

THE SPIRITUAL FAVOURITE AT THE THRONE
OF GRACE.

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NOTE.

'The Spiritual Favourite' forms a small volume (18mo). The title-page is given below.* Prefixed is a portrait of Sibbes, differing from the usual miniature one. He holds a book in his hand; and underneath, in engraved letters, is this inscription, 'The reverend, faithfull, and profitable Minister of Gods word, Richard Sibbes, D:D: master of Katherine Hall, in Cambridge, and preacher of Grayes Inne, London.' *The copy from which our reprint is taken is believed to be unique.* I had searched for it in all the 'public' libraries of the kingdom, and advertised through innumerable channels, but utterly in vain; nor could I hear of any one who had so much as seen it, when, through the spontaneous kindness of W. E. Whitehouse, Esq., Birmingham, I was unexpectedly put in possession of it. It becomes me thus publicly and cordially to acknowledge my obligation to Mr Whitehouse. G.

* THE
SPIRITVALL
FAVORITE
AT THE THRONE
OF GRACE.

By the late learned, and reverend
Divine RICHARD
SIBBS Doctor
in Divinity.

Published by the Authors owne
appointment, subscribed with his hand;
to prevent unperfect Copies.

Proverbs 29. 26.

*Many seeke the Rulers favour, but every
man's judgement commeth from the
Lord.*

LONDON,
Printed by *Thomas Paine*, for
Ralph Mabb. 1640.

THE SPIRITUAL FAVOURITE AT THE THRONE OF GRACE.

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 prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.—NEH. I. 11.

IN the ninth verse the holy man minds God of his promise made to his people, that if they should ‘turn unto him, and keep his commandments, and do them, though they were cast out to the utmost parts of heaven, yet he would gather them thence,’ &c., ver. 9. ‘I will touch a little on them, [on the] two verses, and then come to that I mean to dwell on, from the words read.

‘If you turn unto me, and keep my commandments.’ There is no promise of mercy but to those that turn. The Scripture is peremptory in denial of mercy to such as go on in their sins. Heaven could not brook* the angels themselves, having sinned ; and neither such, nor such ‘shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ Yet how many are there that bless themselves that it shall go well with them, though they cast off all God’s yokes and divine bonds, that might bow them to better courses, as if words were but wind ; when we see here God made his word good against his own dear people, ‘If ye sin, I will scatter you to the farthest parts of the world,’ ver. 8. We see in the former verse, ver. 7, a proud, presumptuous sinful disposition may slight God, and the messengers of the word and all, now when we come to threaten ; but when God comes to execute, will he shake it off then ? Will swearers and blasphemers and filthy persons shake off the execution as they can the threatenings ? God saith, none that are such shall enter into heaven, ‘but his wrath shall smoke against them, and shall be as a fire that shall burn to hell,’ against such persons as ‘bless themselves’ in wicked courses, Deut. xxix. 20 ; and when God comes to the execution, they desire ‘the mountains to fall upon them,’ Rev. vi. 16. There are none more presumptuous against the threatenings, and none more base and fearful when it comes to execution. As we see in presumptuous and profane Belshazzar, that was quaffing in ‘the bowls of the temple,’ and scorning religion and God, when there comes a handwriting on the wall, ‘his knees knock together and his joints tremble,’ Dan. v. 6. So

* That is, = ‘suffer, endure.’—G.

let there be any evidence of execution, and we see all the tyrants in the book of God, and that have been in the world, that have trifled at religion, of all men they are most disconsolate and fearful, as we see in Belshazzar and others.

I beseech you therefore take heed. God will seal all his threatenings with executions in due time, as he did to his own people. What is the reason we should promise ourselves more immunity than they had?

‘If ye turn and keep my commandments, and do them.’ Here are three conditions. ‘Though you were cast to the utmost parts of the world, I will gather you thence,’

‘If you turn.’ The holy man Nehemiah puts God in mind of his promise, and his argument is from the like, and indeed from the less to the greater. Because God would rather of both, perform his promises than his threatenings, because mercy is his own proper work. Now, as he had been just in punishing his people, so he would be merciful in restoring of them again; therefore he saith, ‘Return and keep my commandments and do them, and though ye were scattered to the utmost parts of the earth, yet I will gather you thence.’ And he did gather them thence upon their repentance; he did perform his promise at length.

Beloved, the full accomplishment of this yet remains; for this people to this day, since the death of Christ, since they drew the guilt of that sacred blood on them, they are scattered about the earth to every nation, and have not a foot of land of their own, but are the scorn and hissing of nations. Notwithstanding, this promise will be performed. Upon their repentance, God will bring them again. As St Paul calls it a kind of a resurrection, the conversion of the Jews, so it is true of us all. Though we were scattered as dust, as we shall be in the grave ere long turned to dust, God will gather the ashes; he will gather all those parts of ours. Even as his power gathereth his people together, so his power at length will gather us all. We have his promise for the one as well as the other.

Therefore let us comfort ourselves with the performance of this promise, for the performance of the grand promise of the resurrection. Indeed, the grand promise of the resurrection is the ground of the performance of all other promises. As you have it in Ezekiel, concerning the dry bones: saith God, ‘I will clothe these dead bones with flesh and skin,’ &c., ‘therefore I will restore you again,’ Ezek. xxxvii. 1, *seq.* God that will restore our dust and bring our bodies together, that were scattered here and there, he will restore us out of our sickness and trouble, if it stand with his glory and our good.

Now, after the argument that he useth to persuade God from his word of threatening and promise, he comes to the argument from their relation.

‘These are thy servants.’

‘Though sinful servants, yet they are thy servants. ‘These are thy people.’ Thou hast no other people in the world but these, and ‘thou art their God.’ He pleads from former favours. ‘Thou hast redeemed them by thy great power and strong hand.’

