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“ENTER INTO THY CLOSET:”

OR

SECRET PRAYER,

AND

ITS ACCOMPANYING EXERCISES.

INTENDED

TO ASSIST YOUNG PERSONS AND OTHERS IN ACQU'R
ING DEVOTIONAL HABITS, WITHOUT THE AID OF
WRITTEN FORMS.

BY

THE REV. JAMES M'GILL,

HIGHTAE, LOCHMABEN.

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P R E F A C E .

SOME explanation is perhaps due by the present writer, in offering his thoughts to the public on a subject on which so much has already been written.

Of the many works in existence having reference to the subject of devotion, some are theological treatises, in which the exercise of prayer is examined in its abstract relations, and shown to be consistent with reason, as well as required by christianity; others contain examples of devout meditations, intended to be directly employed in the worship of God; whilst the object of a third class is to exhibit persuasives to the duty of prayer, with hints and directions as to its profitable performance.

The present humble production is most nearly allied to publications of this last description. Wholly practical in its design, it takes for granted the efficacy of prayer, as a

truth which cannot be doubted without denying the authority of scripture, and even the first principles of natural religion as embodied in the superstitions of all nations; but it aims not to investigate the philosophy of devotion, or to illustrate the question, more curious than useful, as to the manner in which prayer becomes efficacious. On the other hand, although intended as a companion for the closet, it is not what is usually called a Manual of devotion; but proceeds upon the principle, that the gift of prayer may easily be acquired by any one who, with the Bible in his hands, will think seriously of what he does when he ventures to address the Father of mercies.

The distinction between teaching and training, is now well understood. The one includes merely the communication of knowledge, the other embraces the regulation of the mind, and the development of character. This distinction supplies a hint as to the different ways in which divine truth may be presented, and religious duties inculcated: in the doing of which the course pursued must vary, according as we wish to communicate information, or to assist in the production of

habits. The title-page has already intimated that the latter, rather than the former, is the object which has been attempted to be kept in view in the following pages.

It is obviously of no moment what are a man's views or opinions on the subject of devotion, if the duty itself is neglected. It is the person who desires instruction, with the direct purpose of reducing it to practice, who is really on the way to improvement. He who seeks to know what he ought to do, with the design of doing it, will make most progress in the knowledge both of truth and duty. The words of our Lord, on a somewhat different subject, disclose a principle which runs through the whole of religion:—"If any man will do his will, he shall know the doctrines." If a man would understand and appreciate the doctrines and precepts of christianity, let him surrender his heart and life to their guidance.

SKAIRFIELD, LOCHMABEN,
January, 1843.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

Forms of prayer useful, yet very often injurious—The right state of the heart the great object—The person should express what he really feels, - - - - - Page 11—17.

CHAPTER II.

DUTIES OF THE CLOSET GENERALLY.

Religious exercises, public and private, suited to the nature of man—Solitude an evil, yet retirement an advantage—Whatever requires close attention must engage our thoughts when alone—Religion a personal and private concern—Every one has feelings to express which are known only to himself—In the closet we may ascertain whether the fervour experienced in praying with others is genuine—Scriptures can be searched, and self-examination practised, only in retirement—Duties of the closet most intimately connected with the interests of the soul—Our Lord's command—His own example—Directions to persons unaccustomed to prayer, - - - - - Page 18—45.

CHAPTER III.

SECRET PRAYER.

Seasons of prayer—Importance of having a fixed time and place—This not inconsistent with cultivating habitually a devotional frame—Morning and evening—Other portions of time occasionally set apart—Secret prayer should be offered intelligently, sincerely, deliberately—With special reference to the promises of the divine word—Through Jesus Christ—Encouragement thus afforded may not at first be realized—Exhortation to persevere, - - - - - Page 46—73

CHAPTER IV.

ADORATION.

Distinction between adoration and thanksgiving—The glory of God the great end of all creatures and of all worship—Man's duty to glorify God—Especially by the direct homage of praise—Scripture examples—Moses and the children of Israel—The same sentiment in the days of Malachi—The book of Psalms—God's moral attributes—Celebrated by seraphim—By saints on earth—By our Lord on the cross—Directions—Meditate—Try to adopt the language of scripture as your own—Begin by thinking of God's natural perfections, - - - Page 74—98.

CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

Connection between confession of sin and forgiveness—No merit in confession—Directions to a person concerned about his soul—Is not aware how much he has to confess—Begin by confessing one sin at a time—Controversy with God thus brought to a point—Sin that has been confessed must be forsaken—Case of a person afterwards falling into the same sin—Gradual experience of the wickedness of the heart—Besetting sins—Aggravations of sin, - - - - - Page 99—122.

CHAPTER VI.

PETITION.

Petition refers to our condition as needy—Two things to be considered, what we should ask, and in what manner—Many ask without knowing what they want—God's knowledge of our wants does not justify our ignorance—The Lord's prayer a rule in offering petitions—Blessings of which the returning sinner stands immediately in need—Pardon of sin—Near relation to God—Hope of reconciliation—Faith, love, and penitence—Sanctification—Strength to perform duty and resist temptation—A blessing on the ordinances, and the dispensations of providence—Relation of this part of prayer to Christ—Discovery of Christ to the soul—Influences of the Spirit—The prayer of faith—Reference to the peculiar circumstances of the petitioner,

Page 123—159.

CHAPTER VII.

THANKSGIVING.

Thanksgiving neglected by many who offer petitions—Has reference to the goodness of God, in creation, providence, grace, special deliverances—Psalm cvii.—All God's dealings with his people lead to praise—Address to a person who cannot feel thankful for spiritual blessings—Relation of thanksgiving to the character and work of Christ—To the dealings of God with the Church—To events in private life—To our present circumstances, - - - - - Page 160—179.

CHAPTER VIII.

SELF DEDICATION.

Self-Dedication practised by every Christian—At the beginning of his religious course, and afterwards—Ought regularly to form part of secret devotion—Every act of divine worship implies the principle of covenanting—Objections answered—Remarks suggested by the objection that it encourages a legal spirit—Case of a person breaking his covenant with God—Advice to such a person—Advantages of daily renewing our covenant—Address to one who has never given himself to God, Page 180—197.

CHAPTER IX.

INTERCESSION.

Duty and privilege of praying for others in their absence—Intercession of Christ—Intercession the duty of ministers—Nevertheless, the duty also of private Christians—We are required to pray for all men—Some have special claims—Relation between a pastor and his flock—Advantages of mutual intercession—The apostle Paul and those among whom he laboured—Prayer for the advancement of Christ's kingdom—Connection between prayer for ourselves and for others—Parents should pray for their children individually—Address to one unaccustomed to this exercise, - - - - - Page 198—217.

CHAPTER X.

READING THE SCRIPTURES.

Scriptures may be read from various motives—Devotional reading

explained—Many neglect this who do not wholly omit secret prayer—Should form regularly a part of devotion—Requires time and self-denial—Even this an advantage—Spiritual profit—Christ in the word—Superiority of the word of God to the best human writings—Scriptures should be studied by the people as well as by ministers—Manner of reading the Bible—Advantages of a systematic plan—Let the same portion be read over two or three times—The attempt of an individual to ascertain how far his feelings correspond with those of the inspired writers exemplified—We should seek the temper and habits described—Should be grateful for our privileges as Protestants,

Page 218—243.

CHAPTER XI.

WATCHFULNESS.

Watchfulness often enjoined—Its connection with prayer—Enemies to be guarded against—We ought to guard the regular seasons of prayer—To watch for special opportunities—Against hinderances, direct and indirect—Against the first approaches to neglect—Against impure motives—Danger of self-deception—Promise attached to judging ourselves—If we will not judge ourselves God will judge us—He searches the heart and character—Often conducts this search by means of his providence,

Page 244—265

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

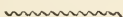
Importance of the subject treated in the preceding pages—Hypocrites deficient in the duty of prayer—Neglect of prayer exceedingly wicked—Would be better even for Christians if they were more prayerful—Wise and merciful purposes served by the institution of prayer—A life of prayer does not imply an ascetic temper—Connection between believing prayer and active duties—Public and social prayer not to be neglected—Devotion does not disqualify for taking part in public questions,

Page 266—276.

SECRET PRAYER.

AND

ITS ACCOMPANYING EXERCISES.



CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

A CONSIDERABLE number of works have, within the last few years, been given to the public, with the design of assisting serious persons in conducting devotional exercises. These works consist, for the most part, of forms of prayer, and are in many respects valuable. They are calculated to encourage those to maintain the worship of God in their families, and perhaps also in their closets, who, without such assistance, might be in danger of neglecting such duties altogether. Even to persons who have cultivated the gift of extemporaneous prayer, the works to which we allude may not be without their use. A written composition, expressing in a simple, perspicuous, and accurate manner, the thoughts and desires that are suitable in the presence of God, is always entitled to attention, and

cannot fail to repay a serious and careful perusal.

But with all their advantages, written forms of prayer are very often productive of injury. They are excellent as helps; but, like every other kind of aid, they are in danger of being too much relied upon, and of thus increasing, rather than diminishing, the weakness they are intended to assist. When constantly employed, they cannot but prevent the feelings of the heart from having that free and spontaneous exercise, which properly belongs to prayer. The business of devotion is liable to degenerate into mere ceremony, and to be considered as a task, which those engaged in it are glad when they have finished. When prayers have been read, there is a danger of resting in the mere external performance of the duty, as if the end of devotion were gained when the observance is concluded. It is apt to be forgotten that prayer is not properly engaged in, unless the person is made to feel himself transacting immediately with God, and laying bare all his thoughts and feelings, his cares and anxieties, and the most secret movements of his soul, in the presence of the Searcher of hearts.

The connection existing in the mind between language and ideas, becomes less distinct in proportion to the frequency with which the language is repeated. The constant use of the same words and phrases, although it calls up by association a certain feeling of seriousness, tends gradually to withdraw

the mind from the sentiments and desires which the words are intended to represent. Expressions which at first could not be pronounced without striking the mind as full of significance, are, in consequence of the ear having become accustomed to the sound, read or listened to without emotion, and with scarcely a perception of their meaning. This is an evil to which many, indeed, are liable who do not employ written forms of prayer. Through long usage, they fall insensibly, into the same train of expressions along which they have often travelled before, and the ideas they utter, are less and less distinctly perceived or attended to. But much more must this disadvantage attach to those, who never venture to address the throne of grace without the aid of a previously prepared composition.

There is also reason to apprehend that forms of prayer are unfavourable to that habit of self-examination, which is so essentially connected with the life of true religion, and with all the exercises of devotion. Faith, repentance, and almost every other precious principle, imply on the part of their possessor an intimate acquaintance with the state of his own heart; and this acquaintance is not to be obtained without habitual scrutiny. In regard to devotional exercises, neither confession of sin, thanksgiving for mercies received, nor petition for a fresh supply of blessings, can be properly offered, except as the result of a close and faithful self-inspection. It is only thus that we can be distinctly aware of

what sins we have to confess, what mercies to be thankful for, and what blessings to solicit. We do not deny that self-examination may be practised by many who make use of written compositions in prayer. Their thoughts may be directed to their own particular circumstances, whilst using the general language of the book. But there is, at least, a danger that it may be otherwise; as their mode of addressing the throne of grace does not, in any peculiar way, remind them of the obligation to look within. They are not under the necessity of reviewing their spiritual condition, and examining in minute detail their daily sins, and wants, and mercies.

It is the object of the following pages to afford assistance to serious persons, and especially to youthful enquirers, in regard to personal and secret devotion; but the assistance we propose to offer is of a kind different from that afforded by the use of forms of prayer. The power of expressing his thoughts with propriety in extemporaneous prayer, is what every individual of ordinary abilities, who is tolerably acquainted with the scriptures, is capable of attaining. Of course no instruction can enable an uneducated person to express himself in addressing his Maker, any more than in conversing with his fellows, in the language which would suggest itself to a man of education. But this is not necessary, nor even desirable. A familiarity with the doctrines and precepts of Christianity, and

a personal experience of the power of the truth upon the heart and character, may be possessed by the poor as well as by the rich, by those whose attainments in secular learning are slender, as well as by the most scientific and erudite; and the same may be said of the gift of prayer. The man, whatever his circumstances, who has been taught to look up unto God as his Father, and has become possessed of the spirit of adoption, will easily acquire the habit of using language appropriate to his devotional feelings.

The great object to be kept in view is to have the heart brought into a right state. If this object is lost sight of, no assistance that can be offered will be of any real value; and no doubt one way of promoting this end is by the study of devotional writings. We do not recommend that forms of prayer should either be read at the time of devotion, or that they should be previously committed to memory, to be then repeated. They should be carefully read at other times, in order that the mind may be stored with the truths, and imbued with the sentiments which they contain; but when prayer is actually engaged in, the mind ought to be occupied neither with the perusal of a book, nor with the recollecting of expressions that have been carefully learned, but with the simple contemplation of the great Object of worship, and of the circumstances in which we stand before him.

It is often astonishing with what propriety even an uneducated man will express himself

on any subject which he perfectly understands, especially if it be one which powerfully awakens his feelings; and there is no instance in which this remark is more frequently illustrated than in the extemporaneous prayers of the pious poor. Nor ought it to escape observation, that those who are in the habit of using written forms, are, for the most part, serious persons belonging to the educated classes, the very persons who might be supposed to stand least in need of such assistance; as if by some strange perversion, education acted as a hindrance to the free utterance of the heart before God. It is not, however, so difficult to account for this as might at first be imagined. Persons accustomed to the use of correct language, are necessarily more fastidious than others, both in the arrangement and in the expression of their thoughts; and this precision can easily be supposed to interfere with that unrestrained fervour in which individuals of humble station, and unlettered in every thing but the truths and the devotion of the Bible, are accustomed to indulge. In all cases, however, it is most desirable that the attention should be withdrawn as much as possible from mere words; and for this end it is necessary that the mind be fully occupied with those feelings and desires which are proper to the exercise. Better, far better, that forms of prayer should be used, than that devotional duties should be neglected altogether. And it may be some time before individuals accustomed to their

use, may be able to lay them aside when praying in the presence of others, even although these others should be only the members of their own domestic circle. But in secret, where no ear hears but the ear of the Eternal, and no eye sees but the eye of Him that seeth in secret, every one can and ought to acquire the habit of expressing, before the great Object of worship, the actual state of his heart—the sentiments which he really entertains. This we believe to lie at the foundation of all saving acquaintance with God.

CHAPTER II.

DUTIES OF THE CLOSET GENERALLY.

THE command of our Lord, "Enter into thy closet," taken in connexion with the precept of an inspired apostle, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together," furnishes one among many proofs of the perfect adaptation of the gospel to the nature of man. It is quite an error to suppose that Christianity requires any of her disciples to assume the character of a recluse, and to shut himself out from all intercourse with his fellow creatures. This would imply such a cruel violence to human nature, and is so directly at variance with all our most deeply rooted feelings, that it might justly have been considered an objection to the truth of our religion, had it really required any thing so unreasonable. The gospel is adapted to man, and far from doing violence to his nature, is admirably suited to his real wants; insomuch that few employments are more delightful than that of tracing the perfect harmony existing between the feelings of our hearts, and the circumstances in which we are placed, on the one hand, and the whole scheme of Christianity with its doctrines, precepts, ordinances, and promises, on the other.

A little reflection will serve to render it obvious that man, in order to be happy, or in other words, that the powers and susceptibilities of his nature may be called into the fullest and most healthful exercise, must neither exist in absolute solitude, nor live continually in the company of others. He must neither be excluded from society, nor denied the advantages of retirement. It is difficult to determine whether the influence of sympathy, or of meditation, is the more indispensable. Both are essential to the preservation of his powers in a state of vigorous activity, and healthful enjoyment. He must spend some portion of his time alone, and he must also have those around him with whom he can have unrestrained intercourse, and who stand to him in relations more or less intimate and endeared; otherwise he can neither make that improvement, nor exert that influence, nor enjoy that happiness, of which he is capable.

If therefore the duties required by our religion were exclusively either of a public or of a private nature, in other words, if the social principle were either solely addressed or altogether overlooked by the ordinances of Christianity, this circumstance might properly beget a suspicion as to whether it were really of Divine origin. When, however, we find the fact to be just the reverse, when we find that in this, as in every other instance, the scriptures are adapted to the actual nature and feelings of man, that Christianity requires

us to meet together to observe certain of its ordinances, and to retire to our closets in order to observe others—that in some of our religious exercises we are permitted to taste the sweets of social intercourse, and in others we are required to commune with our own hearts—that we are, on the one hand, addressed by the precept, “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together,” a precept which we have the most abundant encouragement to observe from our Lord’s own promise, “Wherever two or three are met together in my name, there am I in the midst of them;” and, on the other, by the injunction, “Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers, shut thy doors about thee,” an injunction to which also a most precious promise is annexed by the Saviour, in the words, “Enter into thy closet and shut thy door, and pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly:”—such an admirable adaptation of the religion of the Bible to the character and feelings of man, conveys a most encouraging assurance that the Author of nature is also the Author of Christianity, that the doctrines which we believe, are of divine origin, that the truths of scripture may be confidently relied upon, and its promises most safely trusted.

There are two considerations which may be regarded as illustrating the propriety, and the wisdom, of the command enjoining attention to the duties of the closet. In the first place, any thing that requires very deep and

serious consideration, must wean our thoughts when we are quite alone. Every one accustomed to observe the operations of his own mind, must have remarked the difference between that exercise of the faculties which is excited by conversation and intercourse with our fellow-men, and that which takes place when we earnestly pursue some truth, or prosecute some train of thought, or indulge some favourite meditation in solitude. To be preserved in a healthful condition, the mind must exist occasionally in both states ; but it is evident that the deeper and more important exercises of our powers, as well as our own true interests in regard even to the present world, require that we should cultivate retirement. The man who has been little alone, who has all his life been more accustomed to speak than to think, who knows not what it is to commune with his own heart, has never thought very deeply on any subject, and there is the greatest reason to fear that those subjects which have the highest claims upon his attention have been altogether overlooked.

Now, in order to engage aright in the worship of God, we must have some knowledge of his character, and some knowledge also of the relation in which we stand to him ; and our knowledge upon both subjects must be of that kind which is only to be obtained by deep and serious meditation. The character of the great Jehovah ; his natural attributes of eternity, omnipresence, immutability, almighty power, and infinite wisdom ; his moral

perfections of holiness, justice, and faithfulness, and his gracious attributes of goodness, love, and mercy, present a vast field for contemplation and reflection, and are more than sufficient to furnish abundance of employment for our solitary hours. Besides, there are the relations in which this great Being stands to us, and the claims upon our worship and homage which most rightly belong to him as our Creator, Preserver, Governor, and Judge. There is also the fact that we are sinners both by nature and practice, who have broken the divine law times innumerable, in thought, word, and deed, for every one of which offences we are justly liable to the Divine displeasure; together with the precious truth that God is offering us pardon and forgiveness through the blood of his Son, and has provided the Spirit to enlighten, renew, and sanctify our hearts, and thus to render us meet for the presence and enjoyment of God in a future world. These are all subjects on which we certainly may, and ought to converse with others; but to which we are not applying our minds in a proper manner, unless we study them in the closet, and review them upon our knees in secret.

But, in the second place, the very nature of our devotional exercises shows that they must be performed alone, otherwise they are not rightly performed at all. Religion is a private and a personal concern; every one is related to God as an individual, and is personally a subject of his law and government.

The offers of the gospel, if really received, must be received by each one for himself. No one can believe or repent for another; the parent cannot believe for the child, the husband for the wife, the friend for the friend. Each individual must himself transact with God, as much so as if there were not another creature needing salvation in the universe. We do indeed sometimes speak of the sins of communities provoking public judgments, and calling for national humiliation; but these sins are nothing else than the sins of the individuals of whom the community consists; and, whatever may be the Divine dispensations in the present world, the ultimate, the final result, will simply amount to this, that by each individual for himself the pardon must have been accepted in time, or the punishment must be endured in eternity.

Besides, every one has sins to confess, and mercies for which to be thankful, and blessings of which he stands in need, and manifold feelings to unbosom, desires, sorrows, anxieties, hopes, which are known only to himself, and which it might be highly improper to disclose to any living creature. In the presence of others there is always less or more of restraint, but in the presence of God the most secret recesses of the soul may and ought to be laid open. Social prayer must be expressed in general language, that it may be suitable to the circumstances of all the worshippers. In the private circle we may no doubt lay aside a portion of that restraint which a

promiscuous assembly always imposes, and may employ language more minute and circumstantial in expressing our confessions, thanksgivings, and petitions; still more may this be done in the devotions of a Christian family, and yet more so when uniting for any special object with some dear Christian friend. But, when quite alone, we may indulge a degree of familiarity with our heavenly Father, and express all that is in our hearts, with a fulness and particularity which would be improper in the presence of any earthly witness, however intimate and beloved.

It is in the retirement of the closet that there is an opportunity of ascertaining whether we are really possessed of the spirit of prayer. If the presence of others imposes a degree of restraint, and necessitates the use of general language, it is at the same time favourable to the production of a certain kind of fervour which, in some cases, is entirely awakened, and in all cases greatly increased, by the existence of a sympathy, real or supposed, between the speaker and his fellow-worshippers. This fervour is by no means the same thing as earnestness or sincerity of desire, and is perfectly distinguishable from any proper exercise either of the understanding or the affections. It may exist without any one deep or earnest feeling, except perhaps the desire of those immediate gratifications which it yields; whilst the blessings asked are not really wished for, and the very language by whose sound it is produced is

scarcely attended to or understood. It is a mere movement of those sensations which have their origin not in faith but in fancy, and which delight to dwell on the vast, the remote, the obscure, whether in idea or expression, rather than on what is true, near, and important. It may indeed co-exist and even mingle with the deepest feelings of the heart, and consequently may be an accompaniment of true piety; yet has it no necessary connection with these, but may be equally united with feelings and emotions that have their origin in vanity and self-love. Lest however this remark should give uneasiness to any humble worshipper, it is proper to state that one mode of testing the genuineness of our devotional feelings is constantly at hand, and is supplied by simply proposing the question, are our secret devotions as regularly observed, and attended with as high a degree of fervour, as our public supplications? The spurious fervour of which we have now spoken, not unfrequently expends itself in the presence of our fellow-worshippers. Genuine affections of any kind, whether painful or pleasant, whether excited by natural or spiritual objects, are usually felt most deeply when we are alone.

