religious manners showeth we must ascribe all that we have and do. All our faith and fervency cometh from him; and without his assistance we should either sink under the difficulties, or be cold and careless in our requests.

2. In what sense God is said to know the mind of the Spirit.

1. By way of distinction.

2. By way of approbation.

[1.] By way of distinction. God perfectly knoweth the mind and

intention of those groans which the Spirit exciteh in his own children ; he knoweth what cometh from the *natural*, what from the *carnal*, what from the *divine* Spirit ; to what principles these motions belong. For he ' weigheth the spirits,' Prov. xvi. 2 ; that is, he doth so exactly know them, as if they were put into a balance ; what principles, motives, and aims we are acted by ; and observeth not only the matter of the prayer, but the disposition of the petitioner ; whether the frame of his heart be christian and gospel-like ; humble, holy, and heavenly ; or else it hath a carnal bias upon it.

[2.] He knoweth by way of approbation, that he doth regard and accept the groans of the spirit ; for words of knowledge imply allowance, respect, approbation ; as Ps. i. 6, ' God knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish ;' approveth, favoureth, prospereth, as the opposite clause manifesteth. As Christ's not knowing the wicked implieth their rejection, Mat. vii. 23 : so he knoweth the mind of the Spirit, he doth regard and accept of what is of the Spirit in prayer. The groans of believers are more than the pompous petitions of hypocrites ; it is not luscious eloquence which God regardeth, but serious devotion ; if there be holy breathings after communion with him ; if your prayers be not senseless, without a due feeling of your necessities and wants ; nor heartless, without a desire of the graces and mercies you stand in need of, God will accept you.

3. Why this is such a comfort and benefit to the children of God.

[1.] God's knowledge by way of distinction between the moans of nature and the groans of the Spirit.

(1.) Because sometimes they do not speak in prayer, but join with others ; you make it your prayer if you accompany it with your sighs and groans ; it is not the speaker only, but all that consent by the serious motions of their hearts. When the gifted prayed in the primitive church, the *ιδιώτης*, the private person—we translate it ' the unlearned'—was to say *amen*, 1 Cor. xiv. 16 ; and then it was his prayer as much as the prayer of him that spake ; their hearty *amen* was *signaculum fidei, et votum desiderii*, a hearty assent to the prayer, or a hearty expression of their earnest desire.

(2.) Sometimes they cannot speak and put their desires into a language, as oppressed with troubles. God knoweth the secret groans of our hearts, when you cannot give them the vent of expression : Ps. xxxviii. 9, ' Lord, all my desire is before thee ; my groaning is not hid from thee.' The soul is so confounded that we cannot put our desires into distinct thoughts and words ; but yet they are as formal speech before God, for he can interpret the most secret motions of our hearts : Exod. ii. 24, ' God heard their groans, and remembered his covenant ;' Ps. xii. 5, ' For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord ;' Ps. vi. 8. ' For the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping.' Such sighs, groans, tears, have an intelligible language in heaven.

(3.) Sometimes they dare not speak. For the prophet telleth us of an evil time when ' the prudent will keep silence,' Amos v. 13 ; and another prophet speaketh when a man cannot ' trust in a friend,' and must ' keep the door of his mouth from her that lieth in his bosom,' Micah vii. 5 ; when they dare not speak against that which they cannot

mend, scarce dare peep or mutter or bemoan themselves, or plead with God. Such is the iniquity of the times, the guard is put upon them; then God knoweth the desires of their hearts, and smothered griefs and concealed complaints.

(4.) Sometimes they are slandered when they speak by the scoffing atheist or carnal world, who know not the Spirit and his holy motions, because their heart is wholly devoted to sensual and earthly things; the best strains of devotion are mocked at, and all that suiteth not with their carnal way is counted folly: 1 Peter iv. 4, 'Speaking evil of you;' and ver. 14, 'On their part the Spirit is evil spoken of.' The world, when they hear of believers praying in the Spirit, they scoff at it; as those, Acts ii. 13, when the Holy Ghost came upon the apostles, some 'mocked, saying, These men are full of new wine;' so when anything of God more than ordinary appeareth in them, they deride it. They are not skilled in the motions of the Spirit when they are earnest. Festus thought Paul mad, and beside himself, Acts xxvi. 24. The wisdom of the flesh is enmity against God, and cannot judge aright of his ways and motions. But now it is a comfort that God will put another kind of construction upon the Spirit's working than the world doth; they call evil good, and good evil; but God can distinguish; they are incompetent judges, having no savour and relish of these things. Many things suit not with the corrupt sense of men, that are yet agreeable to God's holy will; and that which is slandered in the world is owned by God; and how much soever they are contradicted and scoffed at, yet they enjoy sweet and real communion with him. Though the world knoweth not this Spirit, yet God knoweth and owneth it, as the event declareth.