It is a good argument to plead with God for former favours: because ‘there is no shadow of change in him,’ James i. 17; he is always like himself; he is never drawn dry. And it is a great honour to go to him for new favours upon former, because he hath an infinite supply. We may raw so much from men as they have not afterwards to make good, but e cannot honour God more than to go to him with a large faith, to fetch

large favours from him. The more he gives, the more he can give, and the more he is willing to give. 'To him that hath shall be given,' Mat. xiii. 12. We cannot honour God more than to go to him upon former favours and with enlarged desires. 'Thou hast redeemed us, and been gracious to us before,' Ps. cvii. 2.

We may much more take this argument in our mouths, and press the majesty of God. 'Thou hast redeemed us,' not out of Egypt or Babylon, the land of the north, but 'with the blood of thy Son,' from hell and damnation; and therefore thou canst redeem us from this petty misery, from these enemies. We may allege that grand favour to all other petty redemptions, whatsoever they are. He that hath given us Christ, that 'hath not spared his own Son, but gave him to death for us all, how shall he not with him give us all things else? Rom. viii. 32. He that hath been so large and bountiful as to give us his own Son, that gift to admiration*—'So God loved the world,' John iii. 16—how cannot we plead with him for all other favours whatsoever, whether they concern the life of grace or glory, or our present condition while we live in this world? We may plead it much more I say, 'Thou hast redeemed us.' But these things I will not press further now.

In the eleventh verse he comes to press it still, and repeats that which he had said before, 'Lord, I beseech thee, let thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and of thy servants that desire to fear thy name.'

'Let thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servants.' It is a prayer; and thou art 'a God hearing prayer.' They be thy servants, and thou regardest thy servants. Here are but a few petitions in this large request: 'remember,' 'be attentive,' and 'give me favour.' The most of the prayer is spent in a preparative considering the attributes of God, and in confession and strong reasons from the word, of promises and threatenings, and from their relation; and then he makes good the relation, 'We are thy servants, because we desire to fear thy name.'

To shew that indeed:

It is an excellent skill and art in prayer, to have strong arguments.

Then the suit comes off easily, as in Ps. xc. It is a prayer of Moses, the man of God; and yet the least part of the psalm is prayer: 'Teach us to number our days,' &c., ver. 12. That is all the petition. Though the petition be short, yet it is efficacious, when the heart is warmed and strengthened with strong reasons before; when the heart is elevated and raised with the consideration of the majesty and the truth of God; and when the heart is strengthened with strong convincing reasons, that God will hear when we press him with his word; I say, when the heart is thus raised and warmed, all the petitions come easily off.

Therefore, it is an excellent thing, beloved, to study the Scriptures, and to study all the arguments whereby holy men have prevailed with God in Scripture; and to see in what case those arguments were used. They are of use and force to prevail with God.

It is a pitiful thing now, for Christians under the glorious light of the gospel, to come to God only with bare, naked petitions (if they come from a true heart, they have their force that God should regard them), and have not reasons to press God out of his own word. They cannot bind God with his own promise, nor with arguments that he hath been bound with before. Let a child but cry to the father or mother, there is relief pre-

* That is, 'wonder.'—G.

sently for the very cry (*a*). But if it be not one that is a child, but is of grown years, the father looks for arguments that are moving to press him with. So here, Nehemiah he presseth God with moving and strong arguments, and he repeats and forceth them. He doth not only allege them, but enforceth them: 'O Lord, I beseech thee, let thine ear be attent to the prayer of thy servant, and of thy servants that desire to fear thy name.'

He desireth God to be 'attentive.' He presseth God; and indeed he doth it to warm his own heart, for when we have humbled our heart low enough, and broken it with the consideration of our own unworthiness, and then warmed it with the consideration of God's goodness, and strengthened it with the consideration of God's promise and truth, then we are sure of a gracious success.

'Let thine ear be attent to the prayer of thy servant, and of thy servants.'

How did they know that they were thine?

Because there was no other people in the world that knew God but they. And he knew that the saints, wherever they were, had a spirit of prayer, and would remember the case of the church. Therefore he saith, remember 'my prayer and the prayer of thy servants.' For if 'the prayer of one righteous man prevaieth much,' James. v. 16, much more the prayer of many. If there had been but ten righteous in Sodom, Sodom had been preserved. Now this he allegeth to God, 'remember the prayer of thy servant,' of mine, and the prayer of thy servants. As Tertullian, an ancient father, saith very well, 'When men join together, they offer a holy kind of violence to God' (*b*). Prayer is a kind of wrestling and contending with God, a striving with him. 'Let me alone,' saith God to Moses, Exod. xxxii. 10. It is a binding of him with arguments and promises of his own, and it is so forcible, that he desires, as it were, to be let alone. Now, if the prayer of one be a wrestling, and striving, and forcing of him, as it were, against his will, that he said, 'Let me alone,' as if he could do nothing except he gave over praying, what are the prayers of many, when there is a multitude of them?

Therefore we may look for a comfortable issue of our prayers and humiliation that is performed at this time.* The desires of so many Christian souls touched with the Spirit of God, and with the case of the church, which God doth tender,† cannot be ineffectual. It must needs draw plenty of blessings from heaven. I will not enter into the commonplace of prayer, having spoken of it upon another occasion; but surely you see the holy man Nehemiah stood so much upon it, that he hoped to speed, because he and others prayed: holy Daniel, and others with him. It was such a gracious messenger to send to heaven for help and for all good, that Daniel, though it cost him his life, that he should be cast into the lion's den, he would not omit it for his life. Take away prayer, and take away the life and breath of the soul. Take away breath and the man dies; as soon as the soul of a Christian begins to live he prays (*c*). As soon as Paul was converted, 'Behold he prayeth,' Acts ix. 10. A child, as soon as he is born, he cries, and a Christian will not lose his prayer for his life, as we see in holy Daniel. For what is all the comfort that he hath, but that that is derived from God? and God will be sued unto for all the favours he bestows. Whatsoever is from his favour, it comes as a fruit of prayer for the most part. Though he go beyond our desires many times, yet ordinarily, what we have if we be his children, we have it as a fruit of prayer. Therefore,

* A 'National Humiliation' by royal proclamation.—G.