Secret prayer must be accompanied with reading the scriptures. The word of God is at once our authority and our guide in every part of worship. We have no right to approach God in the attitude of suppliants, but

that which is derived from his own precious promises; nor can we have any knowledge of the character in which he permits us to worship him, and of the only way of access to his throne, except what is communicated by the discoveries of the gospel. Nor is it enough that we enter into our closets with a determination to be regulated in our devotional exercises by the information we have derived from the sacred volume. We must take the Bible along with us and have direct recourse to it—to its doctrines, its promises, its examples, its adorations, its praises, its supplications, its confessions of sin, its intercessions, its records of devotional feeling, its discoveries of the breathings of the soul whilst enjoying communion with the Father of spirits. Prayer cannot be acceptably performed without the scriptures; and, it may be added, the scriptures cannot be profitably read without prayer. The Spirit whose office it is to lead us into all truth, and whose influences are promised in answer to prayer, is required to open our understandings, and renew our hearts, otherwise the word will remain a sealed book. Even that mental effort which is required in order to obtain an acquaintance with the contents of the Bible, presupposes the necessity of retirement. This is implied in the well known exhortation of our Lord, "Search the scriptures." The scriptures may be read in public as well as in private, and, unquestionably, this ought regularly to form part of public worship; but it is only when

one is alone that he can *search* them. So much was David in the habit of reading the word of God in private, that he says it was his counsellor in all his doubts and fears, even in those, we may well believe, which were known only to himself. The whole of the 119th Psalm shows how constantly he was in the practice of secretly reading, studying, and meditating upon the divine word. He tells us, that unless the law of God had been his delight, he should have perished when his troubles abounded, that he never would forget the divine precepts, for by them he had been quickened, and that the words of God were better to him than thousands of gold and of silver. He exclaims, "O how love I thy law; it is my meditation all the day." "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." "My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times." Elsewhere we find the same psalmist speaking of the law of the Lord, by which, of course, we are to understand the Scriptures as they then existed, as more precious than gold, and sweeter than honey; and describing the blessed man as one who delights in the law of the Lord, and meditates therein by day and by night.

There is another duty belonging to the exercises of secret devotion which, in the general view we are at present taking, must not be passed over,—the duty, namely, of *self-examination*. An intimate acquaintance with one's self, or in other words, a know-

ledge, less or more correct, of one's own character, disposition, temper, and habits, is of great value, considered merely as a mental acquisition; and, in a religious point of view, is of indispensable importance. One of the most grievous evils of our fallen condition, is, that we are naturally destitute of the knowledge of God, and along with this, destitute of the knowledge of ourselves. A discovery of our true position in the sight of God, and in relation to eternity, is perhaps the first step towards deliverance from the misery of which we are naturally the heirs. When the word of God obtains an effectual and saving entrance into the heart, it gives light, and imparts understanding to the simple; it gives light not merely with reference to the character and works of Him whose revelation it is, but also regarding the moral condition of him to whom the revelation is given. It presents a glass which not only discovers external objects, but also reflects the image of the person who looks into it, causing him to see how faithfully the human heart is described, as deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Thus are we made to feel our need of that salvation which is provided for the chief of sinners, and the value of which we are unable to appreciate till we are convinced that we are indeed poor, and wretched, miserable, and blind, and naked.

The self-knowledge of which we speak, has respect not merely to the state in which we exist by nature as lost sinners; it includes the

result of a continual watchfulness over ourselves, and a habitual inspection of our feelings and habits. The frame of mind that may exist at any one time would, taken by itself, be a very unfair criterion of character. We must observe carefully our ordinary deportment, reviewing it from time to time, comparing our public conduct with our private behaviour. We must attend to those particulars in which we are most apt to err, and remark especially whether we are making improvement or the reverse, whether we are becoming more or less watchful against sin, and more or less diligent and punctual in all our religious duties, whether we are advancing or falling off in love, devotedness, spiritual mindedness, whether our acquaintance with Christ, our daily reliance upon him, and communion with him, are increasing or diminishing. We are commanded to keep the heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life; but without such a practice as we are recommending, it is impossible to obey this command.

The duty of self-examination should be performed in a more minute and careful manner, at certain intervals; for example, at the end of the week, and more particularly at the end of the year, or in view of the periodical return of the Lord's Supper; and on such occasions, inquiries regarding the progress that we are making in the divine life, and in the duties and habits of the Christian, are more especially appropriate. But what we have

in view at present more particularly, is the propriety of connecting this exercise with the ordinary devotions of the closet. The reading of the scriptures in a devout frame, can scarcely ever fail to suggest questions which we may very profitably propose to our own hearts. It is, moreover, by a review of our circumstances and employments, that we must be guided in our thanksgivings and confessions, and even in our petitions.

These several exercises, namely, secret prayer, reading the scriptures, and self-examination, it is our intention to consider more fully as we proceed. May we be permitted to pause, and, before concluding this chapter, to say a few words for the purpose of urging on the attention of our readers the vast importance of these duties? We are far from wishing to advance a single word that might have the effect of leading any one to regard these duties as possessing real merit, or giving him a claim to the favour of God. The duties of which we speak, if performed as all should be taught to perform them, will have the very opposite effect. They who are best acquainted with a life of faith and of prayer, are not likely to take credit to themselves for the excellence of their devotions; on the contrary, they are the very persons who are most familiar with the humiliating spectacle of their own guilt and wretchedness, and who consequently are most deeply sensible that salvation is, and can only be, the fruit of unmerited love. However they may stand in the esti-

mation of their fellow-creatures, and when tried by the low standard of this world's morality, they feel that in all things they come short of the glory of God; that their very repentings need to be repented of; that all their righteousness is as filthy rags; that even their best and holiest duties proclaim them unprofitable servants. They know well, that by grace they are saved through faith, and that not of themselves, for it is the gift of God: and it is their constant aim to rejoice in the faithful saying which is worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, even the chief. Their hope is that of poor guilty sinners, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

But all this does not diminish the importance, either of the means of grace in general, or of the duties of the closet in particular. Although they are only means, and, having nothing of the nature of legal merit, are useful no otherwise than by bringing us into that way where God has promised to meet with us, and to bless us, and to give us the knowledge of the Saviour, it is abundantly evident that, even in this view, they are unspeakably valuable, and the neglect of them may be attended with the most tremendous consequences. Inattention to these ordinances, whether public or private, which God has instituted, implies contempt of his authority, and must be visited with punishment; and the connection which, by divine appointment, is established between

the observance of such ordinances, and the salvation of the soul, proves that the person disregarding them subjects himself to everlasting ruin, just as certainly as if the keeping of them were the meritorious ground of justification. The object of all the means of grace is to make us acquainted with Christ; but if, through our neglect of these means, this acquaintance with Christ is not obtained, we perish as necessarily, and as hopelessly, as if our salvation had had no other basis than that of religious observance.

Whilst the ordinances, in general, are of indispensable importance, and whilst inattention to any of them is fraught with the most ruinous consequences, we must take the present opportunity of saying that the duties of the closet are at once more immediately connected with the interests of the soul, and more in danger of being neglected, than any other ordinance it is in our power to mention. A person may attend to the public exercises of religion, whilst he lives in the neglect of private devotion; but we do not think it likely that any one, who is conscientiously waiting upon God in secret, will neglect the duties of the sanctuary. Many motives induce men to attend regularly the house of God, and even to maintain worship in their families, which yet are not of a kind to secure the performance of secret devotion; but those motives which lead a man to his closet, will also insure attendance on more public ordinances. Allowance being made for those cases, in which

feelings purely superstitious may lead to the observance of private as well as public ceremonies, we are much inclined to think that, especially in our own day, and among Protestants, if the proper motive does not exist, the exercises of strictly personal devotion are either entirely and constantly neglected, or observed in such a manner as the individual would himself be ashamed of, were it known to any of his fellow-creatures.

Nor is the peculiarly close relation subsisting between personal godliness, and the exercises of secret devotion, the only circumstance that illustrates the importance of these exercises. Let us advert for a moment to the obligation of the Saviour's command, and the authority of the Saviour's example. "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet; and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Matt. vi. 6. No command can be more plain and distinct, more solemn and authoritative. It is a command applicable to all, binding upon all, and accompanied by a promise that is suitable to all. It cannot be disregarded by any man, or any body of men, to whom it has been made known, without an act of stubborn disobedience to heaven's Lawgiver; to say nothing of the base ingratitude implied in contemning an offer so infinitely good. It is vain to reply that these words were intended, in the first instance, as a rebuke to those hypocrites who love to pray

standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets. That they were so intended we do not deny, but this does not prevent their application to many who can in no proper sense be called hypocrites. The impious and the prayerless stand rebuked, not less than the vain-glorious Pharisee.

Whatever may be alleged regarding the inconsistencies so often supposed to exist between the practice of public teachers and their instructions, is not only inapplicable in the present instance, but suggests by contrast the incomparable excellence of our great Teacher. The truths which he taught and the precepts which he inculcated, were illustrated and enforced by his own example. If the extreme poverty in which he lived, afforded him not the opportunity of literally entering his closet and shutting his door behind him, we find him seeking retirement in the mountains and deserts. He was without a house or a home of his own, and "had not where to lay his head:" but those who were best acquainted with his habits knew that, wherever he sojourned, he always found a place for secret devotion. Very soon after he began his ministry, we are told of his having healed many diseases, and cast out many devils; to the account of which the historian adds, "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." Mark i. 34, 35. When the fame of his miracles was so much noised abroad as

to attract great multitudes around him, the beautifully simple language of scripture does not indeed assert his insensibility to fame, but conveys the same truth in a manner far more affecting. The evangelist continues his narrative by saying: "And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed." Luke v. 16. Every person acquainted with scripture is familiar with the circumstance, that the whole of the night which preceded the sending forth of the twelve apostles, was spent in solemn prayer; "And it came to pass in those days, that he went into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples, and of them he chose twelve, whom he also named apostles." Luke vi. 12, 13. On the memorable occasion of his feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, far from waiting to receive the admiration which such a miraculous display of power and compassion was fitted to awaken in the bosoms of so large an assembly, we are told that, "Straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and, when the evening was come, he was there alone." Matt. xiv. 22, 23. And in his exercise he continued till the fourth watch of the night, that is, till it was almost day, when he came to his disciples walking on the sea. It was the knowledge which Judas pos-

sessed of the private devotional habits of his Master, that enabled him so easily to act the part of a traitor. He could promise to the chief priests to deliver him into the hands of the officers whom they sent for his apprehension, because he knew the place and the hour at which their victim could be found in retirement. The record of that wonderful prayer contained in the 17th of John, is immediately succeeded by the following narrative:—“When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples over the brook Cedron, where was a garden, into the which he entered, and his disciples. And Judas also which betrayed him knew the place.” John xviii. 1, 2.

The importance, and the obligation, of those lessons which are taught by our Lord's example in this matter, it is impossible to over-estimate. If he who had no sins of his own to confess, humbled himself to the very dust before his heavenly Father; how much more does it become us, who are altogether sinful, to prostrate ourselves before the throne of grace begging for mercy and forgiveness! If the Lord of glory, who is in himself almighty and all-sufficient, was so often found in the attitude of a suppliant, how foolish and inconsistent on the part of weak perishing worms to live without calling upon God! If he who possesses absolute sovereignty and dominion, and who claims all power in heaven and on earth, condescended, in the form of a servant, not only to render obedience,

but to submit to every privation, spending whole nights in prayer on the bleak desert or the cold mountain side, how shameful in sinners, who deserve eternal misery; to allow sloth and self-indulgence to deter them from spending a few hours in praying for the salvation of their souls! Let no one say he has not convenience for retirement: Jesus found retirement in the wilderness. Let no one say he has not time for secret prayer: he whose time was infinitely more precious than ours, and who performed beyond expression more work in a short time than any other ever performed, found leisure to spend hours and nights, nay, on a certain occasion, forty days at once, in fasting and prayer.

Let all classes of persons be exhorted to attend to this duty. Christians, enter into your closets; the health and life of your souls require this of you. Professors of religion generally, enter into your closets; your feelings when there will discover to you whether or not you are true believers. If secret prayer has no attraction for you, if the Bible has no charms for you when all other company is excluded, if communion with God is unknown by you in private, and only thought of in relation to public ordinances, be assured you do not love God, you are not living a life of faith, Christ has never been formed within you the hope of glory, it is not upon the Saviour, but upon this world, or something belonging to it, that your afflictions are placed. But be encouraged to listen to the invitations of mercy;

your situation, however bad, does not prevent you from the right to take advantage of the command, "Enter into thy closet." If when there you have nothing to say, make this very circumstance the matter of your prayer; ask God to teach you to pray, to make known to you your wants, to reveal to you the vast importance of your everlasting interests. Demand of your own consciences when quite alone, in the presence of the heart-searching Jehovah, what is your condition, and what are your prospects, whither are you going, in what direction are you daily progressing, where are you about to take up your everlasting abode. Set yourselves in good earnest to meditate upon eternity. Cherish the feeling that you are formed to exist for ever; that at present you are only in the commencement, the morning, the dawn of your being; that you are now, moreover, forming that character and acquiring those habits which will cleave to you through endless ages, and prove the source of your happiness or misery for ever; that this process is even now, every day and every week, making steady advances; that at the very moment you are reading these lines, you have already begun to rise or to fall, to ascend or to descend; and that the progress in either direction will be everlasting. If you have no employment for the closet, spend your time while there in meditating on this.

Do you complain that you are unaccustomed to secret devotion, and that when you at-

tempt to pray you have neither language nor ideas, that your attention is unfixed and your thoughts wandering, that in short you require instructions as to the manner in which the time allotted to this exercise is really to be spent. Be it so. You believe there is a God, and you behold his workmanship in the heavens above, on the earth around, in the structure of your own body, and in the constitution of your mind. This great Being stands in certain relations to you, and you to him; he is your Maker and Preserver; he breathed into your nostrils the breath of life; he gives you the food you eat, and the raiment you wear, and the very air you breathe. His own character and perfections render it proper that you, his rational and intelligent creature, should acknowledge and worship him; while his unwearied kindness, and the many mercies you have all your life received at his hands, demand your warmest gratitude; and the ungrateful return, heretofore rendered on your part, calls for the deepest humility. Your obligation in these respects cannot be denied or disregarded, without opposing the clearest dictates of the light of nature; it is written on the human heart, and acknowledged, even amid superstition and idolatry and gross ignorance, by every tribe of men in the world. Well, if you have no employment in the closet, think of this great Being, who is himself so worthy of your thoughts, whose creature you are, to whom you are so deeply indebted, and who, all unheeded and

disregarded by you, has been acting towards you the part of a Father.

He is, moreover, your Lawgiver and Judge. He has given a law for the regulation of your conduct, a law written in your conscience, and still to be discovered there, although partly defaced by corruption, error, and sinful habits. The existence of this law is proved, even by the ordinary appointments of Providence, in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished, as well as by those feelings of moral approbation towards certain actions, and of disapprobation towards others, of which all men are conscious. Those feelings arise from that moral sense of right and wrong, which has been implanted by God in the human bosom, and which, like all his works, bears a resemblance to himself. He is a just God and a righteous,—“He loveth righteousness, and hateth iniquity.” That law which he inscribed on the heart of man, he has now fully revealed in his holy word, where we are specially informed, that its sum and substance consists in love to God and love to man. Here, then, are abundant materials for private meditation. If you want employment for the closet, think of the moral character and the moral law of God. Allow your thoughts to dwell on his high unbending rectitude, his pure and spotless holiness, his absolute and sovereign authority, his just and righteous administration. Look upon yourself as the subject of his moral government, responsible to him, not only for your every action and

word, but also for your thoughts and feelings, your desires and motives, your temper and dispositions, of all which you must render an account to him as your rightful Lord and Judge. And, oh, meditate on the fact that, even your own conscience being witness, you have often transgressed. How much precious time have you wasted and misimproved; how often have you done that which you ought not to have done, and left undone those things which you ought to have done; how many vain thoughts have passed through your mind, and how many idle words have escaped from your lips; how much has your conduct been guided by pride, selfishness, vanity, ambition, envy and sensual desire; how much better ought you to have discharged even those duties which you have not altogether neglected; how much more advantageously to yourself and others might you have conducted yourself in the relations of life which you sustain, whether as parent or child, master or servant, husband or wife, how much more might you have done for the temporal, and especially for the spiritual welfare of those under your care; how much more useful might you have been to all men; above all, how little have you done for God; how seldom have you so much as thought of living to his glory, and how slothful, negligent, and procrastinating have you been in every religious duty, where earthly and selfish motives did not come to your aid; how much of precious time have you wasted in trifles, how

much of your energies has been expended in sinful passion! Oh, if you cannot find out how to employ your time in the closet, think of these things and you will be furnished with employment. Review the history of your bye-past life with reference to the particular matters now mentioned, and you will find materials at once, of confession, petition, and thanksgiving. If after such a review you feel as if you had no sins to confess, no undeserved mercies for which to be thankful, no blessing in the way of pardon or renovation to request, then assuredly you know nothing at all about your own character and situation. But no, this cannot be. You must feel that you are guilty, and if you do so feel in any measure, continue to think on the subject, and you will discover that you are more guilty than you supposed, and your grounds of humiliation and complaint will multiply. Nay, in the very proportion as you attend to this matter, will you feel constrained to exclaim, "Which of thy commandments have I not broken, which of thy laws have I not violated?" and to acknowledge the application to yourself of the words of Daniel to Belshazzar: "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified."

Look once more at the character of God. The same great Being who is so glorious, so exalted, so holy, so just, who is the Lawgiver and Judge of the moral universe, and whom you have so often dared to offend, whose

law, so exceeding broad, and requiring perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed, you have so often violated, whose throne is founded on eternal justice, and who will by no means clear the guilty, is at the same time a God of infinite love and mercy. He has provided a Saviour for sinners of the human family, even his only Son Christ Jesus, in whose mysterious person is united all that is excellent in divine perfection, with the feelings, and sympathies, and nature of man. Through the intervention of this ever-blessed Mediator, the displeasure of God is removed, the demands of his justice are fully answered, the claims of his character and government are satisfied, the dignity of his administration is supported, the honour of his law vindicated, whilst mercy is extended to the guilty, pardon to the condemned, favour rich, free, everlasting, to the wicked and undeserving. This mercy, this pardon, this grace, is what you must receive, or you are lost for ever; and it is all offered to you, freely and cordially, in the gospel. Here are fruitful subjects of meditation in the closet, upon which, whensoever you are in want of employment, you may most appropriately and advantageously allow your thoughts to dwell. Make the experiment, and ascertain whether there is any thing here which you can regard as interesting; and if there is not, assuredly this very fact is a most humiliating and distressing illustration of the deeply seated depravity of

your nature and habits, and is itself worthy of being most seriously considered.

Surely it is a somewhat alarming reflection, that the salvation which God has provided by the death of his Son, a salvation which is suited in all respects to your condition, which contains the only hope of your escape from eternal misery, and which, moreover, has been distinctly made known to you, and oftentimes pressed upon your acceptance, has yet never thoroughly awakened your attention, and has heretofore taken such a very slight hold of your feelings, that even when you retire for the purpose of making it the subject of meditation, you discover nothing in it which you can regard as interesting.

“Enter into thy closet.” Ask your own heart, in the sight of the great Jehovah, what are your present feelings towards him, and whether you are prepared to stand with safety at his bar. Fall down before him, and on your bended knees, entreat that he would, by his Spirit, teach you to pray. This is a blessing which the very difficulty you have in knowing how to proceed, shows that you greatly require, and it is a blessing which you have the greatest encouragement to ask:—“If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” Luke xi. 13.

If your visits to the place of secret prayer, should for some time only have the effect of teaching you that you cannot pray, they are

far from being in vain. • This discovery may itself be the beginning of that work which is to issue in your everlasting welfare. Who can tell, oh reader! whether the solution of the great question as to your eternal condition, may not depend upon your taking or refusing the advice now offered.

CHAPTER III.

SECRET PRAYER.

IT is our intention, in some of the following chapters, to consider the different parts of prayer. At present we shall not enter upon the consideration of any of these parts, but shall simply mention what they are, and pass on to some general remarks which may be regarded as applying to them all. Prayer has been said to consist of three parts, namely, petition, confession, and thanksgiving; but it seems to include several exercises which cannot very well be classified under any of these divisions. Perhaps it would be more correct to say, that prayer consists of at least six separate actions, and that these are Adoration, Confession, Petition, Thanksgiving, Self-dedication, and Intercession. At any rate, the remarks which we propose to offer in some of the following chapters, may be conveniently arranged under these heads.

In the mean time, a few observations may be submitted on the subject of secret prayer in general. And here let us refer, first of all, to the seasons of prayer, to those periods of time which are most proper for secret devotion. The morning and evening seem marked out by nature as suitable for this purpose, and,

recognized as such in the holy scriptures, are consecrated by the universal practice of good men in every age, and recommended by the example of the Saviour himself. David speaks of engaging regularly in devotional exercises even more frequently than this. He makes mention of evening, morning, and noon; in one passage he tells us that it was his custom to give praise to God seven times a-day; and in another, of his resolution to rise at midnight for the same exercise. But the ancient appointment of the morning and evening sacrifice among the Jews, shows that these seasons have been specially appointed and set apart by Jehovah for his service. And the true fearers and worshippers of God, in every age of the world, and in every country, have regarded the first and last hours of the day as sacred to devotion.