(5.) Sometimes they themselves find it hard to interpret their duty, and judge what is flesh and what is spirit, but yet God knoweth the mind of the Spirit; and when they set themselves to converse with God in the best fashion they can, the Lord granteth the desires of their hearts: Ps. lxxvi. 19, 'Verily God hath heard, he hath attended to the voice of my prayer.' We find our prayers are not rejected by God; he hath some doubt of it, as appeareth in the verses before and after; and so took it as a token of his sincerity. God, who cannot patronise any sin, had been pleased to give him his approbation.

(6.) The saints that are little satisfied in their work plead their desires: Nehem. i. 11, 'O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who desire to fear thy name;' and Isa. xxvi. 9, 'With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit will I seek thee right early.'

(7.) The children of God may be the better satisfied in his providence and favours to them; for God will hear so much of the prayer as cometh from the Spirit. We ask natural conveniences to a certain end; God will not always give the means, but the end shall be promoted; he knoweth whether the means will prove a mercy, yea or no, or the end be promoted by these means or other. Now they desire the spirit may be heard, not the flesh. Abraham would have the promise fulfilled, and pitcheth on Ishmael: Gen. xvii. 18, 'Oh that Ishmael might live before thee!' But God intended a better way by Isaac. If

he give us our will, it is in anger ; that is our prayer ; but the Spirit's prayer is to glorify God, and according to the will of God. God's answer is according to the mind of the Spirit.

[2.] God's knowing by way of approbation, that he will accept and regard the prayer stirred up in us by his Spirit. The reason is given in the text, ' because he maketh requests for the saints according to the will of God.' In which clause we have—

1. The work—' he maketh intercession.'

2. The persons for whom—' for the saints.'

3. The rule, nature, or kind of intercession—*κατά Θεόν*, ' according to the will of God.'

Let us, 1st, Open these things, 2dly, Consider why the prayer so made must needs be acceptable and pleasing to God.

1. The work of the Spirit—' he maketh intercession ;' that is, exciteth and directeth us to pray ; he employeth and maketh use of our faculties, mind and heart and tongue ; yea, of our graces, faith, hope, and love. Of faith to believe God's being and providence, both as to his present government, internal or external, or as to the future and eternal recompenses. This faith is the life of prayer ; for ' how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed ?' Rom. x. 14, and Heb. xi. 6 Of our hope ; looking for these things, we ask of him according to his will ; otherwise prayer is but a wearisome, fruitless task : Mal. iii. 14, ' It is in vain to serve God ; what profit is it to call upon him ?' When we expect what we ask, there is more life in asking : Ps. cxxx. 5, ' I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope ;' that is the posture of the soul in prayer. And for love ; for here we come to show our hearty groans after everything which will bring us nearer to God. Surely they that call upon God aright are they which ' delight themselves in the Almighty,' Job xxvii. 10. The duty is an act of love ; and the life of the duty cometh from the fervency of our love, for it is a solemn expression of our desires. If God be our portion, we will thirst after him, and express our desires after what conduceth to communion with him. Thus the Spirit maketh use of our faculties and graces ; he strengtheneth our faith, quickeneth our love, and stirreth up our hope ; so that, as it is said, Mat. x. 20, ' It is not ye speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you ;' when he doth enable us to speak what is fit and proper before the tribunals of men. So he maketh intercession when he enableth understanding creatures to speak what is fit and proper before the throne of grace, what will become faith, hope, and love.