† That is, = 'care for,' regard.—G.

I beseech you, let us be stirred up to this duty, as we see Nehemiah here : 'Remember the prayer of thy servant,' &c.

And when we pray to God, let us press him, as we see here, 'Be attentive,' verse 6, and here again, 'be attentive.' He presseth upon God. It is no sinful tautology to come again and again. God loves to hear the same song again and again. This music is not tedious but pleasing to him. And this pressing is for us to warm our hearts ; perhaps one petition will not warm them, and when they are warmed by a second, let us labour to warm them more and more, and never give over till we have thoroughly warmed our hearts. 'Be attentive, be attentive to my prayer;' and if mine will not prevail, be attentive to the prayers of others ; let the prayers of all prevail—'the prayer of thy servant, and of thy servants.'

But how doth he make it good, they are thy servants ?

'They desire to fear thy name.'

Empty relations have no comforts in them : to profess one's self a servant, and not to make it good that he is a servant. We must make good the relation we stand in to God, before we can claim interest in the favour of God by our relation. Servants, and Christians, and professors—here are glorious titles ; but if they be empty titles, if we cannot make them good when we come to God with them,—we cannot say we have any interest in God from empty titles,—it is rather an aggravation of our sin.

God will be honoured in all those that come near him, either in their obedience, or in their confusion. Therefore here the holy man did not think it enough to say, 'Thy servant, and thy servants, but who desire to fear thy name.'

He goes to make it good that he was the servant of God, not from any outward thing, but from his inward disposition, 'the fear of God,' which I will not now stand to speak largely of. God requires the heart ; and religion is most in managing and tuning the affections, for they are the wind that carries the soul to every duty. A man is like the dead sea without affections. Religion is most in them. The devil hath brain enough, he knows enough, more than any of us all. But then he hates God. He hath no love to God, nor no fear of God, but only a slavish fear. He hath not this reverential fear, childlike fear. Therefore let us make it good that we are the servants of God, especially by our affections, and chiefly by this of fear, which is put for all the worship of God. It is put instead of those conditions spoken of verse the 9th, 'If you turn to me, and keep my commandments, and do them,' then I will make good my promise. Now, saith he, taking up the same strength of argument, 'We desire to fear thy name.' As if he should have said, we turn to thee and obey thy commandments, and desire to do them. It is all one. 'We desire to fear thy name,' for those that fear God will turn to him ; and to desire to obey his commandments and to do them, it is all one as to do them. If a man should do them, and not from the fear of God, all were nothing but a carcase of obedience. I will not stand longer on that.

How doth he make it good that he feared the name of God ?

He makes it good from this, that he had good desires. '*We desire to fear thy name.*' We desire it for the present, and for the time to come ; whence we will observe two or three things shortly, as may be useful to us. First of all, out of this, that this desire to fear the name of God is brought as an argument to prevail in prayer, we may observe that,

Those that will prevail with God in prayer, must look to the bent of their souls for the time to come, and for the present.

‘Regard thy servants that desire to fear thy name.’ For to come to God without such a frame of soul as this, to desire to please God in all things for the present, and for the time to come, it is to come as God’s enemy; and will God regard his enemies? When one comes with a purpose to live in any sin, without a desire for the time to come, to regard all God’s commandments, he comes as God’s enemy, he comes as it were with his dagg* to shoot at God, he comes with his weapon. Who will regard the petition of a man that comes to wound him at the same time? When a man comes to God with a purpose to sin, he comes to wound God at the same time, as an enemy, and is he like to speed? For what are our sins, but that that makes us enemies to God? They are opposite to him as can be, they make us hateful to God. Therefore we must be able to say with good Nehemiah, when we come to God, to make it good that we are servants indeed, ‘*We desire to fear thy name.*’ As Jeremiah tells them, Jer. vii. 10, ‘Will you steal, and oppress, and commit adultery, and yet stand before me?’ Will you do this and this villany, and stand before me? ‘What hast thou to do,’ saith God, Ps. l. 16, *seq.*, ‘to take my name into thy mouth, and hatest to be reformed?’ If we hate to be reformed, and do not desire to serve God for the time to come, what have we to do to take his name into our mouths, especially in the holy exercise of prayer? Ps. lxxvi. 18, ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear my prayer.’ If a man do but regard to live in iniquity for the time to come, the Lord will not hear his prayer. Therefore, if we will be able to prevail with God in our petitions, we must say with holy Nehemiah, ‘*We desire for the time to come to fear thy name.*’ I beseech you, let us remember it.

And then, to omit other things, ‘we desire to fear thy name,’ we see that

Religion especially is in holy desires.

The greatest part of Christianity is to desire to be a sound Christian with all his heart. Religion is more in the affections of the soul than in the effects and operations. It is more in the resolutions and purpose of the soul, than in any effects we can yield to God. There is much desire in all our performances. Therefore saith the holy man here, ‘*We desire to fear thy holy name.*’

Why are desires such trials of the truth of grace?