It would be well if we could impress upon the attention of our readers the importance, and the great advantage, of having a fixed time and place appointed for this duty. In all matters even of a worldly kind that are of any serious moment, habits of regularity and punctuality are indispensable; and much more must this be the case in matters of such infinite consequence as the interests of the soul. Not only are such habits indispensably valuable as furnishing in one sense a security that the duties of the closet shall not be absolutely neglected, a circumstance of which, otherwise, there will often be the greatest danger; but they will be found of the greatest

utility in counteracting the natural reluctance of the heart to all devotional exercises, a reluctance which is sometimes felt even in the best. Moreover, the hurry and bustle of this world's affairs will encroach upon the seasons which ought to be reserved for the devotions of the family, and much more upon those which belong to secret devotion, unless such seasons be guarded by care and forethought; and this care and forethought must be habitual. It is the part of every one to consider carefully his own circumstances, and to consult his own convenience, in making arrangements as to this matter; but if a hint on such a topic might be offered, we would suggest that the most suitable time for secret prayer is the earliest hour in the morning, but perhaps not the latest in the evening. By making it the first employment of the day, and allowing nothing else in any ordinary circumstance to take precedence of it, we may expect the mind to be in some degree calm, collected, and free from those disturbing influences which previous attention to worldly business could not fail to have exerted. But in the evening, let not the hour or half hour that is given to this duty be deferred till the body and mind are overcome by drowsiness. Let the exercise be quite secret. Prayer, even personal prayer, in the presence of another is not secret prayer. The person should feel himself quite alone; he should feel that it is only with God that he is transacting.

The appointment of fixed seasons for prayer,

should not be considered as inconsistent with the duty and privilege of cultivating habitually a praying frame of mind, nor with the practice of addressing God in the secret exercises of the heart even when in the presence of others, or when engaged in worldly business. We are permitted, nay commanded, to pray without ceasing, to continue instant in prayer, to pray always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit. Indeed, that daily walking with God, that constant living by faith, that unceasing reliance upon divine grace, that habitual looking to Jesus, which belong to the hidden life of the Christian, must imply the secret breathing of many a feeling of love, hope, and desire, which never receive a verbal utterance. It will not be questioned by any one acquainted with vital Christianity, that true religion consists greatly in exercises of this kind. The believer reckons it one of his highest privileges, one of his sweetest comforts, that in Jesus he has a friend to whom he can look, and upon whom he can lean at all times. He prosecutes his journey through this world, feeling that his Guide, his Protector, his Lord and Saviour, his elder Brother, walks along with him; and that upon him he can cast every care as it arises, every anxiety and every burden. Oh, what a precious privilege is this! It imparts a peace that nothing else can give, a peace that passeth all understanding. How sweetly does the individual who thus lives near to Christ, feel himself relieved from the vexations and

disquietudes of earth! He is not his own but bought with a price; he seeks not his own interest, his own ease, his own glory; and this very renunciation of self, which is so contrary to flesh and blood, is to him a source of unspeakable comfort. The Lord Jesus, whose he is and whom he serves, will take charge of him and carry him safely through every kind of trouble. He may not, indeed, have at all times the present consciousness of strength sufficient for such trials as may await him; but he looks to the inexhaustible fulness that is treasured up in his Saviour, and can believe that such supplies of grace will always be given as his circumstances may require, relying, as he does, on the promise, "as thy day so shall thy strength be." Deut. xxxiii. 25.

It is nevertheless a serious mistake, in any one, to suppose that the practice of engaging in secret mental prayer when going about his ordinary employments, or whenever he enjoys a devotional frame, diminishes his obligation to attend in a formal manner to the duties of the closet. It would be easy to show that those devotional feelings which prompt to this kind of prayer, cannot be preserved without habitual attention to the regular seasons of retirement. But it is unnecessary to reason upon this point, for the express command of Jesus sets all dispute regarding it at rest: "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret." Matt. vi. 6.

Let us just add in reference to this topic,

that, whilst the morning and evening are specially marked out for prayer both by nature and revelation, Christians may and frequently ought to set apart other portions of time also for this exercise. If there is any thing particular either in the circumstances or the feelings of the individual himself, if there is any calamity afflicting his person or his family, if any remarkable blessing, whether of a temporal or spiritual kind has been bestowed, let a season of special humiliation or thanksgiving be appointed. This is done by our churches and congregations, why should it not also be done by families and private Christians? If the believer has any particular sin that presses upon his conscience, any spiritual enemy from which he is especially in danger, any peculiar difficulty which he knows not how to overcome, any distressing perplexity through which he cannot see his way, let him reserve for his own use a certain portion of his time to be employed in fasting and humbling himself before God, in pouring out his soul for those mercies which his case immediately requires, and for engaging in whatever special exercises, whether of confession or supplication, his circumstances may seem to demand.

We now proceed to offer a few remarks regarding the manner in which the duty of secret prayer should be attended to; and we begin by observing that this duty should be performed intelligently. A little reflection will show that this remark is not so superflu-

ous as it may at first sight appear. There are many who address the Searcher of hearts in language which even to themselves, is scarcely intelligible. It may seem strange that this should be the case; and certainly were every one to act upon the principle of simply uttering the desires of his heart before the Hearer of prayer, such a thing as we have now mentioned could not exist. But this is a principle on which many never think of acting. The language employed, if not learned from a book, has either been left on the memory from hearing the public prayers of others, or was suggested to the mind at some long distant period by circumstances which cannot now be traced. At all events, it is repeated without awakening the mind to any intelligent perception of its meaning, and, beyond a general emotion of seriousness, its only influence upon the understanding and the affections is that of lulling them asleep. The evil in question may not always exist to so great an extent as this. The words that are uttered may be, in part, understood, and a certain fervour with which they have been long associated may be called up, whilst the attention, although not wholly absent, is yet very slightly directed to the ideas that are expressed; and the individual, if afterwards questioned upon the subject, would scarcely be able to tell any one thing he had requested in his petitions, any one blessing he had acknowledged in his thanksgivings, any one sin he had mourned over in his confessions.

In conducting public prayers, and indeed in praying with others whether publicly or privately, the language employed being necessarily less or more general, the necessity for a distinct and definable idea being attached to every word may not be so great. But we are now speaking of secret prayer, and in the performance of this duty we would decidedly recommend that not a single word should be used, the meaning of which is not at the time attended to, not a single expression that is not clearly understood. Think of what you are doing, and take heed what you say, in the presence of Him before whom your words ought to be few and well ordered. Dare not, under the recollection that his all-seeing eye is upon you, to utter words which you do not understand, or the meaning of which you do not wait to consider. If at any time you have thus acted, your professedly religious observance, whatever else it might be, was not an act of divine worship, and could not be so regarded by Him who requireth the heart. Such empty lip-service can never serve any purpose but to make you hypocritical on the one hand, or superstitious and self-righteous on the other. Oh! if many of those who profess, and call themselves Christians, would only think what has been the character of their prayers from day to day, and from year to year, they must be filled with wonder that God has not long ere now cut them off for their insincerity. Such persons are occasionally heard to complain that God does

not seem to hear their prayers, that they are not making progress in grace, and that amid all their duties their hearts continue cold and unaffected. Surely the wonder is, not that God has never seemed to hear their prayers, but that He, the great Jehovah, whom they have been insulting by their unmeaning observances, has not mingled their blood with their sacrifice, and said to them by some terrible visitation, "Who hath required this at your hands?"

But this leads us to remark, secondly, that secret prayer to be acceptable must be sincere; that is, the individual must not only understand the meaning of the words which he uses, but he must entertain the feelings which his words express. He must not only avoid the mummery of using language which he does not comprehend; he must avoid the falsehood and hypocrisy of expressing sentiments, feelings, and desires, which his heart does not acknowledge. Whatever is the phraseology employed, let it be, so far at least as the individual himself is concerned, a genuine expression of what he really feels. If sin is confessed, let it be sin of which he knows that he has been guilty, and of whose demerit he is sensible. If mercies are asked, let them be mercies the need of which is actually felt. If thanksgiving is offered, let it be for blessings for which gratitude is really entertained. If language expressive of admiration, of love, or of confidence towards God, suggests itself, oh! venture not to use it un-

less these feelings have less or more a place in your heart.

It is extremely probable that many, were they to act upon this plan, would find that their mouths must be almost entirely shut. Were they to confess no sins but those for which they are truly penitent, and ask no blessings but those of which they really feel the need, and express gratitude for no mercies but those for which they are sincerely thankful, they should be altogether silent; as much so as if they had absolutely nothing either to confess, or to request, or on account of which to give thanks. A most extraordinary situation truly! Yet for a man to feel himself in this very situation, might be the first step towards his obtaining a true knowledge of himself. At any rate, and even at the risk of being reduced to this situation, we cannot hesitate to recommend the most perfect sincerity in every part of secret prayer. Let not the sinner, in approaching his Maker, add to his other offences, the guilt of offering insincere and hypocritical worship. To such a person we would say, confess nothing but what you feel you have done wrong, ask nothing but what you wish to receive, express thanksgiving for nothing for which you do not indeed entertain gratitude. And oh, if, in the circumstances, you feel that you have really nothing at all to say in the presence of that great and glorious Being who is infinitely worthy of the homage both of your heart and lips, whose holy commands you have thou-

sands of times broken, to whose unmerited yet most unwearied goodness you have every day of your life been indebted, and who is offering freely to bestow upon you pardon, and eternal life, if you have really no feeling to express in the presence of this most excellent, and merciful, and ever blessed One, no contrition, no gratitude, no love, no desire, surely this very circumstance is pregnant with most serious reflections. If matters are thus with you in very deed, then what have all your prayers in time past been but hypocrisy, one continued system of self-deceiving hypocrisy? Here then is something for you to confess! You are, on the supposition of having nothing to ask, utterly unacquainted with your spiritual wants, a state of things which is obviously most undesirable. You need to be informed of these wants, and God is both able and willing to grant you this information. Here there is something for you to ask. Amid all your insensibility and ingratitude, the great Hearer of prayer has spared and protected and provided for you, and he is even now willing to receive you into his favour and to answer your petitions, if you come to him in simplicity and sincerity of heart. Here is something for which to be thankful. Thus commence your dealings with God anew, and you will begin to pray in earnest. Look for teaching and help from above, and your materials will soon multiply. It will not be long ere you discover that you have much, very much to confess; that your wants are

very numerous; that your grounds of thanksgiving are great and manifold. All these will increase in your estimation, in proportion as you make them the subjects of attention; and you will soon be inclined to use spontaneously the same language, perhaps, which was formerly employed in your devotions; but oh, with what a different feeling! You will now be able to enter into the meaning of expressions which you were accustomed to utter, without thinking what you said. You will see the beauty of many scripture petitions, and the value and richness of many promises, as they occur to you, which you were in the habit of repeating as mere words of course.

Connected with this is another remark, which is, that secret prayer should be engaged in *deliberately*. It can be characterized neither by the intelligence nor the sincerity of which we have spoken, if it is *hurried* over as a task. To some, the truth of this observation may appear so obvious as to supersede the necessity of mentioning it; yet, as many, it is to be feared, err in this particular, we cannot allow it to be altogether overlooked. Are there not persons whose consciences are just sufficiently awake to forbid the habitual and regular neglect of all private religious exercises, but not so far awakened as to prevent them from being easily lulled to sleep, by the least degree of attention, however forced and hurried, to the duties of the closet? Education, or custom, or the consciousness of making a public profession of religion, renders

some regard to duties of this kind, on the part of such persons, necessary to their comfort; but the enjoyment which they thus obtain is by no means of a spiritual or devotional character; it is merely the removal, or the prevention of that uneasy feeling which would arise from pursuing a contrary course. Just as much religion as will satisfy their consciences will suffice for this purpose, and that is an object not difficult to accomplish. But as no higher end is contemplated, the devotional exercises which are performed with this view are naturally regarded as a kind of penance, which, since it must be submitted to, it is best to get over as quickly as possible. The privilege of approaching God as the Hearer of prayer, the promised spirit of grace and supplication, the progress of the divine life in the soul, the advancement of inward sanctification, the gradual assimilation of the character, the temper, and habits, to the lovely example of Christ, the sweetness of communion with God, the joyful hope of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading, all so closely associated in the mind of the believer with personal and secret devotion, are neither known nor regarded.

It is not enough to say that devotional exercises, performed in the manner now described, are of no value; they are in many respects positively injurious. They prevent the sinner from seeing himself in his true character, as living to all intents and purposes without God in the world. They furnish him

with the cloak of religion: he is led to regard himself as even a man of prayer; he comforts himself with the reflection that whatever may be his faults, he is not wholly inattentive to the duties he owes to his Maker, that he does not even neglect secret devotion, a duty which he may with good reason suspect many around him of omitting; he is aware that his devotional exercises are not so well performed as they ought to be, but then there are imperfections in the best, and he must expect them to exist in himself as well as in others. Thus the individual has his attention withdrawn from the only fact regarding which his religious duties furnish any information, namely, that he is living the life of a mere formalist. He goes through his prayers as a task, without wishing to allow his thoughts to come into contact with the meaning of the words which he utters; yet such is the blindness of the human mind that even this fact he does not discover. Half the sagacity which he manifests upon every other subject, would enable him to perceive that his heart is not in spiritual things, that his enjoyments wherever else they may be are not in religion, that he is not living by faith upon Christ, that heaven is not the home of his affections, that, in short, his treasure is on earth, that the things which are seen, and not those which are unseen, have power to excite his hopes and fears, his joys and sorrows.

Let us therefore recommend, as a matter of indispensable importance, that prayer even

in the presence of others, above all, that secret prayer should be performed deliberately. Weigh carefully the words which you utter. When you are quite alone, you may surely feel that the number of your words, and the fluency of your utterance, are matters not to be thought of; and that a single sentence, like that used by the publican when he said "God, be merciful to me a sinner," uttered with genuine honesty of heart, is of infinitely more value than the most accurately constructed composition repeated as a mere form. In the presence of the heart-searching Jehovah think well what you are doing, and before whom you stand; dare not to trifle with your Maker; do not venture to take his name into your lips without considering what you say; presume not to address him in words which you scarcely understand, or which, if understood, are only a lie as coming from your lips. If your time is limited, it will be better spent in offering a single petition carefully considered, than in travelling hastily, and perhaps irreverently, over a large field. Prayers offered with due thought and deliberation, will not be rejected because the words are few.

That secret prayer should be accompanied with reading the scriptures, has been already mentioned, and is a point to which, as it requires special attention, we propose to devote one of the following chapters. We advert to it at present, in order to notice the necessity, when engaged in prayer, of having the eye fixed upon the promises of the Divine word.

These promises are in fact our warrant for approaching God; and without them we could have no assurance, nor indeed any well grounded hope, that He would hear our requests, or, in any way, accept of our worship. The natural attributes of the Creator are manifested by the works of his hands; but these works, manifold and glorious though they are, do not inform us that he is accessible by mortals like ourselves, and unassisted reason could never have discovered that the Author of nature is the Hearer of prayer. This is purely a matter of revelation, and not the less so that some notion of a truth, which, when once revealed, is so obviously of the greatest importance, has been handed down by tradition in every age, even among heathens. Indeed, nothing can show more clearly that the light of nature is unable to afford any satisfactory assurance in this matter, than the fact that philosophers in our own day have reasoned themselves into a denial of the efficacy of prayer. But the word of God sets the question completely at rest. It informs us that the great Ruler of the universe can be addressed by creatures so insignificant as the inhabitants of our world, that he does not consider it presumption in us to hope that he will attend to our circumstances, and listen to our supplications. It abounds with the most encouraging assurances that he is the Hearer of prayer, and the Answerer of requests, that he is more willing to hear our prayers than we are to offer them, that he is the Friend of the friend-

less and the Father of the fatherless, that he lends a willing ear to the petitions of all who call upon him in truth, and regards their complaints with more than parental tenderness. Nay, more, the scriptures contain promises, not merely of grace and mercy in general, but of innumerable blessings particularly specified, and these promises in the most interesting and suitable of all forms; showing us that God is not only willing to hear our prayers, not only has pleasure in hearing them, not only has pointed out in his promises the particular blessings which we need, but in addition to all this has provided the very petitions we are to offer, has proposed the very words we are to employ. The book of Psalms is a most delightful illustration of the truth of this remark. In reading that precious book we should beware of viewing what we meet with as merely the words of David, or even as merely the words of our Lord. They are the words which the Hearer of prayer has selected, as an appropriate expression to those feelings and desires on our part, which he will regard with acceptance. As a type corresponds with its anti-type, and as a mould agrees in figure with that which it has fashioned, so is there a perfect correspondence between the genuine sentiments of a true worshipper, and the words which divine wisdom has chosen and recorded for his use. Nor can any more accurate test be desired of our true character in the sight of God, than by inquiring whether the language of the psalmist is the language of our hearts;

whether we are able to take possession of it as our own, and as unspeakably more suited to the very feelings we entertain, than any words we ourselves could ever have selected. It is indeed possible that even a true Christian may find much in the scriptures, and even much in the book of Psalms, which he is not at all times able thus to appropriate; but every believer is able to appropriate part of what he meets with, and if he is in a healthful state, this power of appropriation is increasing. The word of God is his proper inheritance, as it is his chosen portion. Of the whole of this inheritance he may not yet have taken actual possession, but this is a consummation to which he is constantly advancing, and which every exercise of christian experience, every trial, every joy, brings him so much the nearer. He has found the key which unlocks the treasure-house of heaven, and in due time all its contents shall be his own. "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver," Psalm cxix. 72.

God encourages us to make the most free and unsparing use of his word, when we address to him the prayer of faith. He condescends to invite us to seek, to ask, to knock, to plead with him, to put him in remembrance. No degree of earnestness or importunity will be displeasing to him, even although it may be such as would be regarded by an earthly superior as improper and offensive. We have approved instances recorded of persons *wrestling*, striving, agonizing, offering supplications

with strong crying and tears. In many ways, but especially by the example of God's dealings with the patriarchs, are we taught to rely on the Divine faithfulness. How much has he said, and how much has he done, to assure us that his word may always be safely, most safely, trusted. "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations," Exod. iii. 6, 15. In all our applications to the throne of grace, it is at once our duty and privilege to make use of the promises of the divine word. This gives us an unspeakable advantage. It enables us to plead not only the wants of man, but also the faithfulness of God; not only the misery of the petitioner, but the character and honour of Him to whom petitions are addressed.

We must also remark, that all acceptable prayer is offered through Jesus Christ as the only Mediator between God and man. In his absolute character, as Ruler of the universe, we could expect no mercy at the hands of our Maker. The inflexible rectitude of his moral government, is in itself supremely excellent, and to all holy and righteous beings must be a source of profound satisfaction, and of adoring praise. But with sinners who have already broken the divine law, and exposed themselves to its curse, the case is widely different. From absolute justice they have nothing to expect but punishment. It is no comfort to them to say, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" for to do merely what is right with sinners, must be to punish them.

We need not here dwell on the miserable condition in which man must have existed, but for the intervention of the Saviour, nor upon the certain condemnation which must have frowned upon him, at once from the character, the government, and the law of God. Neither shall we wait to expatiate on the glorious truth that a Day's-man has been provided who lays his hand upon both parties, who effects a reconciliation between the offended God, and the poor guilty offending creature. But what we wish to advert to particularly, is, that Christ has not only satisfied the claims of eternal justice, and delivered his people from that condemnation which their sins had merited, but has provided for them a way of access to the throne of God. Through the same Saviour in whom God is revealed to us, is he also revealed as the Hearer of prayer. A scheme having been devised and executed, by the provisions of which, he who is absolutely just becomes the justifier of the ungodly, we can understand how man can hold intercourse with the great Jehovah and yet live. As Moses, on one particular occasion, acted the part of a typical mediator between God and the children of Israel, so Jesus is the true Mediator between the eternal Lawgiver and his worshippers in every age. He is the Prophet like unto Moses, to whom sinners, alarmed by the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, may still say,—“Speak thou with us, but let not God speak with us. lest we die.” Exodus xx. 19. This is he of whom Moses said,

“The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him shall ye hearken: according to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb, in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord thy God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not.”

The privilege of access to God through a Mediator, was variously and most significantly typified in the Old Testament worship. Jehovah was represented as sitting on the mercy-seat, and dwelling between the cherubim, where he heard the prayers of his people, and accepted of their worship. This mercy-seat, composed of solid gold, covering the ark of the covenant with the ten commandments, situated in the most holy place, overshadowed by the cherubim of glory, and distinguished by the Shekinah, or visible symbol of the Divine presenee, was itself an eminent type of Christ, “whom,” the apostle informs us, ‘God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood.’ Rom. iii. 25. With what propriety does Jesus therefore say, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” John xiv. 6. As the high-priest under the law entered once every year into the most holy place with the sprinkling of blood, and the burning of incense, so Jesus Christ, our great New Testament High Priest, has entered within the veil, even into heaven itself, there to appear in the presence of God for us. It is on this ground that we are encouraged

to come boldly to the throne of grace, to approach with confidence by that new and living way which he hath consecrated. How encouraging the declaration of the apostle John, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father!" 1 John ii. 1. This precious truth should be realized by us in all our approaches to God. We have a Friend at the court of Heaven, a faithful, tender-hearted, yet powerful Friend, a Saviour in our own nature, one with us in covenant, in interest, in feeling, a High Priest who is touched with a feeling of our infirmities, acquainted with what it is to be surrounded with miseries and dangers, and to pray for deliverance. Have we not cause to fear that one reason why our prayers seem so feeble and powerless, and attended with so little sensible comfort and advantage, is that we do not take sufficient care to draw near to God in that only way by which he is accessible, even by faith in the Lord Jesus? It is only as connected with Christ, that the promises of the divine word are to be understood, and made use of in prayer. And the book of Psalms, to which we have already made particular allusion, as containing the most precious promises often presented to us in the very form of petitions, becomes yet dearer and sweeter when received as expressing the feelings and desires of him who, in the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears. These desires, these feelings we are also encouraged to entertain and

to express in the same language. Thus Jesus is at once our covenant-head, and our fore-runner; he gives us a legal title to the promises, and by his own example he teaches us how to use these promises. Let all, therefore, who would acquaint themselves with the Hearer of prayer, be careful to come in the only appointed, the only acceptable way. And, oh! in proportion as any one is accustomed to the daily exercise of coming to God by Christ, will he find this way so sweet and pleasant as to prevent him from desiring any other.