2. The persons for whom he prayeth—' for the saints,' for two reasons—

[1.] Because the saints only are acquainted with these operations : 1 Cor. ii. 14, ' The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit ;' and John xiv. 17, ' Whom the world cannot receive, because they know him not and see him not.' They do not regard his motions and operations, but have their eyes fixed upon this world, and the sins and vanities thereof ; they have no mind to employ him, though he offereth himself to them, but the saints cannot live without him.

[2.] These are only fit to converse with God in prayer. The persons are qualified for audience and acceptance with God, and may obtain

whatsoever in reason and righteousness we can ask of him : 1 John iii. 22, ' And whatsoever we ask we receive, because we keep his commandments, and do what is pleasing in his sight.' None else are in grace and favour with God, and in a receiving posture, according to the terms of the promise ; none but such as are justified, sanctified, and live in obedience to him : Prov. xv. 8, ' The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight ;' John ix. 31, ' God heareth not sinners ; but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doth his will, him he heareth ;' and James v. 16, ' The fervent effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much ;' and Ps. lxxvi. 18, ' If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me ;' so Prov. xxviii. 9, ' He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination ;' these, and many more places, show who are they who have God's ear. The saints, and none but they ; who are careful to avoid all known sin, and make conscience of performing all known duty. Then you will have a large share in his heart and love ; and he will be near you when you call upon him, to counsel, quicken, and direct you, and give you answers of grace upon all occasions.

3. The rule, nature, or kind of this intercession he puts us upon ; *κατὰ Θεὸν* is the same with *καθὸ θεῶν*, ver. 26, ' according to the will of God,' for matter and manner, and ask lawful things, to a holy and lawful end.

[1.] The matter of the prayer : 1 John v. 14, 15, ' And this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us.'

What is the meaning of that, ' According to his will' ?

Answer (1.) With conformity to his revealed will. (2.) With due submission to and reservation of his secret will.

(1.) With conformity to his revealed and commanding will : that we ask nothing unjust and unholy, as if we would have God to bless us in some unlawful purpose, or, being biassed by envy, revenge, or any corrupt and carnal affection, ask anything contrary to piety, justice, charity, or that holy, meek spirit which should be in christians. Unlawful desires vented in prayer are a double evil, as they are contrary to God's commanding will, and as they are presented to him in prayer to accomplish what we desire by his help, as we would have him accommodate his providence to fulfil our lusts.

(2.) With a due reservation of and submission to his secret and decreeing will. The things we ask of God are of three sorts—First, Barely lawful ; so is every indifferent thing, as when Moses would fain enter into Canaan. We cannot say God will give us such things ; God denied it to Moses ; ' Let it suffice thee, speak no more of this matter, Deut. iii. 22. God would only give him a Pisgah sight. Secondly, Not only lawful, but commanded, such a thing as may fall within the compass of our duty ; as when parents ask the conversion of their children, or children beg the continuance of their parents' life, it is not only lawful, but commanded ; yet God disposeth of the event as it pleaseth him. Thirdly, Some things are absolutely good and necessary for us, as the gift of the Holy Spirit, Luke xi. 13. Such God will give. But in the two former things we must use the means, but refer the event to God, who

can best dispose of us to his own glory ; for though the thing be lawful, though it be good, yet it beareth these exceptions—First, If it be not contrary to any decree of God, and cross not the harmony of his providence. Would we have God rescind and disorder his wise counsels for our sake ? Secondly, If it be not inconvenient and hurtful for us ; but of that God will be judge. Some present temporal good may be a cause of future inconvenience ; and something bitter now, may be afterward found wholesome. God knoweth whether life or death be best, a present riddance of troubles or a continuance of them ; therefore it followeth, ver. 28, ‘All things shall work together for good to them that love God.’ That which is apprehended as evil may turn to good ; therefore these things should not be peremptorily asked, but with limitation and exception of God’s will ; as our Lord Christ, Mat. xxvi. 39, ‘ And he went a little farther, and fell on his face and prayed, saying, O my Father ! if it be possible, let this cup pass from me ; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’ It is one thing to believe for certain that God will grant our petition with this condition, if the grant be for his glory and our good, and another thing to believe absolutely that he will not deny the particular thing we ask of him, without such exception and reservation. It is not for us to determine what is most conducing to God’s glory and desirable for us ; we must commit and submit to God, to our heavenly Father, who is never backward to our good, and will certainly guide all things for the best.