Because they are the immediate issues of the soul. Desires and thoughts, and such like, they are produced immediately from the soul, without any help of the body, or without any outward manifestation. They shew the temper and frame of the soul. Thereupon God judgeth a man by his desires; and that which he desires, if it be a true desire, he shall have and be partaker of. The godly man desires to serve God all the days of his life, and for ever he shall do it. A wicked man desires to offend God if he might live everlastingly. God looks upon him as his desire is. He shall not alway sin here; but because he hath an infinite desire of sin, he shall be punished in hell eternally. God looks upon him as he desires. God values men by their desires.

But how are the truth of these desires known?

I will name a few signs. The truth of those desires may be tried thus:

1. *If they be constant desires and not flashes;* for then they come from a

* That is, = pistol. Cf. Halliwell’s Dictionary of Archaisms and Provincialisms, *sub voce*, 2 vols. 4to, 1852.—G.

new nature. Nature is strong and firm. Art is for a turn to serve a turn. When men personate a thing, they do it not long. Creatures that are forced to do so and so, they return to their own nature quickly; but when a man doth a thing naturally, he doth it constantly. So, constant desires argue a sanctified frame of soul and a new creature. They argue that the image of God is stamped upon the soul. Thereupon we may know that they are holy desires, that they spring from a holy soul, if they be constant, if they be perpetual desires, and not as a torrent that is vented for the present on a sudden, and then comes to nothing after. They are constant.

2. And likewise, *if these desires be hearty, strong desires*; and not only strong, but *growing desires*—desire upon desire, desire fed with desire still, never satisfied till they be satisfied. Strong and growing desires argue the truth of desires; as indeed a child of God hath never grace enough, never faith enough, never love enough, or comfort enough, till he come to heaven. They are growing desires more and more. The Spirit of God, that is the spring in him, springs up still further and further, till it spring to everlasting life, till it end in heaven, where all desires shall be accomplished, and all promises performed, and all imperfections removed. Till then they are growing desires still. ‘*We desire to fear thy name,*’ and to please thee in all things.

3. Again, True desires, *they are not only of the favour of God, but of graces for the altering of our nature*; as Nehemiah here, he desires not the favour of God so much as he desires to fear God’s name. Now when desire is of graces, it is a holy desire. You have not the worst men but would desire, with Balaam, ‘to die the death of the righteous,’ &c., Numb. xxiii. 10, that they might enjoy the portion of God’s people. But to desire grace, that is opposite to corrupt nature as fire and water, this is an argument of a holy principle of grace in us, whence this desire springs, when we desire that that is a counter poison to corrupt nature, that hath an antipathy to corruption. Therefore, when a man from the bottom of his heart can desire, Oh that I could serve God better! that I had more liberty to serve him! that I had a heart more enlarged, more mortified, more weaned from the world! Oh that I could fear God more! And of all graces, if it be a true desire, it is of such graces as may curb us of our sinful delights, and restrain us of our carnal liberty, and knit us near to God, and make us more heavenly-minded. The desire of these graces shew a true temper of soul indeed.

4. True desire *is carried to grace as well as glory, and the desire of heaven itself*. A true spirit that is touched with grace, with the Spirit of God, it desireth not heaven itself so much for the glory, and peace, and abundance of all contentments, as it desires it, that it is a place where it shall be freed from sin, and where the heart shall be enlarged to love God, to serve God, and to cleave to God for ever, and as it is a condition wherein he shall have the image and resemblance of Jesus Christ perfectly upon his soul. Therefore we pray, ‘Thy kingdom come;’ that is, we desire that thou wouldst rule more and more largely in our souls, and subdue all opposite power in us, and bring into captivity all our desires and affections; and let ‘Thy kingdom come’ more and more. ‘Let thy will be done by us,’ and in us more and more, ‘in earth as it is in heaven.’ Here is a sweet prayer now serving to the first petition, the hallowing of God’s name, when we desire more to honour God, and to that purpose that he may rule in us more and make us better. These desires argue an excellent frame of soul; as we see in Nehemiah, ‘our desire is to fear thy name.’

5. True desires are likewise *to the means of salvation*, and to the means of salvation as they convey grace, as sincere milk; as you have it, 1 Pet. ii. 2, 'As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word.' Where a man hath holy desires of any grace, and hath them in truth, he will desire those means whereby those graces may most effectually be wrought in his heart. Therefore he will hear the word as the word of God. He comes not to hear the word because of the eloquence of the man that delivers it, that mingles it with his own parts. He comes not to hear it as the tongue of man; but he sees God in it. It is the powerful word of God, because there goes the efficacy of the Spirit with it to work the graces he desires.

Therefore a man may know by his taste of divine truth whether he desire grace. He that desires grace desires the means that may convey grace, and especially so far as they convey grace, 'As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word.' You cannot still a child with anything but milk. He desires no blending or mixing, but only milk. So a true Christian desires divine truths most, because the Spirit of God is effectual by them to work grace and comfort in him. I will not enlarge myself in the point.

Use. The comfortable observation hence is this, *that weak Christians that find a debility, and faintness, and feebleness in their performances*, hence they may comfort themselves by their desire to fear God, and to worship God, and to serve him, if their desires be true. Therefore, in Isaiah xxvi. 8, the church allegeth it to God, 'In the way of thy judgments have we sought thee,' &c. 'The desire of our souls is towards thy name.' They bring it as a prevailing argument to God. So when we come to God, 'The desire of our souls is toward thy name.' Lord, our endeavours are weak and feeble, but 'the desire of our souls is to thy name,' and 'thou wilt not quench the smoking flax,' Mat. xii. 20. Therefore we come to thee with these weak and poor desires that we have. 'The Lord will fulfil the desires of them that fear him,' Ps. cxlv. 19, if they be but desires, if they be true, and growing, and constant desires, and desires of grace as well as of happiness, as I shewed before.