There is yet another truth, nearly allied to this, which must not pass unnoticed. In secret prayer, as in every other kind of worship, respect must be had to the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to know that this divine Person is entitled to worship, as well as the Father and the Son; it must also be known and remembered, that one of the offices which he executes in the economy of grace, is that of the Spirit of prayer. As to him belongs the application of redemption, the regeneration of the soul, the production of faith, love, penitence, joy, peace, and holy desires, so it is only by his blessed agency upon the heart that we are enabled to look upon God as the hearer of prayer, upon Christ as our Mediator, Advocate, and Intercessor, and upon all the promises of scripture as the word of divine truth, and entitled to the most unhesitating reliance. This is a most important truth, and, simple though it seems, is, we

fear, liable to very serious abuse, and, therefore requires to be handled with caution. There are persons to be found who manifest a disposition to excuse themselves in the neglect of prayer, by referring to the necessity of the Spirit, and alleging that, as they do not enjoy his influences, they need not attempt a duty which they already know is above their strength. They speak largely of their inability to pray of themselves; and, professing to believe that without divine assistance their prayers would be only vain and hypocritical, they argue that the safest course for themselves is to abstain from this duty altogether. Perhaps there are not many who would express this conclusion in words, but we fear there are not a few who act upon it in practice. Against this most dangerous perversion of a precious truth let us warn every one, and especially the youthful reader, in the most distinct and emphatic manner. Your obligation to worship God does not depend on your enjoying the assistance of the Spirit. This obligation devolves on you as a creature, and would have continued in all its force, although no revelation had ever been made, and no offer of grace had ever been presented. How then can you imagine such an obligation to be repealed, or even diminished, by the promise of divine assistance? On the contrary, it is hereby greatly increased. True, the influences of the Spirit are necessary to enable you to pray; but this doctrine is never presented in scripture, what-

ever it may be in human writings, in a discouraging, but always in an encouraging and gracious aspect. It is made known, not to prevent you from praying, but to excite you to pray, and to teach you how you may be enabled to pray aright. It is revealed, not to plunge you in despondency, much less to encourage you in a slothful and wicked neglect of an obvious and important duty; but to dissipate your fears, and animate you to come boldly to the throne of grace.

If more is required to be said on this topic, we might allude to the fact that all are invited to pray for the Spirit, as the Spirit of prayer. Were it intimated that a blessing so indispensable to acceptable worship, was offered only to a certain class of men, to the Jews, or any particular nation of Gentiles, or to persons of only one particular kindred, or tongue, or people, this would undoubtedly be discouraging; but so far is this from being the case, that, in no one instance, are the perfect freedom and the unlimited universality of the gospel offer more affectingly exemplified, than in the promise of the Spirit: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him." It is worthy of being remarked that this promise, as recorded by one of the evangelists, is expressed with a slight variation from the words now quoted; and the latter part of the verse runs thus, "how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give

good things to them that ask him." Compare Luke xi. 13, with Matt. vii. 11. This variation is not accidental. Unintentional as it obviously was on the part of the evangelists, who were merely the penmen of the books which bear their names, it was doubtless designed on the part of the Author of scripture, to teach us this important truth, that the "Holy Spirit," and "good things," as promised to mankind, are in every practical sense synonymous. He who possesses the Spirit, possesses in the same proportion all that is good; and no one can be said to have any thing that is truly good who is destitute of the Spirit. And who can describe the value of such a promise as this! Is it not an encouragement that in our approaches to God in prayer, we have not only divine promises on which to depend, and a divine Mediator through whom those promises are confirmed, but also a divine Agent to operate in our hearts and enable us to embrace them! Ought it not to be felt as a heart-cheering truth, that the way to reconciliation and communion with the Father of spirits is prepared, by there being not only an Advocate in heaven to plead our cause with God, but also an Advocate in our own bosoms to plead the cause of God with us? Does any one say, "this is more than I feel, more than I can realize," we answer, "Enter into thy closet," spread the promises of the divine word before you, read them again and again on your bended knees, and plead them as you read; think of God as

the Hearer of prayer through Christ, 'look to Jesus as the all-prevailing High Priest and Intercessor, and that you may do so, pray for the influence of the Divine Spirit.

It may be some time before even one who is honestly seeking the way to Zion with his face thitherward, may be able to make full use of the access which is thus opened before him to the throne of grace. But be encouraged to persevere. If any real comfort is derived either from a view of God as revealed in Christ, or from the character of the Mediator himself, or from the promises of the divine word, or from the offer of the Spirit's assistance, let us invite you to follow on to know the Lord. You will soon find that it is no vain thing to worship God, and in learning by experience that He is the hearer of prayer; your faith in the divine promises will unspeakably increase. The excellent John Newton, in recording the events of his life, says in reference to one occasion: "About this time I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayer." There is probably a time in the life of every Christian, more or less distinctly marked, in regard to which he may make the same remark. And who can tell the importance of that period? Persons born in a Christian land and believing, or not disbelieving the discoveries of the gospel, have been made acquainted with the doctrine as an abstract truth that God hears prayer. They have read of it in scripture, they have been instructed in it by their teach-

ers, they have perhaps been told it by some who had put it to the trial, they "have heard of it by the hearing of the ear." But if they would know it as a certain reality, they must have that knowledge which is founded in experience. Then shall they believe, not because of the saying of others, but because they have themselves tasted and seen that God is good. Let not any one suppose that this is an attainment which even among Christians is confined to a privileged few, and to which it would be presumption, or at least hopeless, in him to aspire. It is an attainment without which no one should be satisfied, and which is just as much within the reach of ordinary Christians as any other privilege of believers. Even this experience, however, is itself gradual, and may for a time be exceedingly feeble, nay, you may be often distressed with the fear that your prayers are wholly in vain and unprofitable. But if you have grace, humbly, patiently, and believingly, to persevere, you shall assuredly find that it is good for you to draw near unto God. "The meek He will guide in judgment, and the meek He will teach his way." Ps. xxv. 9. Happy they, who although they are made to say like David, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me;" are yet enabled with him to add, "Verily God hath heard me, he hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me." Ps. lx. 18, 19, 20.

CHAPTER IV.

ADORATION.

WE have already said, that the three parts of prayer commonly enumerated, petition, confession, and thanksgiving, do not include all the exercises belonging to prayer. One principal objection to this division is, that it does not include what has been called adoration. By adoration we understand the expression of the feelings of love, admiration, and reverence towards God, on account of his glorious perfections. It is evidently quite a separate exercise from either the confession of sin, or the offering of petitions. Those belong to man as a sinful creature, and are peculiar to the worship of the present world. It is not so with adoration. This is an exercise which it would have been the happiness as much as the duty of man to engage in, even if he had never sinned; and it will be continued in heaven where sin and suffering are unknown. In the offering of adoration, we have a fellowship with all holy creatures throughout the universe. Here man unites with angels, and earth unites with heaven.

The distinction between adoration and thanksgiving, however, is perhaps not quite so obvious; although when attended to, it is easily understood. Thanksgiving is the offer-

ing of gratitude for mercies we have received; adoration is the offering of praise for what God is in himself. When we thank God, we think of some benefit he has conferred upon us; when we adore him, we think of his own attributes. We thank him for life and health, for the gift of his Son, for the means of grace, for the offer of pardon, peace, and purity, and for the hope of heaven. We adore him for his own greatness and glory, for his holiness, his power, his wisdom, his justice, his mercy, his faithfulness. We thank him for what he has done; we adore him for what he is. It is true, thanksgiving and adoration may both have respect to the works of God; both ought to be excited by a view of the works of creation, the dispensations of providence, and the scheme of grace; but when we thank God for these, we think of their relation to us; when we adore him on account of these, we think of their relation to himself; when they excite our gratitude, we consider the blessings they convey, and our obligations arising therefrom; when they excite our adoration, we regard them as manifesting the Divine character, and proclaiming the glory of those attributes which they disclose. It is thus evident that while these two exercises, both of them becoming and delightful, are closely connected, and are very commonly united in the feelings of the Christian, as well as in his ascriptions of praise, they are at the same time perfectly distinguishable; and it is also evident that adoration is the higher and

more exalted exercise of the two. When engaged in it, we act under the influence of love to God, not only for what he is to us, but for what he is in himself; we delight to look at his glory on account of its own beauty and brightness, as well as on account of the favours with which its manifestation is fraught; we rejoice even in his favours, not merely because of the happiness they bring to us, and the blessed prospects they set before us, but because of what they show us of the heart and character of the Giver.

As the glory of God is the great and ultimate end of all his works, so the exercise of ascribing glory to his name is a part of all acceptable worship. It is not enough that the Divine glory be promoted by man, as it is by the inanimate and irrational part of creation, involuntarily and unconsciously. The works of nature, being the fruit of infinite power, skill, and benevolence, display the omnipotence, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Creator. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." Ps. xix. 1. And the more exalted the creature, the better is it fitted to serve the end for which it was made. A stone, a plant, an insect, a bird, a beast, a man, an angel, are all the workmanship of God, and they all promote his glory; but they do so in very different degrees. As we ascend in the scale of creation, we meet with greater displays of divine intelligence and beneficence, and when we advance to the human and angelic crea-

tures, we behold a manifestation of the moral perfections of the Deity. The powers of reason and understanding, of thought and emotion, of moral perception and feeling, of anticipating and enjoying an immortality of existence, and above all, the capacity of knowing, and worshipping, and obeying God, separate them by an unspeakable distance from all the lower tribes, and, in the same proportion, qualify them for glorifying their Maker. The earth, with its rivers, and seas, and oceans, its mountains, and islands, and continents; the sun, and moon, and stars, and all the hosts of the firmament, together with all the tribes of vegetable and animal existence which people the land and the waters, were created to promote the glory of God, and his glory they all promote. But they do this according to their nature, not actively, but passively; they serve the end of their being without knowing that they do so. But man is intended to promote the divine glory both passively and actively. The exquisite structure and organization of his body, which is "fearfully and wonderfully made," exhibits as much, if not more, of the power, benevolence, and skill of its Maker, as the fairest of natural objects, or the mightiest and most gigantic forms of animated existence. And his soul, with its faculties of intelligence, judgment, will, affections, conscience, and imagination, is, even considered simply as a piece of workmanship, a glorious manifestation of the Divine perfections. Being created "in the image of God," the na-

tural and moral attributes of Deity were intended to be continually reflected from his soul, and from all his actions. As he was formed lord of the lower world, so it was his peculiar honour and privilege to have the capacity of voluntarily and intentionally devoting his powers and energies to the glory of his Creator. It is his failing to occupy this high station, that is the guilt, the misery, the degradation of man in his present fallen state. Neglect of the Divine glory is the first and greatest, as it is also the origin and source, of all transgressions. It is no slight offence of which the gentiles are convicted, when the apostle charges them with "worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen." Rom. i. 25.

The obligation to glorify God which devolves on man as a creature, is not removed, nor even diminished, by the sinful state into which he has fallen. On the contrary, the way of salvation provided by divine wisdom and love, adds inconceivably to this obligation. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's." 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20. "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." 1 Cor. x. 31. It would lead us away from our present subject were we to offer any explanation of these and similar injunctions, or to attempt to show how the great end of our being is to be kept in view, in the transactions of business, and in

all the ordinary duties of life. But nothing can be more obvious than that if we are bound by obligations the highest and most impressive to glorify God continually, and that in the most common actions, this object ought to be especially present to our thoughts when immediately engaged in the exercises of worship. Whilst we honour his authority by obeying his commands, and honour his faithfulness by relying on his promises, and honour his sovereignty by submitting to his dispensations, and honour him in all things by having an eye to his glory in whatever we do or suffer, we must also honour him as the Hearer of prayer, by drawing near to his throne, magnifying his perfections, and rendering in the direct homage of praise, that glory which is due unto his name. "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me." Ps. l. 23.

We find the exercises of the pious, as recorded to us in the book of Psalms, and indeed throughout the scriptures, abounding with the language of adoration. When the Lord saved Israel from the hand of the Egyptians by causing them to walk on dry land in the midst of the sea, we are told that the people "feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and his servant Moses." The joyful feelings occasioned by a deliverance so signal and so obviously the result of divine power and goodness, produced for the time the most sincere and lively gratitude. Nor did the song of praise, in which those feelings found utterance, express merely the emotion of

thankfulness; the people rejoiced in the display which had been afforded of the perfections of Jehovah, and of his infinite superiority to all the gods of the heathen. "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like unto thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" Exod. xv. 11. The divine glory is distinctly stated beforehand as the main object to be promoted by this deliverance. "I will get me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen." Exod. xiv. 17, 18. This was intended most emphatically to teach the Israelites that the honour of Jehovah was of more importance than their safety, and that the disclosure of power, of mercy, of faithfulness, which he was about to make in their sight and in the sight of the heathen, was more worthy of admiration and praise than their own deliverance from the "iron furnace." And in harmony with this is the song of Moses; "Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy. And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against thee." Exod. xv. 6, 7.

No idea suggests itself more frequently on a diligent perusal of the devotional exercises of the Old Testament church, than the delight with which the superiority of the true God to

all other objects of worship were regarded. In reply to the command addressed to him at Horeb from the burning bush, to go unto Pharaoh and to bring forth the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses ventured to ask the name of him by whom he was sent with such an important commission. To this inquiry there was returned the following answer:—"I AM THAT I AM; thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." Exod. iii. 14. The great name JEHOVAH was henceforth to distinguish the God of Israel, and to be associated in the minds of his people, and in all their worship and obedience, with their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. "I am JEHOVAH thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Exod. xx. 1, 2. Many were the instructions and warnings delivered by Moses, requiring them to fear Jehovah, to worship him only, and to swear by his name; and the well-known song, which towards the conclusion of his earthly pilgrimage he taught them to repeat, is in beautiful harmony with the great object to which his life and labours had been devoted. "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass: because I will publish the name of Jehovah." Deut. xxxii. 1—3. It was not his

own praises, nor yet the praises of the people under him, which this venerable commander delighted to celebrate. He says nothing of the wisdom, the courage, the fidelity, or even of the success, by which his own most extraordinary career had been distinguished; nor does he, as the leaders of armies and founders of states are accustomed to do, expatiate on the good conduct of his followers and the bravery of his troops. The only occasions on which he directs attention to himself and the people, manifest a state of feeling very different from this. "Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you." Deut. ix. 24. "The Lord was angry with me for your sakes, and sware that I should not go over Jordan, and that I should not go in unto that good land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance." Deut. iv. 21. But how full of holy admiration is his language, when he contemplates the perfections of the divine character. "He is the rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are judgment; a God of truth and without iniquity; just and right is he." Deut. xxxii. 4. Nor are sentiments of this kind by any means peculiar to Moses; they pervade the whole of the sacred volume, and are common to the people of God in every age. Indeed, one of the most satisfactory proofs, which a careful reader of the scriptures continually meets with of their divine original, consists in the perfect harmony which prevails in this respect among all the sacred writers, however distant

the times or dissimilar the circumstances in which they lived. From the days of Moses to those of Malachi, the first and the last of the Old Testament penmen, there intervened a period of at least a thousand years, and many and important were the changes which during that long period had passed over the Jewish people; but in the views and feelings of the true worshippers of the God of Abraham, we can observe no change. After describing the wickedness of the priests, the rulers, and the people, which prevailed in his day, the last of the Hebrew prophets adds, "Then they that feared JEHOVAH spake often one to another; and JEHOVAH hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared JEHOVAH, and that thought upon his name." Mal. iii. 16. The same name which the great Jewish legislator resolved to publish, and the publication of which made his words copious and refreshing like the rain and the dew, continued to afford matter of holy and delightful meditation in the days of Malachi. At all times the praises of the truly pious have been excited by the character of God as well as by the acts of his goodness; have celebrated the glory of his perfections as well as the favours which he has bestowed; have expressed the emotions of adoration, not less than those of thanksgiving.

It is scarcely possible for persons in a Christian land to form an adequate conception of the feelings with which the ancient Israelites,

surrounded as they were by heathen idolaters, worshipped Him whom they knew to be the only living and true God. Too often they forgot that it was their peculiar duty and privilege to preserve the knowledge of Jehovah in the world, whilst all other nations were enslaved by the degrading superstitions of polytheism; and instead of diffusing around them the light of divine truth, they followed the heathen, and learned their ways. But how full of holy and delightful emotion were the songs and the worship of ancient Zion, particularly on occasion of her special solemnities! "Oh! sing unto Jehovah a new song; sing unto Jehovah all the earth. For Jehovah is great, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods; for all the gods of the nations are idols. But Jehovah made the heavens; honour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary," Psalm xevi. 1, 4, 5, 6. "Not unto us, O Jehovah! not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. O Israel! trust thou in Jehovah," Psalm cxv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 9.

If from the exercises of public worship, we turn to the private meditations of individuals, we shall find examples of adoration not less instructive. "I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are

thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well," Psalm cxxxix. 14. It was not so much gratitude to his Maker for creating him, that the Psalmist felt when he uttered these words, as admiration of the divine handiwork in his formation. It is the same sentiment, whether it be awakened by the names, the attributes, or the works of God, by the riches of his grace, the excellence of his salvation, or the stability of his promises. We find it sometimes mingled with love, sometimes with gratitude, sometimes with faith and hope, and sometimes with holy joy. Of this last we have a beautiful and well-known example in the language of Asaph:—"Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever," Psalm lxxiii. 25, 26. It was the opportunity which they afforded of contemplating that glory which calls forth from the pious heart expressions of adoring praise, that rendered the house and ordinances of God so precious in the eyes of David. "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple," Psalm xxvii. 4. And when separated, by a temporary banishment, from his throne and his kingdom, through the unnatural rebellion of a worthless son, it was his absence from God's house that occasioned him the deepest

regret. Neither his own loss of power, nor the unfaithfulness of his people, nor the number and power of his enemies, produced in his mind such deep sorrow as his distance from the much loved ordinances of Zion. "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" Psalm xlii. 1, 2.

We have said that the exercises of adoration have special reference to the Divine attributes; and among these attributes it may here be added, that the moral perfections of God are particularly celebrated in the praises of his people; even angels adore God chiefly on account of his holiness. In this attribute there is a beauty and excellence which fills with admiration "the bright and burning seraphim." Thus Isaiah, in describing that vision which is recorded in the sixth chapter of his book, informs us that "one cried to another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory," Isa. vi. 3. The four living creatures described by John in the fourth chapter of Revelation, are represented as resting not day and night, saying, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come," Rev. iv. 8. In the fifteenth chapter of the same book, we learn that the song of those who had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and who stand upon the sea of glass, includes, among other ascriptions of praise, an allusion

to the same divine attribute of holiness;—
 “Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify
 thy name! for thou only art holy!” Rev. xv. 4.

Nor is any other attribute so often expressly mentioned in the adorations of the saints on earth. If divine power is magnified, it is the holiness displayed in the exercise of power that engages their attention. “Oh! sing unto the Lord a new song, for he hath done marvellous things; his right hand and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory.” Ps. xviii. 1. If the great and terrible majesty of God is the subject of praise, it is the holiness combined with that majesty which they especially celebrate. “The Lord is great in Zion, he is high above all people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name, for it is holy.” Ps. xcix. 2, 3. If infinite eternal justice attracts their notice, they forget not at the same time to look at the holiness by which its manifestations are characterized. “Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy.” Ps. xcix. 8, 9. Even when they sing of the Divine mercy and faithfulness, the holiness of God is not forgotten. “Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness.” Ps. xcvii. 11, 12. In cherishing these sentiments, Christians in our day have not only the example of Old Testament saints set before them for imitation, they have also the example of our

blessed Saviour himself. In the midst of his most bitter sufferings he delighted to adore the Divine holiness, even although that holiness was in one sense the cause of his sufferings. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" Ps. xxii. 1. A most appropriate question this seems, and upon a most astonishing subject. Did God the Father in very deed forsake his eternal, his well-beloved Son? What had that Son ever done to merit such treatment? What is there in the history, the life, the conduct of even the man Christ Jesus, to justify his being deserted by God? How can such bitter agony, such extreme suffering, administered to one perfectly pure and spotless, be reconciled with the dictates of infinite rectitude? Such a spectacle was never before beheld, and will never be beheld again. Who in heaven or on earth is able to explain it? The explanation is furnished by the sufferer himself. "O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. But thou art holy." Ps. xxii. 2, 3. Jesus suffers not for himself, but for others; he stands in the room of sinners whose substitute he has voluntarily become. The sentence of that law which they had broken takes effect upon him, and thus the holiness of God is consistent with his sufferings, explains his sufferings, nay more, demands his sufferings. The moral character of God is thus at once completely vindicated,

and most gloriously illustrated ; and the knowledge of this supported the soul of the Redeemer, even in that awful hour when the cup of Jehovah's wrath was put into his hands. When his distress was the deepest, he drew comfort from the thought that the Divine law whose penalty he was enduring was holy, that the Divine hand which pressed upon him was holy, that the Divine countenance which was averted from him was holy ; nay, his sufferings were the very means of exhibiting the Divine holiness in its greatest brightness. "Thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel."

It is possible that some who may read these pages, for the purpose of receiving instruction as to how they shall themselves conduct the duty of secret prayer, (and it is for such readers exclusively that we write,) may feel rather disquieted than encouraged, by what has been advanced on this part of the subject. They may fear that to those emotions of admiration, love, and holy rejoicing, which find their proper utterance in the language of adoration, they are in a great measure strangers. They do not find it so difficult to regard with gratitude the many instances of divine goodness which they are made to experience ; but the higher exercise of loving God on his own account, and adoring him for what he is in himself, seems an attainment which they know not how to reach. But even the very discovery of this deficiency is itself a point gained. Yet a person in the circumstances now

described knows not what to do, and, looking for direction, he asks such questions as these:—Am I to make use of the language of adoration, whilst the feelings which it expresses exist not in my bosom, or am I to refrain from using it? Am I to extol the name and the perfections of the great Jehovah in words which give utterance to sentiments I do not entertain, or am I to neglect the exercise of adoration altogether? In the former case am I not guilty of hypocrisy? in the latter am I not chargeable with the omission of an obvious duty!

Anxious as we are to treat with the greatest gentleness the state of mind which would prompt to such inquiries as these, we cannot depart from the principle laid down in the last chapter, that in every part of prayer one of the first things to be observed is sincerity. We say not indeed that it is better to omit the worship of God than to employ words which are not sincere, and it is unnecessary to draw a comparison between two evils which are both so great; but it is unquestionably of vital importance that prayer in general, and adoration in particular, should be the genuine utterance of the heart. When any individual is conscious that his adorations are not of this description, let him seek deliverance from the sin of hypocrisy, not by leaving off the form of prayer, but by seeking to have the substance as well as the form; not by ceasing to offer praises because his heart has no share in them, but by bringing his heart to join in the

praises which he offers; not by reducing his language to correspond with the state of his feelings, but by raising his feelings to correspond with the import of his language.