[2.] The manner.

(1.) With faith. What faith have we in prayer ? With respect to God, that he is able and willing to help his people ; that we need not run to other shifts, and be divided between God and carnal means, James i. 6–8. As to the acceptance of our persons, we must pray that we do not weaken our confidence by any allowed sin : 1 John iii. 20, 21, ‘For if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things ; if our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God ;’ we sin away our peace, and then cannot come cheerfully to God. As to the particular blessings asked, necessary, that are absolutely promised, must be absolutely expected. But the promise of the common blessings of this life is not absolute ; these things are dispensed as shall be for God’s glory and our good. The saints themselves express themselves with some hesitancy about these things, though inclined to hope the best ; as David, 2 Sam. xii. 22, ‘ Who can tell whether the Lord will not be gracious to me, that the child may live ?’ God knoweth what we most really want, and what is most agreeable to our desires, being able to choose for us better than we can for ourselves : Joel ii. 14, ‘ Who knoweth if he will return and leave a blessing ?’

(2.) With fervency, or that life and seriousness which will become addresses to God : Mat. vii. 7, ‘Ask, seek, knock ;’ we are not in good earnest unless we set ourselves to seek the Lord, Dan. ix. 3. Christ taught us to pray in two parables ; one for the Spirit, Luke xi., by a man coming to his friend for loaves at midnight ; for right done to the church, Luke xviii. 1, in the parable of the widow and unjust judge. Persevere till prayer be answered, Mat. xv. 26, 27 ; keep wrestling and striving with God : Rom. xv. 30, ‘ Now I beseech you, brethren, for

the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.'

(3.) With humility; we must come as 'less than the least of his mercies,' Gen. xxxii. 10; Ezra ix. 6, 'O my God, I am ashamed, and blush to lift up my face to thee my God;' as the publican, Luke xviii. 13, 'God be merciful to me a sinner;' as Abraham, Gen. xviii. 27, 'Behold now I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes.'

(4.) With holy ends, that God may be glorified: John xiv. 13, 'And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son;' in the Spirit, John xvi. 14, 'He shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you;' Ps. cxv. 1, 'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory;' Joel ii. 14, 'Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him, even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the Lord our God?'

2dly, The reasons why the prayers so made must be acceptable to God.

1. Because here all the divine persons concur. We pray according to God's will, in Christ's name and mediation, by the motion and instinct of the Spirit. Every one is a ground of hope; therefore it will not be lost labour, or breath poured out into the air: 2 Sam. xiv. 1, 'When Joab perceived that the king's heart was towards Absalom,' he makes use of the advantage. Christ's merit breeds confidence: Heb. x. 19, 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.' And then the Spirit's motion; God accepteth what cometh from himself: Ps. x. 17, 'Lord, thou hast heard the desire of the humble, thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear,' what is excited and stirred up in us by his Spirit.

2. On man's part, the person is qualified, the petition just, the end right, and the heart excited.

Use. Is to show us what prayers are heard; such as (1.) cometh from God, and (2.) are made to God. Certainly such shall be dealt with as friends; God will bestow marks of abundant favour upon them, and reward their love and obedience by hearing their prayers; he delights to do great things for their sakes, and will have it known that their supplication is acceptable to him. Oh! pray thus by the Spirit.

1. Is your prayer such a prayer as cometh from God? such a prayer as is inspired by the Spirit, holy and fervent? Holy, for he is a holy and heavenly spirit, and puts us mainly upon holy and heavenly things; things that always make us better, not worse; and in other things referring our choices to God, what he liketh and thinketh best for us, not what we do for ourselves: 'not my will, but thine be done.' Then fervent, *δέησις ἐνεργουμένη*: James v. 16, 'The fervent effectual prayer of a righteous man,' when it looketh like wrestling with God.

2. To God. Like worship relating to God, it hath the stamp of his nature upon it. Some of his attributes relate to his mercy and goodness, some to his majesty and greatness; the one is seen in the joy of our faith and confidence, by our delight to converse with him; the other in our humility and deep reverence of God, when we come to him as poor undone creatures without his grace.