The reason why God accepts them is partly because *they spring from his own Spirit*. These desires they are the breathings of the Spirit. For even as it is in places where fountains and springs are digged up, they are known and discovered by vapours; the vapours shew that there is some water there, some spring, if it were digged up. So these desires, these breathings to God for grace and comfort, these spiritual breathings, they shew that there is a spring within and Spirit within, whence these vapours and desires come. Therefore they are accepted of God, because they spring from his own Spirit.

And because *they are pointed to heavenward, to shew that a man is turned*; for it is put here instead of turning, 'Turn ye to me, saith the Lord,' ver. 9; and he answereth here instead of turning, 'My desire is to fear thy name,' because, when the desire is altered, then the frame of the soul is altered, a man is turned another way. The desire is the weight of the soul. What carries the soul but desire? Now, when the soul is carried another way than before, it argues an alteration of the frame; therefore it pleaseth God to accept of them.

I beseech you, let us often enter into our own souls, and examine what our desires are, which way the bent of our souls is; what cause we would have to flourish and prevail in the world, Christ's or antichrist's; for God esteems us by the frame of our desires. 'Who desire to fear thy name.'

‘And prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day.’

Now he comes to his petition, ‘Prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day.’ He doth not capitulate* with God for particular matters much—for he knew he had to deal with an all-wise God,—but he commends his petition in general, ‘Prosper, I pray thee, thy servant,’ &c. He was to attend the king, and he was in his attendance to mind the state of the church, for the re-edifying the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Now saith he in general, ‘Prosper thy servant.’ He leaves it to God how and in what manner, being to deal, as I said, with an infinite wise God; only he prays in general, ‘Prosper thy servant this day.’

He comes again with his relation of ‘servant,’ to teach us alway when we come to God to look in what relation we stand to him, whether we be true servants or no, what work we do for him, in what reference we do what we do; whether we do it to please him as servants or no. I said something of the relation of servant before. I will add a little here, because he repeats it four or five times in this short prayer.

In all our services we should look to God; for our aim in our works shew what they are, whether they come from servants or no. As the stamp upon a token makes it, if there be a good stamp on it; it is not the matter that makes it current. A stamp on silver makes it current as well as gold, though the metal of gold be better. So when things are done, because God commands them, to please God, as a service to him, this makes it good that we are servants indeed, that the relation is good. When we go about the service of the church or country, or place we live in, to think I do God service here, and do it as a service to God, who will be honoured and served in our service to others, herein I am a good servant. Though the matter of my service be a common, base, and mean matter, yet it hath a stamp upon it. It is God’s will. God hath placed and planted me here, and he will be served of me in this condition at this time, though the matter of it be an ordinary thing. I know it may help the good of the church. It hath reference to the will of God and the good of the church. Thus if we do what we do with an eye to God in the place where he hath set us, that we do it as to him, we are God’s servants, whatsoever the work is.

And let us remember oft to think of it, to bring it in our prayers. ‘Master,’ say they when they were ready to be drowned, ‘dost thou not care that we perish?’ Mark iv. 38. They put him in mind of the relation they were in to him. So when we can put God in mind of our relation—‘Father, we are thy children;’ ‘Lord, we are thy servants’—it will strengthen our faith and hope of all good. Will a master suffer his servant to miscarry in his service? Surely God will never turn away true-hearted servants that have served him a long time. It puts us in mind of our duty, and serves to strengthen our faith; for as it is a word of service on our part, so it is a promising word of all good from God. Doth he expect that masters should be good to their servants because they have a Master in heaven? and will not the great Master of heaven be good to his servants? You see how he follows the relation.

‘Prosper thy servant this day.’

What is included in this word ‘*prosper*?’

It includes not only success, which is the main upshot of all, but all that tends to good success. ‘Prosper thy servant this day;’ that is, direct thy

* That is, = ‘make terms.’—G.

servant this day how to do and to carry himself. And likewise assist thy servant. When thou shalt direct him, assist him by thy strength, direct him by thy wisdom, prosper him with thy grace, give him good success in all. It includes direction, and assistance, and good success. In that he saith, 'prosper thy servant,' it includes these things.

First of all, that in ourselves *there is neither direction, nor wisdom, nor ability enough for success.* We have not power in ourselves to bring things to a comfortable issue. So it enforceth self-denial, which is a good disposition when we come to God in prayer.

2. And then again, *to attribute to God all, both wisdom, and strength, and goodness, and all.* Here is a giving to God the glory of all, when he saith, 'Prosper thy servant this day.'

3. Then in the third place, here is *a dependence upon God*; not only acknowledging these things to be in God, but it implies a dependence upon God for these: 'Prosper me, Lord.' I cannot prosper myself, and thou who art the Creator hast wisdom, and strength, and goodness enough. Therefore I depend upon thee, upon thy wisdom for direction, and upon thy strength for assistance. I depend upon thy goodness and all for a blessed issue. Here is dependence.

4. Again, in the fourth place, here is *a recommendation of all by prayer*; a recommendation of his inward dependence upon God for all. Now, Lord, 'prosper thy servant.'

So that when we come to God for any prosperity and good success, let us remember that we bring self-denial, and an acknowledgment of all excellency to be in God, to guide, and direct, and assist, and bless us. And remember to depend upon him, to cast ourselves on him, to bring our souls to close with the strong, and wise, and gracious God, that God and our souls may close together. And then commend all by prayer 'to cast ourselves and our affairs, and to roll ourselves,' as the Scripture saith, and all upon God, Ps. lv. 22; and then we shall do as the holy man Nehemiah did here, we shall desire to good purpose that God would 'prosper us.' Indeed, 'it is not in man to guide and direct his own way,' Jer. x. 23. We are dark creatures, and we have not wisdom enough. And we are weak creatures. We have no strength. We are nothing in our own strength. And for success, alas! a thousand things may hinder us from it. For success is nothing but the application of all things to a fit issue, and foreseeing all things that may hinder, and a removing of them. Now who can do this but God?