Here we may be met by another question;—How is this object to be accomplished? How am I to obtain this sincerity? What means am I to employ, that my heart may be brought to unite in those ascriptions of praise with which it is my duty to approach the throne of Jehovah? To this we reply:—Pray for the sincerity of which you feel the want, and entreat the Lord to grant you his Holy Spirit for this special purpose. It is well that you are not wholly ignorant of the state of your heart; although, were you more fully enlightened, you would doubtless perceive a much greater amount of imperfection, of sin, and hypocrisy, in your by-past addresses to the Hearer of prayer than you have yet discovered. But the light which you have is valuable; use it conscientiously and it will increase. If the acceptance of your prayers depended on their own inherent merit, then assuredly, the insincerity which you have found in your acts of worship might fill you with despair, as it would obviously render it impossible for you ever to obtain the divine favour. How much reason have you to be thankful that this is not the case, that through Jesus Christ the door of mercy is opened to the vilest and most unworthy, and that as no good qualities in yourself or your services could have given you a title to the approbation of heaven's Lawgiver

so no amount of demerit can exclude you from the offer of salvation made in the gospel. Come, then, with all your transgressions on your head to the throne of grace; make known to God your requests; tell him all your wants so far as you know them; make mention of your insensibility to divine things, your unbelief, your wanderings of heart, your want of holy desires and emotions; confess to him the insincerity and hypocrisy of your very acts of praise and adoration; and entreat that he would create in you a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within you.

A little reflection will suggest to an honest inquirer, various exercises that may be had recourse to for obtaining that frame of mind which corresponds with the language of adoration. In this as in other particulars, the necessity of the Spirit's influences does not supersede the use of means. Besides that fervent prayer for the Spirit which we have just recommended, it will be found of unspeakable advantage to cultivate the habit of meditating upon the glory of those divine perfections to which our praises are so justly due. Think of Him whom you address as the only living and true God. Cherish the belief not only of his existence, but of his presence with you in your retirement. Meditate on his greatness, his glory, his majesty, his infinite and matchless excellencies, till you are constrained to say with Moses, "Who is a god like unto thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" *Exod. xv. 11*, and with Da-

vid, "Who in the heaven can be compared with the Lord? who among the sons of the mighty, can be likened unto the Lord? O Lord God of Hosts, who is a strong Lord like unto thee, or to thy faithfulness round about thee?" Psalm lxxxix. 6, 8. Reflect on the insignificance of every thing as compared with Jehovah, that "all nations before him are as a drop of the bucket, or the small dust of the balance, and he taketh up the isles as a very little thing: they are as nothing, and are counted to him less than nothing and vanity," Isaiah xl. 15, 17. Direct your thoughts in particular to his natural and moral attributes, and cultivate familiarity with the sublime language of scripture, in which these attributes are revealed. If you find that there is much in the adorations of the pious with which you are not yet qualified to join, you will probably also discover that there is more than a little in their sentiments and feelings with which you can unite, and that many of their expressions you can not only admire, but even appropriate.

This will at first be chiefly the case with respect to the natural perfections of God. We say not that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can be acceptably worshipped by those who adore merely his natural attributes, but these attributes as well as the others are adored by acceptable worshippers; and we think that one who is honestly desirous of acquainting himself with God, will act wisely in endeavouring to ascertain how far the feelings of his heart are expressed in the language of

the inspired writers. For this end, it may be profitable to begin with the manner in which the faithful worshippers of Jehovah have been accustomed to speak of his eternity, his immutability, his omnipresence, his omniscience, his almighty power, his absolute sovereignty, his unsearchable wisdom. When you think of his eternity, endeavour to enter into the feelings of David when he says—"Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands: they shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment, as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed; but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end," Psalm cii. 25, 26, 27. When you consider his omnipresence, try if you are not able to say with the same devout worshipper, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there: If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me," Psalm cxxxix. 7, 8, 9, 10. Does his omniscience excite your admiration, or inspire you with awe? If so, the very psalm from which we have just quoted, expresses your emotions:—"O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine up-rising: thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path, and my lying down, and

art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it," Psalm cxxxix. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6. Reflect upon his irresistible power until you are able to adore him as the "Almighty God." Ponder the unsearchable wisdom manifested in his plans and operations till you are ready to exclaim with the psalmist, "Great is our Lord, and of great power; his understanding is infinite," Psalm cxlvii. 5, and with the apostle, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out," Rom. xi. 33. Accustom yourself to meditate upon his absolute sovereignty and universal dominion till you are able, not only to understand and see the beauty of such language as the following, but also to adopt it as the most appropriate expression of your own feelings:—"Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all," Neh. ix. 6. "I praised and honoured Him that liveth for ever and ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation." Dan. iv. 34.

But whilst the natural attributes of God are fitted to engage your thoughts and to awaken your adorations, you must also direct attention to his moral perfections, his holiness, his rec-

titude, his faithfulness, his goodness, his love his compassion. The practice of secret devotion to which we suppose you to be now giving yourself, will soon, if persevered in with sincerity, make you so familiar with your own weakness, imperfection, and sin, that you will find it refreshing to look up to One of spotless purity and unblemished excellence. Till God himself becomes the portion of the soul, there remain in the human heart desires that are never gratified, feelings that are never developed, a void that is never filled, a restless longing after something which is never found. You may turn to the character of God with the full confidence that in Him these longing desires, and ungratified feelings, and undeveloped powers, have an object fully adequate to their nature, and fitted to afford them free exercise, and most entire satisfaction. We cannot wait to give even a specimen of those numerous passages, in which the inspired writers speak in glowing terms of the moral attributes of Jehovah; but a little well directed industry will make you intimately familiar with them. Those attributes are revealed not only in abstract statement: they are embodied in all the doctrines of the gospel, they are illustrated in the whole of God's dealings with his church, they are celebrated in all the adorations of the pious, and they are glorified in all that is made known to us of the person, offices, and work of the Messiah. From the cross of Jesus of Nazareth you may see reflected the immaculate purity of Divine

holiness, the burning brightness of eternal justice, the unquenchable warmth of Jehovah's love, the boundless riches of his grace, the unsearchable wisdom of his counsels. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father he hath declared him." John i. 18. "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Cor. iv. 6.

Adoration is a part of prayer in which it seems especially proper to employ the language of scripture. In confessing our sins, expressing gratitude for mercies received, and even in framing our petitions, it is proper that our feelings should be expressed in our own words, although even in these exercises the words of the inspired writers are peculiarly suitable, and may be freely employed. But in the particular exercise of which we have spoken in this chapter, no language of ours can adequately express the sentiments which we ought to cherish. Let the Bible, therefore, which is your guide and authority in all your acts of worship, be your constant companion here. A very slight experience in these matters will convince you how poor and inadequate are any expressions you could yourself select. It is in the word of God alone that his character and perfections are spoken of in a manner worthy of such a lofty theme. And whilst you offer your adorations in the very

terms employed by the patriarchs and prophets of former ages, you may hope to be a partaker of the holy fellowship of the saints, whose sentiments, like the character of their common Head, are "the same yesterday, today, and for ever."

CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

IF the exercise of adoration is performed with sincerity, it will produce that frame of mind which prompts to the confession of sin. The glory of the Divine perfections can never be beheld without suggesting our own guilt and unworthiness. It was in consequence of the glorious vision beheld by Isaiah when he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and encompassed by adoring seraphim, that he was led to exclaim, "Wo is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Isa. vi. 5. The patriarch of Uz, upright and patient, and a genuine fearer of God though he was, did not, during all the long-continued controversy with his friends, humble himself aright in the presence of his Maker, till at length a discovery of those perfections which demand adoration filled his soul with the deepest sense of his own unworthiness. "Behold I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay my hand upon my mouth." "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job xl. 4.—

xlii. 5, 6. It was when Peter witnessed a display of the Divinity of his Master, that we are told he "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Luke v. 8.

The connection established by God between the confession of sin and the blessing of forgiveness, is a subject which would admit of a more full illustration than we can at present attempt to offer. That such a connection exists is undoubted. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." Prov. xxviii. 13. These words of the wise man agree with the statement of the apostle John, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." 1 John i. 9. And both are in harmony with the experience of David, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." Ps. xxxii. 5. The truth conveyed by these and similar passages of the word of God, is most important and precious, and will be so regarded in proportion as men are sensible of the guilt and misery of their condition as sinners. That the just God of heaven and earth, whose law we have broken, and whose righteous displeasure we have incurred, is in very deed offering pardon and acceptance to all who will honestly confess and forsake their offences, is a truth which ought not to be heard without the deepest emotion. An offer so good, so mer-

ciful, so divinely gracious, is actually made to us in the gospel: God sent his Son into the world to make this offer with his own lips, and to lay the foundation of its being published to the ends of the earth. Let not any one turn away from it with the hypocritical and most ungrateful excuse, that he cannot confess of himself. O sinner, do you not feel that this inability to confess is itself most blame-worthy, and ought to cover you with shame? Neither is it necessary that we should qualify our statements regarding the free offer of pardon to all who confess, by reminding our readers that our confessions and endeavours after amendment have no intrinsic merit to procure the favour of God, and that pardon is a blessing communicated to sinners only through the atonement. That a blessing so infinitely valuable as forgiveness is offered to sinners in the gospel, because it has been purchased at a price no less costly than the blood of God's only begotten Son, and that on no easier terms could it have been provided, consistently with the honour of Jehovah as supreme Ruler—are matters never to be either forgotten or overlooked. But let not our time be spent in speculating even on these precious truths, whilst the work of actual confession is neglected; far less let it be thought that such confession of sin as we wish to inculcate is fitted to encourage a legal spirit. No man, who has incurred a debt, has any right to expect that his creditor will allow him to escape on the ground of simply acknowledging what he

owes. No criminal is entitled to hope that by merely confessing the crimes for which he is imprisoned, he will be permitted to regain his liberty. Should a debtor or a criminal receive the offer of forgiveness on so easy a condition as that of acknowledging the debt or the crime, it would, in such a case, be madness to suppose there was any merit in the acknowledgment itself. Assuredly, the merit of the whole transaction would belong exclusively to the party granting forgiveness, and the person forgiven must feel that he owes his enlargement entirely to free favour. In like manner, the person who draws near to the throne of grace, and who there honestly and humbly confesses his sins, and in so doing obtains forgiveness, must be under a strange delusion if he imagines that by the acknowledgment which he makes, he gives to his Maker a price for the blessing which he receives. So far from this, it may be safely affirmed, that no genuine confession was ever yet made in a state of mind which could admit such a sentiment.

Let us now suppose one of our readers truly concerned about his spiritual interests, and desirous to obtain salvation. Let us suppose that he is acquainted in a general way with the doctrines of the gospel, but that he has not yet found peace to his soul. He is often concerned deeply about his eternal welfare, he has no confidence in the Divine mercy, and no inward sense of security from the wrath to come. He feels that matters are not with

him as they ought to be; he resolves to do well, but his resolutions have again and again been broken. He goes on resolving, and breaking his resolutions, clinging to the hope that he will by and by acquire strength of character to act in a manner more consistent with his own wishes. Meanwhile his weakness and irresolution are aggravated, by not knowing exactly what to do. Our remarks on the subject of confession, may be conveniently presented in the form of a few advices to a person in this situation.

To such a one we would say;—"Enter into thy chamber," and having fallen on your knees, begin to make confession of your sins. In the presence of the great God whose glory should fill you with reverence, whose wrath you have reason to fear, it becomes you to acknowledge those sins which have rendered you odious to his holiness, and obnoxious to his justice. He whom you approach is one of whom it has been said, "Behold he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water." Job xv. 15, 16. To this infinitely glorious and holy Lord God, you are permitted, nay invited and encouraged, to draw near. Open your Bible, and in the attitude of prayer, read over and over such passages as the following:—"If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared. With the Lord

there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." Psalm cxxx. 3, 4, 7, 8. "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." Isaiah lvii. 15. Acknowledge your original guilt, and your actual transgressions; confess that you are by nature, as well as by practice, a child of wrath even as others. Bewail the blindness of your understanding towards spiritual objects, the ungodliness of your heart, the stubbornness of your will, the earthliness of your affections, the irregularity of your desires, the multitude of your vain and idle thoughts, and the strength of your sinful passions. Call to your remembrance the instances in which you have indulged the workings of pride, anger, covetousness, impatience, uncharitableness, or sensual desire, and recount them in the presence of the Searcher of hearts. Review the sins of your words and actions, your vain and unprofitable conversation, your neglect of duty, and the wasting of your time and talents in the service of Satan. Think of the errors of your youth, and the transgressions of your riper years; how much of the best of your life has been spent without any proper regard, either to your own true interest, or to the authority and glory of your Creator. Too long have

you sought your happiness in vain and sinful pleasure, and in ignorance or neglect of the only true source of enjoyment. What fruit have you had in those things whereof it becomes you now to be ashamed? How much happier and more useful might you have been, these many years, had your habits been different from what they are? Have you not forsaken the fountain of living waters, and hewed out unto yourself broken cisterns that can hold no water?

The person whom we suppose ourselves to be now addressing, may perhaps reply that his life has been comparatively blameless, and that if he is to observe the sincerity which forbids the expression of any feelings that are not really entertained, he cannot confess guilt which he does not feel, or acknowledge depravity of which he is not conscious. He will perhaps tell us that he is not aware of any such blindness of mind, hardness of heart, or perversity of inclination, as we have now spoken of, and he cannot consent to bewail evils the very existence of which seems in some degree doubtful. To acknowledge that his heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, and much more to profess deep sorrow that this is the case, is consistent neither with his convictions nor his genuine feelings, and would only be an act of hypocrisy. The state of mind which would suggest such an objection as this, is one which in itself we are far from condemning, and with which we are anxious to deal affectionately

as well as faithfully. Assuredly we have no wish to lead any one to utter sentiments which he does not entertain, even in regard to the confession of sin. Strange as it may seem that a creature formed for the glory of God, and bound to make this the object of his being, and of all his actions, placed under a law which requires him to love the Lord his God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself, strange as it may seem that a creature so situated, and failing so entirely as all men in this world do, to fulfil those obligations, should have any difficulty in feeling the utter sinfulness of his heart, and life; yet would we much rather deal with such a person, provided he is determined to act with perfect sincerity, than with one who would readily, and without scruple, utter any acknowledgment that might be put into his lips. Alas, there are many who have long been accustomed to confess sin without knowing what true penitence means, and without so much as asking their own hearts whether or not they are truly penitent. They confess in general terms, and in language which has become so familiar to the ear that its meaning has ceased to be attended to, that they "have erred and gone astray like lost sheep, that they have done those things which they ought not to have done, that there is no soundness in them, and that they are miserable offenders;" but no true sorrow is ever awakened in their minds on account of the sins which they have themselves committed.

When we call upon our reader to enter his chamber and confess his sins before God, it is not in the spirit of such worshippers that we wish him to act. Let the confession, however limited its extent, and however guarded the language in which it is expressed, be at least made in sincerity. Let your words, however few, be at least a faithful representation of what you really believe, and what you truly feel.

For this end we would recommend you to begin, by confessing one sin at a time. The confession we speak of, is confession with a view both to forgiveness and amendment, and must therefore be engaged in with full purpose of heart. Summon together your wandering thoughts; consider carefully what you do; feel that you are in the presence of your Maker, your Lawgiver, your Judge, with whom you are transacting in a matter which, to yourself, is of infinite and everlasting importance. Think of some one sin that you have committed. The candour, which makes you refuse to confess more than your conscience acknowledges, will not suffer you to deny that you have been guilty of many individual offences. We say nothing, for the present, of the sinfulness of your heart, or the ungodliness of your desires and affections. We wait not to debate with you the question, as to whether or no you are by nature in a state of spiritual death, and liable to the wrath and curse of Jehovah. And even in regard to individual offences which you are not disposed

to deny, if there is any one for which you honestly think an apology may fairly be pled, any one, which, as it appears to you, is either trifling in itself, or unattended with any serious consequences either to yourself or to others; then let us say nothing at present of such an offence. But does not your conscience tell you that you have been guilty of sins for which no excuse can be admitted, and of which the utmost stretch of candour can allow no extenuation? sins by which you have injured yourself both temporally and spiritually, diminished your power of doing good to others, and righteously offended your Creator? Can you not remember having committed such sins; or are you indeed able to stand up in the presence of the Omniscient, and claim from eternal justice the rewards of spotless innocence, and of perfect righteousness? You will not pretend that this is the case. You will not plead that you have never done any thing amiss; that you have always thought, and felt, and spoken, and acted, exactly as you ought; that your time and talents have always been employed to the best advantage; that no sinful thought has ever dwelt in your bosom, that no forbidden desire has ever been cherished; that no irregular affection has ever been indulged; that no idle word has ever escaped your lips; that no unholy action has ever stained your conduct. You will not assert that your behaviour, not only in the transactions of business and trade, but in all the public and private intercourses

of life, and in all the various relationships which you fill, at all times and in all places, has been perfectly faultless. Still less will you profess that you can think of no obligation devolving on you either to yourself, or to your neighbour, or to God, which you have not faithfully and faultlessly discharged.

You can, therefore, have no difficulty in fixing upon some one sin that you have committed, or some one duty that you have neglected. In either case you are guilty before God, and for this one offence you are liable to his righteous displeasure. It is a transgression of his holy law, and subjects you to the penalty which his law has threatened. But with reference to this one offence He is now saying to you, "He that confesseth and forsaketh shall have mercy." Avail yourself of the gracious offer. Make free and ample confession of your fault, and let its aggravations, one after another, be humbly acknowledged. Entreat that God, for Christ's sake, may pardon your sin, and give you grace to refrain from it in time to come.

The course we have now recommended will soon appear to be attended with many advantages. You will thus find the controversy between God and yourself brought, as it were, to a point, where you will have an opportunity of observing the manner in which, on both sides, it is conducted. You will now understand that the calls and exhortations of the gospel, and it may be the warnings and rebukes of providence, have, with reference

to yourself, a distinct and definite meaning. You will begin to feel what God means, when he commands you to turn and live; and you will be enabled to see where your own sincerity is likely to be tried.

Having carefully meditated upon one sin, allowing your mind to dwell on all the circumstances belonging to it, its enormity, its causes, its consequences, the frequency of its commission, its power over your habits, its influence in leading to other sins—having carefully considered these and other circumstances, and made ample confession accordingly, proceed next to think of some other offence, and pursue the same course with reference to it. This you can have no difficulty in doing, for if even one sin is confessed in the manner we speak of, it cannot fail to suggest other sins of equal or greater heinousness. Having acknowledged this second transgression with its various aggravations, you will next proceed to a third, and from that to a fourth, till you gradually discover that your sins are more numerous than the hairs of your head. Thus will you learn, step by step, that you are in all respects as guilty and depraved, and that your heart is as deceitful and as wicked, as the scriptures represent. And having thus learned something of your true character in the sight of God, oh, with what different emotions will you now acknowledge yourself a “miserable sinner.”

To confess sin in such a manner as this, is a most humbling exercise, and one that im-

plies no small degree of self-denial. Nothing is easier than to make a general acknowledgment of sinfulness, in language which, as it is understood to be applicable to all, fails to bring home a consciousness of blame to the mind of any individual. But to feel that demerit really attaches to us, that we are verily guilty and justly exposed to the frown of Jehovah, is something deeply mortifying to the pride of the human heart. So much, indeed, is this the case, that without the special aid of the Spirit, no one will heartily engage in such a task, or persevere in it after it is begun. And one important part of the duty we are now recommending, consists in fervent prayer for the direction and illumination of that blessed Agent.

It is specially to be noticed that no confession of sin can be considered as genuine, except in so far as it is followed by amendment. It is to him who confesseth and forsaketh, that mercy is promised. When John preached the baptism of repentance in the wilderness, he called upon those who waited on his ministry to bring forth fruits meet for repentance: a command which, in reply to the inquiries of several classes of his hearers, he explained as requiring the publicans, to show the sincerity of their repentance by leaving off the practice of extortion, the soldiers, to cease from their habits of violence, false accusation and discontentment, and the uncharitable, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. It is by their fruits we must judge of the character of reli-

gious emotions, as well as of the character of professing Christians. No sorrow for sin however deep, no regret however painful, is entitled to be considered as of the nature of true penitence unless the sinful habit is abandoned. This is the most important, and, at the same time, most difficult part of repentance. We are not so unwilling to attend to any external duty however laborious, as to relinquish our favourite sins. Hence the frequency with which we read in the word of God of turning; and the manifold warnings and exhortations by which our attention is called to it. "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon," Isaiah lv. 7. "Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin," Ezek. xviii. 30. "I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: therefore turn yourselves and live ye," Ezek. xviii. 32. So soon as an individual has become aware of any sinful principle or habit, his only safety consists in confessing it, and from that moment is he bound to forsake it. To continue in the commission of any sin, after it has been confessed and professedly mourned over before the Searcher of hearts, is frightful and heaven-daring hypocrisy.

When therefore you come to the throne of grace for the purpose of making confession of whatever you have discovered amiss, in

your thoughts or feelings, in your temper or desires, in your words or actions, think seriously of the circumstances in which you are placed. The sin which you have discovered must be forgiven, otherwise it will sink you to the lowest hell. It marks the existence of a controversy between God and your soul, and this controversy shall never be terminated unless the ground of it is removed. This can only be done by the removal of your guilt through the pardoning mercy of God, and the removal of your sinful habits by their being forsaken on your own part. Say not, you are not able to forsake them, it is the work of the Spirit. This is a mistake. It is not the Spirit that forsakes sin, for he was never guilty of it. The work is therefore your own. Do you say that the Spirit must enable you to do it? True; but if you content yourself in sinful indulgence, and allow yourself to slumber on in careless indifference, trifling with temptation, and allowing your habits of sloth and aversion to spiritual activity to gain strength, whilst you pretend to wait for the agency of the Spirit, you are guilty of a most wicked and dangerous abuse of one of the most precious doctrines of the gospel. It is your duty to turn from sin, from all sin, especially from your favourite sin, be it pride, or covetousness, or ambition, or anger, or lust, or carnal security, or fretfulness, or uncharitableness, or evil-speaking. It is your duty to turn from sin, because you are plainly commanded to do so; and assuredly there is neither doctrine nor

promise in the Bible that was ever intended to cancel this obligation. The promise of the Spirit only increases it, and renders more aggravated and dangerous the continuing in any forbidden course for a single hour. Let this promise be pled with fervency and perseverance, arising from a deep conviction of the indispensable importance of that work for which the influence of the Spirit is required; and while you beg his assistance, place yourself in that attitude of resistance to sin in which you may expect him to come to your aid. Say not that you will wait God's appointed time, and for the present merely resolve to give attention to the means of grace perhaps somewhat more carefully than heretofore. The means of grace, private and public, are all of them invaluable, and assuredly you cannot afford to neglect any of them; but if your resolution to observe them proceeds from a secret wish to postpone the painful hour of separation from some beloved sin, and this may be its origin, even although you think otherwise, then we say, such resolution is in itself dangerous. It is now, even this day, this moment, that you are to forsake your sin, and begin to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.

We can, however, suppose the case of a person confessing his sin in the manner above recommended, and so far as he knows his own heart, with the honest desire to avoid it, and with the prayer to be preserved from it in time to come; and yet, notwithstanding, falling

again into the same sin, and that before the very first temptation that presents itself. This is a situation sufficiently humbling, and implies conduct highly dishonouring to God, and deeply criminal in his sight; but it is not our part to treat the person who occupies it with unkindness, or even with neglect. Such a person may be ready to conclude that no advantage of any kind has resulted from his exercise of confession, and may perhaps feel so much discouraged as to be in some danger of discontinuing an exercise so unprofitable. This is a result by all means to be avoided, and therefore are we most anxious to show, that even in the case supposed, the confession of sin has not in every sense been in vain. We must not deny that a highly-aggravated offence has been committed, in repeating sin for which sorrow has been professed, and forgiveness supplicated; yet neither must we forget that a very important and instructive lesson has been received. The person has been effectually taught his own weakness, the feebleness of his resolutions as a protection from temptation, and the strength of sinful principles in his heart. When he next approaches the throne of grace he will have more to confess, and more reason for deep and bitter humiliation than he formerly could have supposed himself to have. He will now, with greater sincerity, acknowledge the wickedness of his heart, and implore that Divine grace, by which alone, as he has now learned

to his cost, he can be enabled effectually to resist temptation.

One good effect of the confession of sin, wherever it is performed with any degree of sincerity, is the increased attention which it directs to sin in the heart and life for the time to come. Men often commit sin so thoughtlessly, that it is neither observed by them at the time, nor remembered afterwards. Thus many persons live in the daily practice of sins, of which it would be difficult to persuade them that they are more than very rarely guilty. But when a man begins in earnest to confess his sins, when he begins to confess them one by one in the presence of the Searcher of hearts, his observation on the subject is greatly quickened. His attention being thus earnestly directed to some of his own prevailing transgressions, he cannot so easily repeat them afterwards without at least observing and remembering what he does. This increased attention to the sins which he is himself prone to commit, is a most important means of leading an individual to a true acquaintance with his own character, and to a knowledge of the wickedness of his heart. It will also make him aware of the temptations by which he is most liable to be led astray, and of the circumstances in which these temptations have most power over him. It will make him acquainted with the power of his sinful habits, and it will gradually disclose to him the depravity of his whole nature. The same person who at first, in proposing to

confess his sins, felt as if he had scarcely any thing to confess, will soon be prepared, if he is enabled to persevere with that candour and sincerity of which we have spoken, to say with David, "For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great." Psalm xxv. 11. And tracing all his transgressions to their proper source, he will be constrained to add with the same inspired writer, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." Psalm li. 5.

And here let us endeavour to impress the serious reader with the importance of searching out his besetting sin. Every individual is, by natural temperament or by habit, more prone to some sins than to others; and probably in every case, there is some one sin that has greater power over the individual than any other. Strange though it may seem, the greater number of men are not themselves aware of the sins to which they are most prone. This may arise from that insensibility to the evil of a favourite sin, which is the effect of constant familiarity with it, and from a strong, though unconscious desire to excuse it. So blind are we all naturally to our faults, that it is no uncommon thing for us to be fully aware of the prevailing errors of those around us, whilst we are profoundly ignorant of our own. Seek then, we would say, an acquaintance with your besetting sins. Make it your business to find out what they are. For this end, compare the habitual state of your heart and life with God's holy law

Look to your conduct in public and in private, and in all the various relations of life. Mark those particulars in which you find yourself going astray in the daily course of your thoughts, words, and actions. By persevering in this exercise, with earnest prayer for the illumination of the Holy Spirit, you will not long remain wholly ignorant of your imperfections, your weaknesses, your frailties of temper, and your prevailing faults in conversation and conduct. Inquire what sin it is that corresponds most with your natural disposition, or that you are most easily led into by your companions or pursuits. Ask yourself what is the sin that you are most loath to part with, and which you are most anxious to palliate, and least willing to hear condemned. Examine what is the temptation which you find it most difficult to avoid, and which notwithstanding your secret conviction of its danger, and some feeble wish to overcome it, still continues to control your conduct. And having discovered this evil, make free and full confession of it to God. The discovery itself is of great importance, as it discloses to you the chief hindrance in the way of your salvation. This besetting sin, if not repented of and forgiven, will prove your everlasting ruin. It has already deeply injured you. It has prevented your return to God, and has been operating, it may be for many years, in blinding your mind, hardening your heart, and rendering you insensible to the claims of the Divine character, and to your own eternal

welfare. There is a controversy between God and yourself in regard to this very sin. God commands you to confess and forsake it; and you, on the other hand, wish God to save you from hell, and yet to allow you to continue your favourite though forbidden indulgence. In this controversy, do you expect that God will yield to you? Never. "I am the Lord, I change not." You must yield, or the controversy will continue undetermined for ever. And if you yield in this one point, if you really and truly give up this one sin, if you with an honest heart confess and forsake it, there is the greatest probability that you will also be enabled to forsake your other sins as they become known to you, and that in forsaking them you will find mercy.

We have spoken of the aggravations of sin as necessary to be taken notice of in making confession; perhaps this is a point which requires a little further attention. By the aggravations of sin are meant, those accompanying circumstances by which its criminality is increased, and on account of which it ought the more deeply to be bewailed. There are certain aggravations which attach to all sin, and which must not be overlooked. It is opposed to the character and perfections of God, and implies rebellion against his authority, defiance of his power, and contempt of his goodness and mercy. It is the violation of a law which is at once holy, just, and good; and so deeply impressed was the mind of the

apostle with its odiousness in this view, that he speaks of sin, by the commandment, becoming exceeding sinful. The injury which the sinner inflicts upon himself, the utter unprofitableness in every sense, and even in regard to the interests of the present life, of the course which he has pursued, the loss of time, the abuse of talents, the wasting of opportunities of improvement, opportunities which once lost can never be recovered, furnish abundant grounds of deepest humiliation. The deceitful nature of sin, insinuating itself into the heart without observation, gradually and insensibly acquiring power over the habits, concealing the terrible and destructive consequences to which it exposes, and presenting the character of God and the situation of the sinner through a false medium, must be carefully considered. But above all, the wrath and curse of the Almighty, and the everlasting perdition of soul and body, are realities of such overwhelming magnitude, that to overlook them were madness.

But in confessing your own individual offences, there are aggravations of a more private and personal nature, which you must acknowledge. Perhaps you have had the advantage of a religious education, and have been brought up in the bosom of the visible church. If so, your guilt is that of the servant who knew his Master's will, but did it not. You have professed to know God, but in works you have denied him; you have named the

name of Christ, and yet have not departed from iniquity. Perhaps you have been frequently warned by the word of God, by the dispensations of Providence, and by the rebukes of your own conscience, and have thus subjected yourself to that dreadful threatening, "He that being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." Prov. xxix. 1. Perhaps the hand of affliction has been laid upon you, and in your trouble you have sought the Lord, and made solemn vows and promises of amendment, yet have afterwards returned to your former courses. Perhaps your sins have encouraged others, your friends, your neighbours, your companions, in habits of ungodliness; and may thus, even when you were not yourself aware of it, have contributed to spread around you ruinous consequences, which it is not now in your power to counteract. It is at least certain, that your sins are aggravated by many mercies received from that God against whom you have transgressed. Let the aggravations, of whatever kind, with which your sins are attended, be frequently reviewed and regularly confessed. Like your sins themselves, they will appear more numerous, the more carefully they are considered. And oh, be thankful that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, is sufficient to wash away all your sins, how heinous or aggravated soever; and that God is even now making offer to you of a full and free forgiveness. Does it

not become you to say with the prodigal, "I will arise, and go to my Father, and will say unto him. Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." Luke xv. 18, 19.

CHAPTER VI.

PETITION.

IT is a wonderful thought that the high and lofty One, who inhabits eternity, should be accessible to creatures like ourselves, and that an actual interchange of sentiment and feeling should exist between heaven and earth. Yet is this truth not only clearly revealed; it is implied and taken for granted in all that is made known in scripture of the Divine character and works. The great and invisible Jehovah does really hold intercourse with man. Though infinitely removed from human eyes, he may be spoken to by human lips, and he will actually grant any reasonable petition that we may offer. This is a truth in itself so wonderful as to demand universal attention, and so precious that it is astonishing it is not universally taken advantage of. Must not man be indeed infatuated, when he neglects the means with which he is thus provided, of benefitting himself and others to an extent absolutely beyond calculation?

Petition is a part of prayer so well known, that scarcely any thing needs to be said for the mere purpose of explaining it. It is that part of devotion which is more immediately suggested by the name of prayer. In it we do not direct attention chiefly as in adoration, to

the Divine perfections, nor as in confession, chiefly to our several sins with their aggravations. The part of prayer of which we now speak has direct reference to our condition as needy, and directs our thoughts, on the one hand, to our own wants, and, on the other, to the power and willingness of God to supply those wants. The proper business of petition is to ask, and to this exercise we are encouraged by the injunction, "Ask and it shall be given to you."

The exercises of which we have spoken in the last two chapters, suggest, as has already been hinted, various matters of petition. If, in presenting to God that adoration which his perfections should call forth, you feel that your heart is not impressed as it ought to be with those emotions which it becomes you to cherish, you are permitted to ask that your affections may be quickened. And if in confessing your sins, you are conscious of not entertaining such a deep regret, nor such a vivid sense of the demerit of your offences as you are aware the occasion most rightfully demands, you are encouraged to pray for repentance. In addition to this, the very exercise of confessing implies an earnest desire of forgiveness, and cannot be performed with sincerity unless accompanied with fervent supplications for pardon. Indeed, although it is profitable to consider the different parts of prayer in succession, they are all inseparably connected with each other; for the exercise of petitioning will, on the other hand, suggest

reasons for addressing the great Object of worship in the language both of adoration and penitence. In confession you open the wounds of sin and examine their extent and number; in petition you apply for a remedy; and as the more deadly and dangerous you discover the wounds, the more earnestly will you desire a cure, so in proportion as you seek after and become really acquainted with that only remedy which the gospel reveals, will your conviction be increased of the greatness of the danger from which you seek deliverance.

It is plainly impossible to over-estimate the importance of having the heart deeply affected with our need of those mercies for which we pray. And it is matter of thankfulness that, as our wants are infinitely better known to our heavenly Father than to ourselves, we are encouraged to pray that he would so far acquaint us with our true situation, as to awaken within us sincere desires for what we really require. Yet it seems strange, and is itself an evidence of the utter depravity of human nature, that men, situated as they are, should not of themselves be aware of their spiritual wants. But, alas, they are prone to regard themselves as "rich and increased in goods, and in need of nothing," whilst they are in truth "poor and wretched, miserable, blind and naked." So soon, however, as any one has been fully awakened to the realities described in the scriptures, and has been made to feel himself a guilty transgressor in the hands of eternal justice, and liable in consequence to punish-

ment throughout the whole of his future being, he ceases to be insensible to his actual condition. The thought of being exposed to the wrath of God here and hereafter, cannot be seriously entertained without prompting to the prayer of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner," Luke xviii. 13. The value of the throne of grace will be felt when the conscience is really touched, from what point soever the truth may come by which it is affected. If the authority of God as our rightful lawgiver is truly felt, if his goodness as our unwearied Benefactor notwithstanding our continued ingratitude and rebellion is truly acknowledged, if a man's own real interest as the undoubted possessor of an existence that shall never end, is seriously considered; if eternity—an eternity of inconceivable blessedness or of unutterable wo—an eternity into which he knows not how soon he may be plunged, is indeed realized as his undoubted portion;—who is there that can regard with indifference the assurance that God hears and answers the prayers of sinners?

On the subject of offering petitions, there are two points which may deserve to be considered. What are the blessings which it becomes us to ask? and in what manner ought our desires to be presented?

In regard to the former of these, we may begin by remarking that as there are many who confess in general terms they are sinners, without ever acknowledging any one sin they have actually committed; so it is to be feared,

there are many who use the language of petition without thinking what they ask, and without so much as knowing what they really require. They daily say their prayers, and no doubt consider themselves truly devout, but were they required to state in few words what are the good things they are daily praying for, and what is the blessing they are most anxious to receive, they would be at a loss to give any intelligent answer. One of the greatest favours that can be bestowed upon such persons, is to convince them (if that were possible) that they have probably never yet offered a real prayer in their lives.

The man who confesses sin without thinking of any particular offence, is not farther from the character of a true penitent, than the person who offers the language of petition without desiring any particular blessing, is distant from the exercises of a true suppliant. Any one who presents a petition to his fellow-creature, whether that fellow-creature be his ruler, his parent, his master, or simply his neighbour, must have a distinct notion of the favour which he requests. If he is ignorant of, or inattentive to, what his own petition contains, he must wish to insult the party to whom his application is made, unless he is either insane, or is, for some unaccountable reason, acting the part of a designing hypocrite. His conduct, however it may be explained, is neither ingenuous nor manly; and if the person is in his senses, and his motives understood by the party addressed, it cannot

fail to be in the highest degree offensive. And is conduct which would not be tolerated between man and man, justifiable in the dealings of man with God? No. Let the person who has been accustomed to present such petitions to the Searcher of hearts, leave off at once and for ever a practice so wicked. Let him hold his peace in the presence of the Eternal, rather than be guilty of such hypocrisy and profaneness. Let him pause to think of some one thing which he needs, and then let him make that the subject of humble and believing petition. If he can think of no one thing that he believes himself really to need, let him reverently ask that God would reveal to him his destitution; a petition which, if presented in sincerity, will not be despised by the Hearer of prayer.

Perhaps some one may consider it an objection to what we have now stated, that God knows our wants infinitely better than we do ourselves; and may remind us of the words of our Lord, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him." Matt. vi. 8. Does not this declaration, it may be argued, supersede the necessity of any minute acquaintance on our part with the particular blessings we may require? and does it not teach us that we do our duty if, in general terms, we supplicate the divine favour, and ask God to give us whatever he knows to be for our good? Was not the publican accepted when, without condescending on any particular blessing, he merely used the words, "God, be merciful to me a sinner?"

That our heavenly Father knows what we have need of before we ask him, is, as has already been hinted, a most precious and encouraging truth; and for the privilege of entreating that he, who alone perfectly knows our circumstances, would consult his own infinite wisdom in bestowing what is really for our good, although it should even be contrary to our desires, it is impossible to be sufficiently thankful. But to infer that this privilege justifies any one either in remaining ignorant of his wants, or in regarding them with indifference, would be a most mischievous and fatal error. The prayer of the publican, although it specifies no particular blessing, indicates a state of mind the farthest possible from that of a person who is either ignorant of, or indifferent to, his true situation. He cries for mercy to himself as a sinner, thereby showing that he is aware at once of his sinfulness, of the misery to which his sins expose him, of his total inability to deliver himself from this situation, and of his want of all title to present any claim to the favourable regard of Jehovah, except that which is afforded by the revelation of divine mercy.

The utmost knowledge that we can acquire of our wants must also be exceedingly imperfect, nay, sometimes it may be positively incorrect. Our greatest deficiencies may be comparatively unknown to us, and some things of which we suppose ourselves to stand in need, may be hurtful rather than advantageous, and, therefore, kindly withheld. How pre-

cious, then, the assurance, that our Father, who is perfectly able to give whatever is needful, is also perfectly acquainted with what it is proper to grant, and when and how to bestow it; and that no good thing will be withheld from those who call upon him in truth! But, at the same time, without some distinct notion of the particular blessings which we really require, we cannot pray for any thing with sincerity. Our prayers must not only be without adaptation to our particular circumstances, but also destitute of life and earnestness. How can a man ask any thing with true and honest desire, if he knows not what he asks? The prayers of the godly recorded in the book of Psalms and throughout the scriptures, abound with petitions for particularly specified blessings. That admirable form of prayer which our Lord taught his disciples, and which every one regards as an infallible directory, contains six several petitions. The promises of the divine word, which are at once our warrant, encouragement, and guide, are not more remarkable for their general richness and beauty, than for the endless diversity of forms in which they exhibit the varied and manifold favours which divine goodness and mercy hold out to our acceptance.

For what, then, are we to pray? For whatever God has promised,—for whatever our Lord has taught us to pray. And here we must remark that, if we are to take for our model the prayer which Christ taught his

disciples, the first desire we present must be for the promotion of the divine glory. As the glory of God is the great end of all his works, so ought it to have the first place in our desires, and in all our petitions. Our Lord, who gave us so valuable an example as to the duty of prayer generally, has most emphatically shown the place which this object ought to have in our requests. His well-known intercessory prayer begins with the words, "Father, glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee;" John xvii. 1. and in the course of the same wonderful address, he declares this to have been the end of all his labours and sufferings; "I have glorified thee on the earth, I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." John xvii. 4. It is in perfect harmony with his own conduct, therefore, that he teaches us to express our first petition in the words, "Hallowed be thy name." Indeed it is remarkable that, of the six petitions which he enumerates, it is only in the three latter that any mention is made of our own wants, whether temporal or spiritual. If our hearts were in harmony with the spirit of the Lord's prayer, our first desire would be for the promotion of the glory of God, our second, for the advancement of his kingdom, our third, for the accomplishment of his will; and all this before we should present a single petition in reference to ourselves.

But as we have at present in view the case of those who are seeking after an acquaintance with God, rather than that of experienced

Christians, we must proceed to mention some of those particular blessings of which such persons stand immediately in need. And here let us, in the first place, direct attention to the pardon of sin, as a blessing which ought to form the subject of special request. This blessing, of which every penitent sinner must so deeply feel the value, is promised again and again in the most gracious, condescending, and encouraging manner. In praying for it, we are taught to appeal to the infinite goodness of Jehovah's nature, of which the communication of so great a favour is a signal instance. Says David:—"For thou, Lord, art good and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy, unto all them that call upon thee." Psalms lxxxvi. 5. The same powerful argument is employed by Nehemiah: "Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness." Neh. ix. 17. The Great Supreme himself declares that he has especial delight in bestowing this blessing, as something by which his glory as the true God is eminently exhibited, "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Isaiah xliii. 25. By this Jehovah is distinguished from the gods of the heathen. It was vain for a man to expect salvation from dumb idols, and to ask forgiveness from the work of his own hands. How impressively is this taught in Isaiah xlv. where, after exposing the absurdity of falling down to the stock of a tree, God introduces

himself by saying; "I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins!" And how strikingly is this view of the distinguishing excellence of Jehovah, exhibited in the well-known language of Micah, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage. He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy!"

Nor are these the only arguments we are permitted to employ in begging the forgiveness of our sins. We are encouraged to plead the work and righteousness of Christ, as the foundation on which pardon can be extended to the guilty, whilst the honour of the divine law is fully maintained. "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Eph. i. 7. In token of the infinite value of the atonement, God the Father, not only grants pardon to the sinner, but has given to his Son the honour of conferring it: so that the same Redeemer who purchased forgiveness by his blood, makes offer of it in the gospel, and actually bestows it. During the days of his public ministry, it was proved by the miracles which he wrought, that the Son of man had power on earth to forgive sin. One of the latest charges delivered to his disciples before his ascension, was to the effect, that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations. And in fulfilling that ministry with which they were in-

trusted, the disciples did not fail to give continual prominence to this blessing. "Him hath God exalted with his right hand, a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins." Acts v. 31. Nor can we omit to notice that, on the solemn night when he instituted the ordinance of the Supper, forgiveness of sin is expressly mentioned by our Lord as the leading blessing of the New Testament, and as expressly signified in that ordinance: "This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins." Matt. xxvi. 28.

So abundant is the divine mercy, and so free and ample the offers of the gospel, that those very circumstances which are in themselves fitted to alarm the sinner, he is encouraged to use as arguments in begging forgiveness. Are his sins numerous and aggravated? There is a suitable petition already prepared;—"For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great." Ps. xxv. 11. Is his misery deep? Let him unfold all his wretchedness. "O remember not against us former iniquities, let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us, for we are brought very low." Ps. lxxix. 8. Does he long to taste the blessedness of the man whose iniquities are forgiven, and does he esteem the condition of the justified person, to whom there is now no condemnation, as a state infinitely more valuable than any thing that could be purchased by the whole world? Let him give free utterance to these sentiments in his pleadings at

the throne of grace. Let him not rest satisfied till he is able to unite with the apostle in his declaration:—"Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ." Rom. v. 1.

Closely connected with pardon, is the privilege of being admitted into a new and endeared relation to God as our reconciled father in Christ; and this privilege also ought to be made the subject of special petition. It is true that, if the returning sinner is properly affected with his own unworthiness, he will esteem it an instance of unspeakable kindness that he is admitted into any relation whatever, with that God whom he has so often and so grievously offended. How much more should he feel impressed with the offer of being taken into covenant with God, and being made the object of his special love and favour! Yet even this may be obtained in answer to prayer. In regard to this as well as other good things, the promises of the divine word may be converted into petitions. "Incline your ear and come unto me, hear and your soul shall live, and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." Isa. lv. 3. It is truly wonderful that the great God of heaven and earth, should condescend to enter into any thing that can be called a covenant with creatures, and much more with creatures who by their sins had provoked his displeasure and incurred his wrath. Can any ingratitude equal that of rejecting such an offer! Can any guilt be

compared with that of trampling upon such unparalleled goodness!