One main circumstance that besiegeth and besets a business may hinder an excellent business. Who can see all things that beset a business? all circumstances that stand about a business? Who can see all circumstances of time, and place, and persons, that are hindrances or furtherances? It must be an infinite wisdom that must foresee them; man cannot see them. And when men do see them, are there not sudden passions that come up in men, that rob them of the use of their knowledge? that though they know them before, yet some sudden passion of fear or anger may hinder the knowledge of a man, that he is in a mist when he comes to particulars. When he comes to apply the knowledge that he had before, he knows not what to do. So that unless God in a particular business give success, who is infinitely wise and powerful to remove all hindrances, there will be no success.

As it is in the frame of the body, it stands upon many joints; and if any be out of tune, the whole body is sick. And as it is in a clock, all the

wheels must be kept clean and in order, so it is in the frame of a business. There must all the wheels be set a-going; if one be hindered, there is a stop in all. It is so with us in the affairs of this world. When we deal with kings and states, if all the wheels be not kept as they should, there will be no success or prosperity. Nehemiah knew this well enough; 'prosper thou therefore.'

He meant not to be idle when he said this, 'prosper thou;' for he after joined his own diligence and waited. Therefore join that. If we would have our prayers to God and our dependence upon him effectual for prosperity and success, be careful to use the means as he did. He stands before the king, and observed how he carried himself, to see what words would come from the king, and then he meant after to put in execution whatsoever God should discover.

Use. It should teach us to make this use of it, when we deal in any matter, to go to God to prosper it, and give success, and direction, and assistance, and a blessed issue. For God, that we may always depend upon him, he keeps one part in heaven still. When he gives us all likelihood of things upon earth, yet he reserves still the blessing till the thing be done. Till there be a consummation of the business, he keeps some part in heaven. Because he would have us sue to him, and be beholding to him, he will have us go up to heaven. Therefore, when we have daily bread, we must pray for daily bread, because the blessing comes from him. Our bread may choke us else. We may die with it in our mouths, as the Israelites did. But when we have things, we must depend on him for a blessing; all is to no purpose else.

Let us learn by this a direction to piety and holy walking with God; in all things to pray to God for a blessing. And to that purpose we must be in such a condition of spirit as we may desire God to prosper us; that is, we must not be under the guilt of sin when we come to God to prosper us. And we must be humble. God will not prosper a business till we be humble. As in the case of the Benjamites, when they came, they were denied the first, second, and third time. Till they prayed and fasted, and were thoroughly humbled, they had their suit denied, Judges xx. 36, *seq.* If the cause be never so good, till we be humbled, God will not prosper it, because we are not in frame for the blessing; if we had it, we would be proud. God in preventing* mercy and care, will grant nothing till we be humbled. Therefore let us see that we be humble, and see that the matter be good that we beg God to bless and prosper us in, or else we make a horrible idol of God. We make (with reverence be it spoken) a devil of God. Do we think that God will give strength to an ill business? This is to make him a factor for mischief, for the devil's work. We must not come with such 'strange fire' before God, to transform God to the contrary to that he is; but come with humble affections, with repentant souls for our former sins. And let the thing itself be good, that we may come without tempting of him; let the cause be such that we may desire God's assistance, without tempting of him, as we do when it is good and when we come disposed. Then come with a purpose to refer all to his service. Lord, if thou wilt bless me in this business, the strength and encouragement I have by it, I will refer it to thy further service. Let me have this token of love from thee, that I have a good aim in all, and then I am sure to speed well.

'Prosper now thy servant.'

* That is, 'anticipating.'—G.

It is an excellent point, if I had time to stand on it. I beseech you, let it have some impression upon your hearts.

What is the reason that God blasts and brings to nothing, many excellent endeavours and projects? Men set upon the business of God, and of their callings, in confidence of their wit* and pride of their own parts. They carry things in the pride and strength of their parts. Men come as gods to a business, as if they had no dependence upon him for wisdom, or direction, or strength. They carry things in a carnal manner, in a human manner, with human spirits. Therefore they never find either success, or not good success. Let us therefore commend all to God: 'Prosper thy servant.' Before he went about the business, holy Nehemiah he sowed prayers in God's bosom, and watered the seed with mourning; as it is in this chapter, he mourned and prayed. When this business was sown with prayers, and watered with tears, how could he but hope for good success! He mourned and prayed to God, 'Hear thy servant.'

Now when we deal with things in a holy manner, we may, without tempting God, trust him. That which is set upon in carnal confidence and pride, it ends in shame; when men think to conceive things in wit, ay, and in faction and human affections, God will not be glorified this way. God will be glorified by humble dependent creatures, that when they have done the business, will ascribe all to him. 'Not unto us, but to thy name give the praise,' Ps. cxv. 1. The direction and assistance and blessing was thine. Saith God in Isa. 1., towards the end, ver. 11, 'Go to now, ye that kindle a fire, walk in the light of your own fire: but be sure you shall end in sorrow.' You will kindle a fire of your own devices, and walk in the light of your fire; you will have projects of your own, and be your own carvers: but be sure you shall lie down in darkness and discomfort, you shall lie down in sorrow.

A proud unbroken heart accounts these poor courses. It is but a course of weak and poor spirits to pray and fast, and humble themselves to God, and to fear God. Alas! what are these? These are weak courses. I hope we have stronger parts and means to carry things. So they have a kingdom in their brain. What is the issue of these vain men, when God discovers all their courses to be vain at length, to be wind, and come to nothing? 'Prosper now thy servant,' saith he.