Those who are thus admitted into covenant with God, stand to him in the relation of children. One of the most delightful views that we can take of the blessings flowing from the mediation of Christ, is, that those who are interested in that mediation are called sons of God. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons," Gal. iv. 4, 5. This is a privilege closely connected in various ways, with the exercise of prayer. It is even promised in answer to prayer: "Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me, my Father, thou art the guide of my youth?" Jer. iii. 4. And when it is conferred, it is accompanied with the Spirit of prayer, who enables the person to address the throne of grace with new hope and confidence. "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father." Gal. iv. 6. So soon as any one is enabled to call God Father, and is really possessed of the feelings of a heaven-born child, he begins to have a delightful consciousness that his prayers are heard and answered. He begins to see the importance and to taste the sweetness of many portions of the divine word, the meaning of which was before very dimly apprehended, if at all understood. He is now able to appreciate the value of our Lord's invitation

when he says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest to your souls." Matt. xi. 28, 29. He knows by experience, that it is one of the privileges of the children of God to cast their cares upon the Saviour, and to find true rest by entering his service.

And this leads us to mention a third blessing, which it becomes us to ask, and that is an assurance, or at least a lively hope, of our reconciliation to God and acceptance with him. Many and varied are the expressions, by which this blessing is brought under our notice in the word of God. Sometimes it is described by the notion of God causing the light of his countenance to shine upon his people: and accordingly we are taught to pray:—"God be merciful unto us, and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us," Psa. lxxvii. 1. Sometimes it is spoken of as the communicating to the soul, by divine power, of joy and gladness:—"Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice," Psa. li. 8. And very often it is represented under the idea of giving peace to the mind:—"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, unto which also ye are called." Col. iii. 15. "The peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Phil. iv. 7. "Now the God of peace fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope

through the power of the Holy Ghost." Rom. xv. 13.

That the blessing thus variously described is exceedingly valuable, and ought to be earnestly prayed for, we need scarcely wait to prove. It was the subject of special intercession, in behalf of believers in various churches, on the part of the apostle Paul, as is obvious from the passages just quoted. In its own nature it is inexpressibly sweet and pleasant, and yields the purest and most elevated enjoyment which it is possible to taste in the present world. It animates to the discharge of every duty, and thus contributes in no ordinary degree to promote, at once the inward sanctification and the active usefulness, of those by whom it is possessed. Nor ought we to omit to mention how much it is fitted to recommend Christianity to the world. A man who carries about with him a sense of reconciliation with God, and who enjoys in consequence that inward peace which passeth all understanding, is unspeakably better qualified to recommend his religion to the notice of his fellow-men, than is one who lives continually in the region of doubts and fears. His own sense of security will give strength and energy to all his efforts for the good of others; and the happiness he possesses, so far as it is known to others, (and in some particulars it cannot be concealed,) must be regarded as a living testimony, not only to the truth, but also to the supreme excellence of true religion.

It is further to be remarked that faith, love,

and every other Christian grace, are to be expected in answer to prayer. Faith is a duty, and we are commanded to exercise it: "This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ." 1 John iii. 23. But it is also a blessing conferred by Divine grace; and as such it must be made the subject of petition. "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God," Eph. ii. 8. "Unto you it is given, in the behalf of Christ, to believe on him," Phil. i. 29. In harmony with these statements, is the prayer of the distressed father, whose son was possessed of a deaf and dumb spirit,—“Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief,” Mark ix. 24. And not only are we to pray that this grace may be implanted in our hearts, we must also continue to pray that it may be preserved and strengthened. Thus we are told that the apostles said unto the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

To speak of the importance of faith, would be to enter upon a field too extensive for us at present. Its connection at once with justification and regeneration, is sufficient to account for the prominent place which it occupies in the scriptures. The relation in which it stands to prayer, is itself a subject of great interest and extent. As we cannot pray acceptably without faith; so the power of faith in prayer, is spoken of as absolutely unlimited. “All things whatsoever ye shall ask in faith, believing ye shall receive,” Mat. xxi. 22. Seeing faith is of so much importance in prayer, and

seeing that it is at the same time to be itself obtained preserved and increased, in answer to prayer, we are thus furnished with an overwhelming argument for making it the subject of unwearied supplications at the throne of grace. If the life of the Christian is a life of constant prayer, it is also a life of constant faith. The same apostle who commands us to pray without ceasing, and whose practice we cannot doubt was in accordance with his precept, says also, "The life which I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," Gal. ii. 20.

Faith in Christ is always accompanied with love to God, which also is promised in the scriptures, communicated by the Spirit, and implanted and perpetuated in answer to prayer. The kindness and condescension of God in bestowing this blessing upon sinners, it is impossible for us fully to appreciate, as the longer it is considered it must appear the more astonishing. The obligation to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, belongs to us as creatures, and arises necessarily from the character and perfections of God himself. To fail in discharging this duty, is to fail in accomplishing the very end of our being, and is destructive in ourselves of the source of all true happiness. Not to love God, is the essence at once of sin and of misery. How rich then that grace which is displayed in communicating this principle, where it has been lost. It is a re-

storation of life to the dead, and as such it is described in some of those promises which we are permitted to plead in prayer. "The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." Dent. xxx. 6.

This principle of divine love is produced by the same agency, as that by which the grace of faith is implanted. "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, who is given unto us." Rom. v. 5. In order to love any object it is necessary that we behold its beauty and excellence; and faith is the eye, by which the glory of the divine perfections is so discovered, as to render God the supreme object of regard and affection. The Lord Jesus himself, when thus discovered, is seen to be fairer than the children of men, the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely; and the believer becomes qualified to understand the language of Peter, when he says, "Whom having not seen ye love: in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." 1 Pet. i. 8.

Not only on account of our high obligation to discharge those duties to which it prompts, nor even on account of its own inherent sweetness alone, should we be constrained to pray for this grace, but also on account of its influence in counteracting and overcoming other principles which it is alike our interest and our duty to mortify. As on the one hand it

is true, that "if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him," 1 John ii. 15, so is it true on the other, that the love of the Father will destroy the love of the world. The most effectual way to prevent our affections from being set on the things of the earth is, obviously, to have them fixed on the things that are above.

Intimately connected with love to God, is that humility which so well becomes us, as creatures and as sinners, and for which also we are encouraged to pray. Jesus is exalted to bestow not forgiveness only, but also repentance, and the one as well as the other we are to make the subject of petition. To the dispositions of humility, penitence, and meekness, there are many promises made. The high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, dwells with him that is humble and of a contrite spirit. But what it concerns us to remark at present is, that these dispositions are themselves promised, and may be obtained in answer to prayer. In the well-known invitation addressed by our Lord to the weary and heavy laden, he says, "learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." Matt. xi. 29. We are commanded to have the same mind in us that was also in Christ; and here we find Jesus distinctly offering to impart to us his own dispositions. Whoever has his eyes opened to the surpassing loveliness of the Saviour's character, will in some measure understand the value of this blessed offer.

Nothing is more common than to plead the

infirmities of natural temper, as an excuse for the indulgence of pride, anger, and discontent. But how little weight can such an excuse have, seeing God has promised to give a new heart! There is not an evil cleaving to human nature, for which there is not an adequate remedy provided in the gospel. "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." Col. iii. 13. Another beautiful illustration of that temper which the gospel both inculcates and inspires, we have in the often-quoted language of Paul, in which he describes his own feelings. "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound, everywhere and in all things. I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." And lest any one should despair of attaining a state of mind so excellent, the apostle immediately points out the source from which this and every other good thing is to be obtained. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Phil. iv. 11—13.

Such a state of mind as this implies the possession of inward sanctification, a blessing which also we are encouraged to make the subject of special petition. Closely connected with that change of state which is effected in

justification, is a change of character produced by regeneration; and this change of character, although in itself so great as to be called life from the dead, and so complete as to renovate the deepest springs of feeling and action, is yet only the commencement of a work which is destined to transform the whole man. The power of depraved nature and of ungodly habits, is not to be destroyed at once. The Christian has a race to run, a battle to fight. The principles of indwelling sin are gradually overcome, they are subjected to the process of crucifixion. In the day of converting grace they are nailed to the cross, and their death is certain, however painful and lingering the process by which their destruction is effected. "Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." Rom. vi. 6.

In matters of this kind, an honest-hearted and diligent inquirer will have less difficulty in discovering his own personal wants, than in appreciating the value of some of the other blessings of which we have spoken. His desires for pardon, for peace, for the hope of heaven, for faith and love, may be extremely feeble; and here, as on a former occasion, we can imagine him to say, "If I am to pray for nothing which I do not really and sincerely desire, I cannot make all these matters the subject of petition." In reply to this we would ask,—Can you deny that these blessings are exceedingly desirable? Does not reason, does

not common sense, declare that they are of infinite value, unless Christianity itself is a delusion? Is it possible that your consciousness of guilt is so slight, that you do not consider it worth your while so much as to ask forgiveness? Is it not desirable to possess that confidence in the Divine mercy, which would enable you to overcome the fear of death? At all events you must admit (whatever may be your feelings in regard to the subject of sanctification generally,) that the temper exemplified by Paul in the passage above quoted, is a rich possession, and more than worthy of all the pains you can ever take to acquire it. Without fear of hypocrisy you may surely acknowledge, in the presence of that God to whom all your sins, your inconsistencies, your follies are known, that such a state of mind it is not yet your privilege to possess. And by earnestly and perseveringly praying for its attainment, you will become more and more sensible, on the one hand, of the excellence of the blessing which you desire, and on the other, of your own manifold imperfections. Thus your petitions will multiply in proportion to the sincerity with which they are presented.

But we must proceed to observe, that the promises of the divine word hold out encouragement to ask in prayer, strength to perform the duties, resist the temptations, and overcome the difficulties of our situation. The source of all holiness of heart and character, is the principle of spiritual life; and, when this principle has been implanted, we are en-

couraged to pray that it may be preserved and invigorated. As the gospel is intended to open men's eyes, and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God: it must be warrantable to pray that this object may be accomplished. And after our eyes have been thus opened, it becomes us to ask wisdom to know the path of duty, and the necessary obedience and self-denial to walk in that path when it is known. Solomon was accepted when he intreated the Lord to grant him a wise and understanding heart; and the apostle besought God, in behalf of the Colossians, that they might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work.

The wisdom thus obtained, must appear in the whole course of our words and actions. In regard to our conversation, it becomes us to pray with the Psalmist:—"Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips." Psalm cxli. 3. And in regard to our general conduct, we must remember that "the grace of God, which bringeth salvation, teacheth us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in the present world." As the promises of the divine word are our warrant in prayer, so the commands laid upon us as believers imply a promise of grace to obey them; and this being the case, the very precepts of the scriptures may be turned into prayers. The petition of David, "Order my steps in thy word, and let not any iniquity have dominion over

me," Psalm cxix. 133. cannot be too often repeated. And in general, the promise, "As thy day so shall thy strength be," Deut. xxxiii., 25. is suitable in all the varied circumstances of duty, difficulty, or affliction, in which we may be placed. We must not wait to quote passages of scripture at any length; but would strongly recommend that the person who reads these hints, with the desire of turning what is suggested to practical use, should, for himself, consult the word of God, that he may become familiar with those promises and recorded petitions which are suitable to his own situation. This is a task which it is not difficult to perform, and which will amply repay all the trouble it may cost.

As the ordinances of grace, whether public or private, and the dispensations of divine providence which work together for good to believers, will not produce those sanctified fruits which render them so valuable, without the special blessing of God, this suggests another class of petitions, which it is every way proper to urge in the presence of the Hearer of prayer. In regard to the public ordinances, Jesus himself has promised to be with his servants and people when they meet together; and this promise should be made use of in prayer every time we enter the house of God. Without the presence of Christ, the ordinances will be productive of no real advantage; on the contrary, they will prove the savour of death unto death. But by looking to Jesus before we come to the house of God, and im-

ploring his countenance and blessing on those institutions which he himself has appointed, we may expect to find it good to draw near unto God, and thus to make progress in spiritual wisdom and holiness.

And the same blessing will rest on all the dispensations of divine providence, if asked in sincerity and faith. From the afflictions of the present life, Christians are not exempt any more than others, but they have access to the richest sources of consolation, from which it is the misery of multitudes that they foolishly turn away. Grace is to be obtained in answer to prayer, by which the sufferer may be supported in all his troubles. The same Saviour, whose presence with his people in the ordinances fills their hearts with joy, has promised also to meet with them and to bless them in the furnace of affliction. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." Isa. xliii. 2. The presence of Christ in trouble, secures support under it whilst it continues, and permanent advantage from it afterwards. The apostle Paul, in praying for the Colossians, besought the Lord that they might "be strengthened with all might according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness." Col. i. 11. And the promises are not a few, which teach us to look for such an influence upon our afflictions as shall not only

sustain us under them, but convert them into positive blessings. "We know that all things work together for good, to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Rom. viii. 28. "Now, no chastening, for the present, seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness, to them which are exercised thereby." Heb. xii. 11.

To enumerate all the blessings, which we ought to ask in prayer, is impossible, and to attempt to do so could serve no good purpose. Our object is merely to suggest hints, which the serious reader may follow out in his own meditations. We shall therefore proceed to offer a few thoughts on the second point formerly noticed, namely the manner in which our petitions ought to be presented.

Petition, as well as adoration, may be addressed to all the persons of the Godhead, and to each of them severally. On this point, however, we shall not dwell. Petition, also, like every other part of prayer, is to be offered to God in the name of Christ. The relation in which our blessed Lord stands to believing prayer, is a subject susceptible of most extensive illustration. In the first place, it is through Christ that we have access to the Father. In the second place, it is by grace derived from Christ that we are enabled to pray with acceptance. And in the third place, the blessings which we really need are all conferred by God in the way of discovering

Christ to the soul. This last point is the only one to which we shall particularly allude.

It is in Christ that the glory of the divine character is discerned: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." John i. 18. The unrenewed mind cannot discern Christ; it perceives neither the truth and reality of his character, nor the unparalleled excellence by which he is distinguished. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Cor. ii. 14. By the almighty operation of divine grace, the eyes of the understanding are opened to see that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Christ. The scripture testimony concerning him, is seen in its truth and certainty. The beauty of his moral character, presenting such an entire contrast to the weakness and wickedness of human nature as we find it in ourselves and others, is beheld in its surpassing loveliness, as "fairer than the children of men." "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Cor. iv. 6. This spiritual discovery of Christ to the soul, is variously spoken of in the word of God. Among other names which are applied to it, it is called *revelation*. "It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to

reveal his Son in me." Gal. i. 15, 16. When Peter professed for the first time his belief in the Messiahship of Jesus, his Master said to him in reply, "Blessed art thou Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Matt. xvi. 17.

Without this, none of the blessings already enumerated can be received; neither pardon, nor acceptance, nor peace; neither faith, nor love, nor penitence. Till Christ is spiritually discerned, the heart cannot be united to him, and will rely upon him neither for justifying righteousness nor sanctifying grace. When pardon is conferred, Jesus is revealed to the soul as he "in whom there is redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." Eph. i. 7. When acceptance is granted, he is beheld as "the Lord our righteousness." Jer. xxiii. 6. Whatever be the blessing that is conveyed, it is perceived, appreciated, accepted by the believer, only in and with Christ. This revelation of Jesus to the soul, is just the enabling a person to look at him with the eye of faith; and wherever any one is enabled to do this, there will love, humility, and every other grace be found.

Let us request our reader to direct his attention to this the more carefully, as it is the very point at which the distinction between a true believer and a hypocrite is most clearly to be discerned. A mere professor may pray for pardon and all the other blessings we have named, from day to day; but, resting

satisfied with going through the duty of asking, he never advances a step further. Make it therefore the matter of your prayer night and day, that God would reveal Christ to your soul. In regard to this particular blessing, ask till you receive, seek till you find. So long as this is not obtained, you are an unbeliever; you can neither feel the power of the truth, nor taste its sweetness; the god of this world, having blinded your mind, has rendered you insensible to the one and the other. But so soon as Jesus makes himself known to you in the glory and beauty of his person, in the excellence and all-sufficiency of his mediation, and in the inexhaustible riches of his grace, old things will pass away from you and all things will become new. God, Christ, eternity, the soul, sin, holiness, the world, death, judgment, will all present themselves in a new aspect. The divine word will become sweet and pleasant, more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. "In thy light we shall see light." Psalm xxxvi. 9. A new life will be communicated to your soul. "This is life eternal, to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." John xvii. 3. Thus the storehouse of heaven opens upon you, and you may apply as much and as often as you will. When Christ is seen in his beauty, sanctification and every grace become yours. "We all with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same

image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Cor. iii. 18.

With reference to this matter, be exhorted to pray for the influences of the Holy Spirit. It is directly by the operation of this blessed agent, that Christ is made known to the soul in the manner of which we have just spoken; and our knowledge of this circumstance should lead to special supplications for the presence of the Spirit. To omit this is to neglect to put that honour upon the third person of the Trinity, to which as well from the part he acts in the economy of grace, as from his essential claims as God, he is so justly entitled. If therefore you would be savingly acquainted with Christ, entreat the presence and influence of the Spirit of Christ. All other blessings are connected, as was formerly mentioned, with this one. That justification which includes the forgiveness of sins, is expressly said to be by faith, and this faith is the work of the Spirit. That renovation of heart and character, of the necessity of which we so often read, is from beginning to end accomplished by the same blessed agent. Every Christian grace is by him implanted and preserved, and every duty is performed, every difficulty overcome, every temptation resisted, and all wisdom, holiness, and comfort received, through his divine and efficacious influence. And how often and how kindly, does God promise to send his Spirit! We have already alluded to the well-known argument of our Saviour, "If ye being evil, know how to give

good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him!" Many are the passages in the Old Testament as well as in the New, which hold out encouragement to plead the accomplishment of this most precious promise. "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes," Ezek. xxxvi. 27. "I will be as the dew unto Israel:"—"I will pour water on him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring." Isa. xliv. 3. That the Spirit is what is meant by the dew, the water, the floods, here spoken of, is abundantly obvious from the explanation given by the evangelist John of the living water, promised by our Lord:—"This he spake of the Spirit, which they that believe in him should receive." John vii. 39.

The connection between petition and the exercise of faith, deserves to be particularly noticed. We have said that it is our duty to pray for faith; we now observe that prayer cannot be acceptable unless it is presented in faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Heb. xi. 6. By faith, we understand a reliance on the promises which God as the Hearer of prayer makes to sinners through the Lord Jesus Christ. There are some who maintain that the prayer of faith implies an assurance that

what we ask shall be granted, and that when this assurance is not entertained, faith is wholly wanting. In this opinion we cannot concur. There may be faith in the goodness and power of God, and a firm reliance upon the faithfulness of his promises, whilst in regard to any particular blessing that we may ask, there may be an uncertainty on our minds whether it is consistent with his wisdom to grant it at the time, and in the manner that would agree with our wishes. A child may present a request to his father, in perfect confidence both in the wisdom and the affection of his parent, although he is by no means certain that his immediate wishes will be gratified. Yet there may be circumstances which are sufficient to warrant a lively hope, and in some cases an assurance, that the petition will be granted. If the blessing asked has been expressly promised; if the person in asking it feels himself in the very circumstance of those to whom the promise is made; if the heart is secretly, but irresistibly drawn out to rest on the truth and faithfulness of Jehovah in regard to the blessing desired, and if, moreover, there is a clear discovery made to the soul, of the excellence and glory of that Redeemer through whom all blessings are conveyed; if, in addition to this, there is a disposition to acquiesce in the will of God, and to seek that, above all things, the Divine glory may be promoted in the bestowment of what is asked: in these circumstances there is great reason to believe that the petition

will be granted. Nay, we must not deny that, in some cases, an assurance that God will hear his prayer, may be directly imparted by the divine Spirit to the mind of a believer. But we must take care to notice, that the hope of our prayers being accepted, is a very different thing from the assurance that all or every of our particular requests, will be answered.

It is however of very great importance that our prayers should be offered in such a manner as to be accompanied, on our part, with the humble hope that God does really regard them as prayers. One of the well-known resolutions of the famous Jonathan Edwards, was to the following effect:—“Resolved, never to count that a prayer, nor let that pass as a prayer, nor that as a petition of a prayer, which is so made, that I cannot hope that God will answer it; nor that as a confession which I cannot hope God will accept.” To pray with the secret consciousness that our petitions are so insincere, or so carelessly presented, that we cannot suppose the heart-searching God to regard them as petitions, is heaven-daring impiety; and to offer prayers so thoughtlessly as not to consider how God may regard them, is, to say the very least, a gross instance of wilful self-deception. On the other hand, to pray with the constant dread that God will not deign to listen to our requests, and with the painful apprehension that, let us do what we may, we are only adding to our guilt by every attempt to ap-

proach his throne, betrays a spirit of bondage which represses even those desires and affections that are truly good, and leaves the heart discouraged and unsatisfied. Let the attention be firmly fixed on the manifold assurances contained in the scriptures, that God is in very truth the Hearer of prayer, and will undoubtedly make himself known as such to all those who diligently seek him. Let the humble hope be cherished, that the prayers you now present, God, whose omniscient eye witnesses your desires, will surely accept, and that so far as what you ask is really good, He will grant your petitions. This hope, as far removed from a spirit of self-righteousness as it is from the spirit of bondage, will produce in you the deepest humility, whilst it fills the soul with peace, love, and joy. It is thus that prayer ceases to be a task, and becomes at once easy and pleasant to yourself, and acceptable in the sight of God. "All things whatsoever ye ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." Matt. xxi. 22.