Let us learn this lesson likewise. If we come to God in a particular business, that we are not so confident in, to be pleasing to God, yet in general to submit ourselves, 'Lord, prosper thy servant;' go before thy servant; let me deal in nothing against thy will; direct me what is for thy glory; and not to prescribe or limit God. 'Prosper thy servant this day.'

'And grant him mercy in the sight of this man.'

He comes more particularly to this request, 'Grant me mercy in the sight of this man.' We see that

A king is a great organ or instrument to convey good things from God, the King of kings, to men.

Therefore he prays that God would give him favour in the sight of the king. For a king is the first wheel that moves all other wheels, and as it were the sun of the commonwealth, or the first mover that moves all inferior orbs. Therefore in heavenly wisdom he desires God to give him favour with him; for if he had that, the king could turn all the inferior orbs to his pleasure. Indeed, it were a point worthy enlarging, but that

* That is, 'wisdom.'—G.

it is not so seasonable for this time, the time being already spent. You see what great good God conveys by kings and princes. And when God means to do good to a church or state, he raiseth up 'nursing fathers and nursing mothers,' Isa. xlix. 23. He will raise up both kings and subordinate Nehemiahs, excellent men, when he hath excellent things to do.

But the main thing here intended, which I will but touch, is, that considering they stand in such a subordination to God as to be instruments to convey so much good or so much ill as they may, as it is said of Jeroboam, they either cause others to sin or to worship God, therefore we should do as good Nehemiah: he prays that he might find favour in his sight.

A wise and holy prayer! He begins at the head; he goes to the spring of all good. Prayer is the messenger or ambassador of the soul. Being the ambassador of the soul, it goes to the highest, to the King of kings first; to the Lord of lords first. It goes to the highest mover of all, and then desires him to move the next immediate subordinate mover, that is, the king, that he may move other orbs under him, that things may be carried by a gracious sweet course to a blessed issue. Therefore the observation hence is this, *that when we have to do anything with great men, with kings, &c., however, begin with the King of kings*, and do all in heaven before we do it in earth; for heaven makes the laws that earth is governed by. Let earth conclude what it will, there will be conclusions in heaven that will overthrow all their conclusions. Therefore in our prayers we should begin with God, and desire him with earnest and fervent entreaties that he would set all a-going, that he would set in frame these inferior causes. And when we have gotten what we would in heaven, it is easy to get in earth. Let us win what we desire in heaven at God's hands, and then what an easy thing is it to work with princes and other governors in state when we have gotten God once! Hath not he 'the hearts of kings in his hand as the rivers of water,' Prov. xxi. 1, to turn this way or that there way? As a skilful man derives water by this channel or by that, as he opens a vent for the water, so God opens a way to vent the deliberations and determinations of kings and princes, to run this way or that, to this good or that, as he pleaseth. Therefore considering that there is an absolute dependence of all inferior things from God, when we have to do with kings or great men, let us always begin with prayer.

As Jacob, when he was to deal with Esau, he falls down and prays first; and when he had gotten of God by prayer, God, that makes 'even of enemies friends,' he turned Esau's heart of an enemy to be a friend. And God put into Jacob's heart a wise course to effect this, as to offer a present, and to give him titles, 'My lord Esau,' &c., Gen. xxxiii. 4. God, when he will effect a thing amongst men, and hear the prayers that are made to him for the favour of men, he will put into their hearts such ways whereby they shall prevail with men, as Jacob did with Esau. So Esther, before she goes to Ahasuerus, she got* in heaven first by prayer. When she had obtained of God by prayer, how placable and sweet was Ahasuerus to her! So we see in other places of Scripture, when holy men have been to deal with men, they began with God.

I beseech you therefore learn this point of Christian wisdom. If you would speed well,—as we all desire to speed well in our business,—especially those that have public employments, [this must be the course] that they would pray to God, that hath the hearts of kings and princes in his government and guidance, that he would make them favourable; and not to

* Spelled 'gate,' *i. e.*, gat.—G.

think to carry things in a violent course, for then God doth not usually give that good success; but to carry things in a religious course to the King of heaven, and then to know in what terms to stand in all inferior things as may stand with the will of God in heaven.

If so be there be a dependence of all inferiors to God, then we must not offend God, and go against conscience, for any, because he is 'King of kings, and Lord of lords.' He doth not set up authority against himself, to disarm and disable himself. He never went to set up gods under him, to make him a cypher; that he should make them gods, and God a man, or nobody, to alter all the frame of things. He never meant to set up any ordinance to nullify and make himself nobody. Therefore, I say, we ought to pray to God for kings, that so in our obedience we may be sure to do nothing against conscience for any creature. We must do all things that possible can be, that may procure the favour, and ingratiate us, because it is in vain to pray unless we use all possible means to win their favour; but if it cannot be upon good terms, then 'whether to obey God or man, judge ye,' Acts v. 29. And as the three young men, 'we take no thought to answer in this matter; our God can defend us if he will,' Daniel iii. 16. And as Esther said, 'If I perish, I perish,' Esther iv. 16. When things are clear, we are to be resolute, yet reserving due respect to God's ordinance and to his lieutenant upon earth; I say, always reserving due respect, and using means to win favour, and also to use prayer.

Holy Nehemiah, he prays here; and together with that, he attends upon the king. As good Jacob observed Esau, so all good means must be used, or else God will not bless our proceedings.

Remember that all inferior governors whatsoever, they are subordinate and dependent, and therefore they must be regulated by a superior. They are limited, they are dependent, they are derivative. They are dependent upon God; they are derived from him. Therefore, as the apostle saith that 'servants must obey their masters in the Lord,' Eph. vi. 5, so we must obey and do all 'in the Lord.' That limitation must be always added; but reserving that, it is a good thing to pray that there may be favour from the king, because it is of much consequence to bring business to a good issue. And with prayer, there must be a using means to get favour, always with this liberty, to do it so far as we can with preserving a good conscience.

As they have a distinction among civilians, there is a parting with a thing *cumulativè* and *privativè*: *cumulativè*, that is, when we part with a thing so as that we reserve the propriety;* *privativè*, when we give away the propriety and all. Now, so God parts with nothing below, as to strip himself; but *cumulativè*, he derives† authority to others, but reserves the propriety to himself. Therefore we must obey them in him, and with this limitation, as it may stand with his favour.

To draw to a conclusion in a word. You see here that any good Christian may be a good statesman in one good sense. What is that? A good Christian hath credit in heaven, and he hath a spirit of prayer, and his prayer can set God on work; and God can set the king on work; and he can set his subjects on work. Now, he that can prevail with God to prevail with the gods upon earth here, surely such a man is a profitable man in the state. And you know, God he can alter all matters, and mould all things: it is but a word of his mouth. And what God can do, prayer can do; for prayer binds God, because it is the prayer of faith; and faith, as it

* That is, property, 'possession.'—G. † That is, 'communicates,' bestows.—G.

were, overcomes God. Now, prayer is the flame of faith, the vent* of faith; and faith is a victorious, triumphant grace with God himself. If it be any, it is Christians that can prevail with God for a blessing upon a state. Then certainly there is no good Christian but is of excellent service in the state. Though in particular perhaps he hath not policy, and wisdom, and government, yet he hath God's ear to hear him, and he can pray to God that God would make the king and other subordinate magistrates favourable.

You see what great good a good man may do in a state. 'The innocent man delivers the land,' as it is in Job xxii. 30. And the 'poor wise man delivers the city,' as it is in Ecces. ix. 15. A few holy, gracious men, that have grace and credit in heaven above, they may move God to set all things in a blessed frame below. And surely if this holy means were used, things would be better than they are; and till this be used, we can never look for the good success and issue of things that otherwise we may hope for.

Divers things might be spoken of the doctrinal part. I will give you but a word of it. *That God hath our hearts in his government, more than we ourselves.* I speak it to inform our judgment in a point of doctrine, whether God foresee and determine of things below upon foresight, which way they shall go; or whether he foreordain that they shall go this way, because he directs them thus: that is to make God, God indeed. He determines that these things shall be, because he determines, in the series and order of causes, to bring things to pass, and to guide kings, and princes, and magistrates, and all, this way. Again, whether God hath set all men at liberty, in matters of grace especially, that they may apply grace at their liberty, which way they will; and in foresight, which way they will apply their liberty, to determine thus or thus of them. This is to make every man's will a god, and to divest God of his honour, as if God could foresee the inclination of the creature, without foresight that he meant to incline it this way or that way.

Can God foresee any entity, any thing that hath a being in nature or grace, without foresight to direct it this way or that way? He cannot. This is to make him no God. We see God hath the hearts of kings in his power, and that is the ground of prayer for grace to them. Why should we pray for them, if they could apply their own will which way they would? Why should we give thanks for that we have liberty to do this way or that way? It stops devotion, and petition, and thanksgiving, to say that the creature hath liberty to apply itself, and God, seeing it would apply itself thus, determined so. Oh no. We must go to God. He hath set down an order and course of means; and in the use of those means, desire him to guide us by his good Spirit, to enlighten our understandings, to guide our wills and affections by his Holy Spirit, because our hearts are in his government more than our own. If it were needful to prove it, I could prove it at large. If there had been such a liberty, good Nehemiah would never have made this prayer. But God doth strangely put thoughts and guide all, even of himself, as we may see excellently in the story of Esther. I will give you but that example and instance. What a strange thing was it that Ahasuerus could not sleep; and when he could not sleep, to call for the book, and then that he should read of Mordecai, and thereupon to advance Mordecai. All this tended to the good of the church: it was a strange thing. And so in other things. It is a strange thing that God should put little thoughts and desires into great persons, and then follow

* That is, 'outlet,' = utterance.—G.

it with this circumstance and that; and so bring things to pass. All this is from God. Except we hold this, that God rules all without, and especially the hearts of men, where it is his especial prerogative to set up his throne, we shall never pray heartily or give thanks. And if we do pray and give thanks, he will put thoughts into governors' minds, strange thoughts and resolutions for the good of the church, that we could never have thought of, nor could come otherwise, but from the great God of heaven and earth. We shall see a strange providence concur to the good of all. But I must leave the enlargement of these things to your own thoughts and meditations.*

* Here is added, 'Imprimatur. Thomas Wykes. August 24. 1639.'—G.

NOTES.

(a) P. 96.—'Let a child but cry to the father or mother, there is relief presently for the very cry.' Tennyson has finely put this:—

'What am I?
An infant crying in the night,
An infant crying for the light,
And with no language but a cry.'—*In Memoriam*, liii.

(b) P. 96.—'As Tertullian saith, . . . "When men join together, they offer a holy kind of violence to God."' In his 'Apology' the *sentiment* is found, *e.g.*, c. xxxix.: 'We are a body united in the profession of religion, in the same rites of worship, and in the bond of a common hope. We meet in one place, and form an assembly, that we may, as it were, come before God in one united body, and so address him in prayer. This is a violence which is well-pleasing to God.' Cf. Temple Chevallier's excellent edition of the post-apostolical Letters and Apologies (8vo, 2d ed., 1851), *in loc.*

(c) P. 96.—'Take away prayer, and take away the life and *breath of the soul*. Take away breath, and the man dies; as soon as the soul of a Christian begins to live, he prays.' This recalls the beautiful hymn of James Montgomery—

'Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,' &c.

G.