Petitions ought to be made, with special reference to the peculiar circumstances of the petitioner, at the time when they are presented. One chief objection to forms of prayer is that, however excellent in themselves, they do not express the varied feelings and desires and experiences of the believer, at different times. In reply to this objection, it is often asked, are not our wants always the same! do we not daily require a repetition of the same blessings! There is, no doubt, a sense in

which we always stand in need of the same things, and it would be easy to mention a number of blessings, such as the pardon of sin, the sanctification of the heart, protection from temptation, and strength for the discharge of duty, which it becomes us daily to ask. But even in regard to these blessings, not only is there a constant variety in the aspect in which they present themselves to the mind as desirable, but there are daily new circumstances occurring, without reference to which, they cannot be asked in sincerity. If the pardon of sin is prayed for, we must mean the pardon of those sins which we have most lately committed; if sanctification is desired, it must be clearly understood as including deliverance from those sinful dispositions and habits, the operation of which has just been observed upon the temper or conduct; if protection is sought from temptation, it must be from those temptations especially which have most frequently overcome us, or to which, from our peculiar circumstances, we at present stand most exposed; and if grace is asked for the discharge of duty, we must have those duties in view to which we are at the time immediately called. The circumstances of every individual are daily undergoing some change; and it belongs to the privileges of the child of God, that he can make mention of all his circumstances to his heavenly Father. Besides, the Christian is habitually making progress in the divine life, and this of itself is inconsistent with absolute sameness

and uniformity in his devotional exercises. As the inexhaustible stores of the word of God are more and more unfolded, and he obtains a clearer perception of the truth and beauty of spiritual objects, his desires after perfect conformity to the lovely example of the Saviour become enlarged, and, in the same proportion, his feeling of constant dependence upon divine grace will be deepened, and new and varied views of his spiritual wants will daily present themselves to his notice. That growth in grace may be promoted in the believer, it is important that he should daily review his condition, examine his progress, and seek to learn more of the Saviour. Let him cherish the habit of living day by day near to God, looking to him for every thing he needs, and recognizing him in every event, and in every action. Let him daily ask, What specific errand have I this day to the throne of grace? What one blessing do I chiefly want? What is there suggested by the portion of scripture I have read in the closet, or in the family, or by the dispensations of Providence—prosperous or adverse—or by the present condition of the Church and of the world, or by the present aspect of the times, which I ought specially to bring before God this day in my petitions?

CHAPTER VII.

THANKSGIVING.

IT seems strange that thanksgiving should be considered as a part of prayer, a name which, strictly speaking, denotes the asking of gratuitous favours, or the presenting of petitions. It is, however, an exercise which, whether considered as a part of prayer, strictly so called, or a most important and indispensable accompaniment of prayer, cannot be overlooked by any one who professes to illustrate the subject of secret devotion. If we are to present petitions for the mercies we require, it must be our duty to return thanks for those mercies after they have been conferred. If the feeling of need, and the cry of want, are allowable in addressing the great Object of worship, the emotion of gratitude cannot be improper. If God condescends to listen to our complaints, and to answer our requests, he will surely accept of those expressions of praise and thanksgiving which his goodness is so well fitted to excite.

Indeed, thanksgiving is, in some respects, a more exalted exercise than the offering of petitions. Even between man and man, gratitude is a principle that is always highly esteemed. Many who are ready enough to request favours, are slow to acknowledge them

after they are received. Petition arises from a regard to our own interest immediately and directly; gratitude is more generous and unselfish, and implies a respect to the character and claims of our Benefactor. As a part of divine worship, thanksgiving directs attention chiefly to God, petition, chiefly to our own circumstances; thanksgiving is closely allied to love, petition is related to fear; thanksgiving belongs to angels, petition to man in his fallen state; thanksgiving will be continued in heaven, petition belongs exclusively to the worship of earth.

Many are the examples of thanksgiving presented to us in the scriptures. God has not only condescended to accept of the gratitude of his creatures, but has assured us of this in a way the most encouraging, and the most suitable to our weakness, by recording for us in his word the gratitude of his people in former ages, and the language in which their gratitude was expressed. "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Psalm. ciii. 1, 2. "Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare." Psalm lxxv. 1. "I will mention the loving-kindness of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his loving kind-

nesses." Isaiah lxiii. 7. The exercise exemplified in these and many other passages, may be regarded at once as a privilege and a duty. It is a privilege for a creature, and especially for a sinful creature, to have access to God in any way, and much more to approach him in a state of mind so peaceful and happy, as that which is produced by the feeling and the expression of gratitude. And seeing God has condescended to accept of the offering of thanksgiving even from poor unworthy sinners, through the all-prevailing merits of his Son, Jesus Christ; to refuse to present this offering must imply a disregard as well of moral obligation, as of Christian privilege. Hence the command, "Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the Most High." Psalm l. 14.

Allusion has already been made, see page 75, to the distinction between adoration, and thanksgiving. The claims which God has upon our adoration, arise from his own essential character and the glory of his perfections; his claims on our thanksgiving are founded on the relations in which he stands to us as Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer, and on the unbounded favours and mercies which in these relations He confers. Adoration has respect to all the divine attributes, thanksgiving is immediately and properly concerned only with the attribute of goodness, including, of course, love, mercy, and patience. We adore even the divine goodness, as a glorious and excellent perfection of the great Supreme; it is the

putting forth of that goodness in positive acts of kindness which excites to the expression of gratitude. Other attributes than that of benevolence, are indeed sometimes spoken of as awakening thanksgiving; for example, we find David saying, "Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness." Psalm xxx. 4. In such a case, however, the feelings expressed are plainly those of love and admiration, produced by contemplating, or as it is here expressed, by remembering, the divine holiness; and whatever degree of gratitude, properly so called, mingles with these feelings, must arise from the goodness displayed in those acts of God's administration by which his holiness is manifested.

As the book of Psalms abounds with the language of thanksgiving, it may be profitable to advert, in a few sentences, to some of the examples which are there recorded, together with the grounds of it which are there specified. The goodness of God as Creator, is celebrated in such passages as the following:— "I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm cxxxix. 14. "O Lord, our God, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! What is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour." Ps. viii. 1, 4, 5. His goodness in the ordinary events of providence is also frequently alluded to. "Thou visitest

the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn, when thou hast so provided for it." Ps. lxxv. 9. "He watereth the hills from his chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works. He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man; that he may bring forth food out of the earth. O Lord, how manifold are thy works, in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. These all wait upon thee, that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That which thou givest them they gather; thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good." Ps. civ. 13, 14, 24, 25, 27, 28. But the warmest expressions of gratitude, refer to spiritual, rather than temporal blessings. "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits; who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction: who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies." Psalm ciii. 1—4. As might be expected, we frequently find praise and thanksgiving offered after remarkable deliverances, whether from temporal or spiritual evils, especially when such deliverances have been granted in answer to prayer: "I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. Be-

cause he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live. The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord: O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful. Thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling." Psalm cxvi. 1—5, 8

In Psalm cvii. the varied trials of believers are represented by a succession of striking figures. At one time they are spoken of as wandering in the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty, their soul fainting within them; at another, as sitting in darkness, and in the shadow of death, bound with affliction and iron; at another, as afflicted because of their iniquities; and finally, as surrounded with the storms and the waves of a tempestuous ocean. In troubles thus numerous and diversified, there is only one source of deliverance; and accordingly each of the above mentioned representations concludes with the words, "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses." After which, there follows the equally often-repeated ascription of gratitude: "O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men." All God's dealings with his people, have one result: they lead to the exercise of praise and thanksgiving. The duties, the trials, the visitations of prosperity and

adversity, the hopes, the fears, the joys, the sorrows, the temptations, the conflicts, which belong to their earthly course, all end in the same way. Even in this world, sorrow gives way to joy, prayer to praise, the weeping of a wounded spirit to the tear of gratitude. "In every thing, give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." 1 Thess. v. 18. "Giving thanks always for all things, unto God and the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Eph. v. 20. "We glory in tribulation also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope." Rom. v. 3, 4.

We shall not attempt any enumeration of the particular blessings, for which we ought to be thankful. In this, as in other parts of prayer, the topics will multiply upon our observation, in proportion to the frequency with which they are considered. The man who, unaccustomed to the exercises of secret devotion, feels, in attempting to confess his sins before his Maker, as if he had scarcely any thing to confess, is likely, also, in attempting to use the language of thanksgiving, to feel as if he had but little for which to be grateful. Perhaps it is for this reason, that less attention is given by many to this part of devotion, than even to petition. Upon a certain occasion our Lord cleansed ten lepers at once, but only a single individual of the ten, and he a Samaritan, returned to give glory to God. Luke xvii. 17, 18. How often in the day of trouble, are petitions for mercy eagerly offer

ed by those who, when their affliction is removed, express no gratitude either by their lips or in their lives! The offering of praise and thanksgiving, ought regularly to form a distinct part of worship, as daily conducted in the family and in the closet. That this is so commonly omitted by many who attend punctually to the other parts of worship, is by no means a favourable symptom of the prevailing temperature of religion, even among serious persons. If the ridicule of the profane is usually most directed against those practices which are most decidedly indicative of heavenly-mindedness, it says much for the importance of the exercise in question, that "psalm-singing hypocrite" is a term of reproach so commonly in use.

The person who is sincerely anxious to obtain the spirit of prayer and to acquire truly devotional habits, and who, moreover, is determined to act upon the principle already alluded to, of uttering nothing which he does not feel, will speedily find the grounds of thanksgiving multiply around him. If he cannot at first thank God for the pardon of his sins, because he fears that his sins are still unforgiven, if he cannot offer gratitude for the renovation of his heart because he fears that his heart is still unrenewed, if he cannot express thankfulness for the hope of heaven, because that is a hope which he does not yet venture to cherish, if he cannot even celebrate the divine goodness and mercy as displayed in the mission and death of an incarnate Re-

deemer, because he feels himself unable to lay hold upon and realize this truth in such a manner as to fill his heart with praise and thanksgiving, let him think of something for which he can be grateful. Let not the plainness and simplicity with which we address such an individual, be offensive to any. Even supposing your sins unpardoned, your heart unrenewed, and yourself a stranger to faith in Christ, you have still many causes of thankfulness. Your situation is neither good nor safe, but it might have been unspeakably worse. You might have been long ago sent to the place of endless misery and despair; instead of which you have been spared, provided for, have received the offers of pardon and eternal life, and are now invited to approach the throne of grace to ask and receive all that is good for you here and hereafter. Have you indeed nothing for which to be thankful? Your gratitude is demanded by every thing short of the full execution of that sentence to which your sins have exposed you. If your sins are not pardoned, be thankful at least that there is such a thing as pardon; if your heart is unsanctified, it is a mercy for you that there is a fountain of grace from which it can be sanctified; if you cannot so discern Christ as to receive him and rejoice in him, it is matter of thankfulness that he is still held out to your notice, and that you are encouraged to pray that he may make himself known to you. Is it possible that you can look up to the Father of your spirit, the

Framer of your body, the Preserver of your life, and say that you cannot entertain towards him the feeling of gratitude? Surely this is impossible. You have received many mercies, common and special, ordinary and sometimes extraordinary, as your by-past history testifies,—which you have not forgotten, some of which you cannot forget if you would, and which you ought not to overlook in your secret devotions. Well, be thankful for the divine goodness to you so far as you have observed it, and cultivate the habit of observing it more carefully for the time to come. In proportion as you advance in the knowledge of your own sinfulness, will you see more of the patience and long-suffering with which you are treated. You will gradually discover that God has all along been dealing with you in kindness and mercy; and you will become astonished at the perversity of your own heart, which so long concealed his goodness from your observation. How great has been his kindness to you, in common with the human race at large, in sending his Son Christ Jesus to suffer and die that pardon might be offered to the chief of sinners! How much greater his goodness to you than to thousands, in casting your lot in a Christian land, a land of Bibles and Sabbaths and Sermons! With how many favours, temporal and spiritual, have you been blessed, from your childhood upwards! From how many evils and dangers have you been protected! And what return have you made to the Author of all

these mercies? Pray that the Spirit of grace may open your eyes to the fatherly treatment you have all your life experienced, and to your own conduct as an ungrateful and rebellious child. The subject is pleasing as well as profitable and instructive. As it is wise always to look at the bright rather than the dark side of events, as it makes the heart happy to love rather than to fret and contend; so it is not only an obvious and most important duty, but is in fact indispensable to happiness, to cherish, day by day, lively gratitude to the Father of mercies and God of all grace.

No circumstances, however humble or afflictive, can exempt any one from the duty and privilege of offering thanksgiving to God. Affliction, so far from leaving us nothing for which to be thankful, is very commonly the means of making us aware of the mercies we enjoy. It reminds us of the value of some blessing which we perhaps received without gratitude, but which is now removed. It shows the precarious nature of that tenure by which we possess all earthly good, and how completely we are at all times in the power of the great Disposer of events. It directs our attention to the mercy that is mingled with judgment, even in the bitterest cup that is put into our hands. It makes us think of the many blessings which are still continued with us. It leads our thoughts to those special consolations which Christianity affords, consolations arising from the precious truth that the severest sufferings are, to those who seek

their sanctified improvement, only blessings in disguise. Thus, true religion, like the philosopher's stone, turns every thing into gold; and the heart that has learned to love and to trust God in all circumstances, can never be wholly deprived of its song of praise and gratitude.

Although we have recommended that a person who feels himself unable to appreciate spiritual blessings, or to enter into those expressions of thanksgiving which they call forth from the experienced Christian, should begin with cherishing gratitude for those blessings of which he does feel the value, we would by no means have it understood that any one should content himself in this situation. Many entertain certain grateful emotions towards the God of nature, arising from the proofs of divine goodness with which they are every where surrounded, who yet overlook and disregard the greatest proof of that goodness which the world ever beheld. As it is incomparably better that a merely natural man should attempt to pray, than that he should neglect religious duties entirely; seeing the very attempt may, by convincing him of his inability to worship God aright, be the means of leading him to something better; so is it exceedingly desirable that any one, however deficient his estimate of spiritual blessings, and however little he may have attended to their value and importance, should be brought humbly to acknowledge such instances of the kindness of his Creator as he has actually ob-

served. But let such a person be aware that he has much, very much, to learn; and that it is his part to seek earnestly and perseveringly that God would so discover to his soul the riches of grace and the greatness of his love in the gift of his Son, as to cause his heart to overflow with adoring gratitude and praise. As sin is only seen in its vileness, when viewed in relation to the cross; as the mercies we need are only seen in their value and magnitude, when beheld in connection with that price by which they were purchased; so the blessings of salvation, infinitely rich and precious as they are, will never awaken genuine evangelical gratitude till Jesus, in and with whom they are all bestowed, is himself revealed to the soul. Even the common bounties of providence, however much they may occasionally awaken a sentimental feeling toward the Almighty Preserver of the universe, will never produce warm-hearted thankfulness till the affections have been quickened by receiving the testimony of God concerning his Son. If the greatest instance of divine goodness is disregarded, how can we feel aright towards those acts of kindness which are inferior and subordinate? No gratitude for any favour is placed on a proper foundation, unless it begins and ends with that feeling which prompted the apostle to exclaim, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." 2 Cor. ix. 15. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all,

how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Rom. viii. 32.

The frequency with which the very name of Christ is repeated, whenever the blessings of salvation are spoken of, is remarkable. From the manner in which these blessings are related to him, it was to have been expected that He should have been distinctly exhibited as the medium through which they are conveyed. Not only however is this truth clearly and frequently revealed, but the name of Christ is expressly mentioned much oftener than was necessary for this purpose, and in such a way as to prove both the delight which the inspired writers have in repeating it, and the importance of having it constantly brought under our notice. To how many passages in the writings of the apostle Paul might we refer, as containing examples of what we have now stated! When he gives thanks to God, it is usually expressly mentioned that it is God in the character of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom his thanks are offered; and not less emphatically is it stated, that through Christ those blessings are conferred which awaken his gratitude. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, in Christ." Eph. i. 3. It would be easy to quote numerous passages, showing as this does, that thanks are to be offered up for Christ, as the chief of all God's gifts,—through Christ, as the only way by which our gratitude can be accepted,—to God

in Christ, as the character in which we have access to him,—and by ourselves in the name of Christ, in virtue of that new covenant relation and vital union, which subsist between him and his people. As Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of the gospel, so is he the beginning and the end of love, gratitude, and every other gracious principle in the hearts of his people. Does the believer sing of pardon? One part of his song is in these words, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever, Amen.” Rev. i. 5, 6. Does he acknowledge that grace by which he has been enabled to resist temptation, to overcome difficulty, to persevere in the path of duty, to vanquish spiritual enemies? his acknowledgment is in such terms as the following, “Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ.” 2 Cor. ii. 14. Does he look forward to the final struggle, and anticipate with an overflowing heart its successful issue?—his gratitude finds utterance in the exclamation, “Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. xv. 57.

If we take the scriptures for our guide in the matter of thanksgiving, we shall find ourselves often directed to make grateful mention of God’s dealings with his church, both in Old and New Testament times. “O give thanks unto the Lord; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.

Remember his marvellous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth; O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen. He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations." Psalm cv. 1, 5, 6, 8. This sentiment pervades a large proportion of those sacred songs which were originally prepared for the Jews, but which are equally suitable for the gospel church; and is sometimes expressed in language glowing with rich imagery. "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt; thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it; and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars." Psalm lxxx. 8—10. And that the praise of all this is due to God, is an idea of which we are never suffered to lose sight. "For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them; but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them." Psalm xliv. 3. Viewed as a most important event in the history of God's dealings with the church, the incarnation of his Son at the fulness of time, must never be either forgotten or overlooked. When that wonderful event took place, it awakened the praise and gratitude even of the heavenly hosts, who gave expression to their feelings

in the exclamation, "Glory to God in the highest." The whole history of our Lord, whilst it contains much that is fitted to reprove and humble us, furnishes unceasing materials of gratitude. His instructions so pure and heavenly, his example so perfectly faultless, his motives and principles so noble and unselfish, his heart so warm, so tender, and faithful, his amazing condescension, his unparalleled death, his glorious resurrection from the grave and ascension to heaven, his revelation and promise of eternal life; these are topics which no degree of familiarity can prevent the person, who has been delivered from that spiritual blindness with which all are naturally affected, from constantly recurring to with fresh gratitude. And when we think of the encouragement arising not only from the perfection and all-sufficiency of his atonement, but also from the assurance that he is now acting the part of an Advocate with the Father in behalf of his people, we can be at no loss to understand how true Christians should be described as persons who "worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus." His government of the church and of the world, is also ground of praise and gratitude; for, however dark the prospect that may immediately present itself, and however discouraging the circumstances amid which our lot may be cast, we must never cease to be thankful that Jesus reigns. And we know that, when fully understood, the whole system of God's dealings with his church, from first

to last, shall produce one universal song of praise: "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of Saints." Rev. xv. 3.

As there are particular events in the history of the church which are ever to be remembered with gratitude, so there are events in the lives of individuals which ought never to be forgotten. It is the duty of every one to attend to the various dealings of Divine providence with himself, and to keep in careful remembrance those cases in which he has experienced deliverance from trouble, or the bestowment of good. It was said to the people of Israel of old, "Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness." From time to time the Christian is called to mark the goodness of God in visiting him in the season of distress, or in delivering him from some dreaded calamity, or in setting him free from spiritual fears and disquietudes, or in conferring upon him some unexpected blessing, or in some remarkable manner granting an answer to his prayers. Amid his frequent encounters with difficulty and danger, he is led at one period after another to erect his Ebenezer, and to say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped me." These successive instances of the divine goodness ought to be regularly reviewed, as grounds of thankfulness for the past, and of hope for the future. Thus, as the believer advances on his course, he will find himself more and more encompassed with

songs of deliverance, and even in the hour of darkness and affliction he will find comfort by saying with Asaph:—"I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High. I will remember the works of the Lord: surely I will remember thy doings of old. I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings." Psalm lxxvii. 10—12.

As it is proper in offering our daily petitions, to have an eye to certain blessings which we more immediately need; so in offering those thanksgivings which ought regularly to form part of our devotions, we should take care to fix our minds on those circumstances which at present specially demand our gratitude. This will tend to give life and energy to our worship, and will prepare us to enter into the meaning of those acknowledgments which we utter. If at any time the heart is cold or lukewarm in confessing sin, or in asking grace to supply the wants of the day, it may perhaps be revived by the attempt to offer gratitude for the mercies that have been received. Not only is this exercise fitted in its very nature to quicken the attention, and enliven the feelings, but it naturally suggests materials both of confession and petition. Thus, even in our worst frames, when we can neither bewail our sins nor feel sensible of our wants, let us think of that goodness to which we have been already so deeply indebted. If some of those special grounds of thanksgiving which we ought never to forget, fail to awaken the soul to lively gratitude, let us think of

others. As a person who is under the teaching of the Spirit may expect to have continually new grounds of thankfulness, both from the increasing discoveries which are made to his soul of the divine character and operations as revealed in the scriptures, and from his daily experience of the divine goodness to himself, he will act wisely in preserving some memorial of those things for which, from day to day, he feels that his gratitude is due. Nor ought any one to rest satisfied till he is enabled, in some measure at least, to entertain the sentiment of the Psalmist, when he says, "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will give praise to my God while I have my being." Psalm civ. 33.

CHAPTER VIII.

SELF-DEDICATION.

THAT self-dedication is a duty devolving on every professing christian, and actually practised by every real christian, is a truth which no one holding evangelical sentiments will deny. Many of the promises of the gospel are expressed in the form of an offer on the part of God, to enter into a covenant alliance with the returning sinner: "Incline your ear and come unto me, hear and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." Isaiah lv. 3. In making this proposal, the great Jehovah offers to be a Friend, a Father, a God, to those by whom it is accepted; whilst they in closing with the offer, engage to be his servants, his children, his people. By thus entering into covenant with God, they acknowledge that they are no longer their own property, that their own will is no longer to be the rule of their actions, that their own happiness is no longer to be the chief object of their desires and labours, that their persons, their talents, their time, their influence, their worldly possessions,—all they are and all they have,—are the Lord's. The apostle Paul states one of the objects for which Christ died to be "that they which live should not henceforth

live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again." 2 Cor. v. 15. The same important truth is frequently, and in various forms, brought under our notice. It is not a matter to be found merely in a few indirect allusions; on the contrary, it is a topic which is very frequently brought under our notice, and that in the plainest and clearest statements, and upon which the sacred writers seem to have pleasure in dwelling. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20. "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether therefore we live, or die, we are the Lord's." Rom. xiv. 7, 8.

We might, therefore, expect to find christians described in the beginning of their religious course, as giving themselves to God, or entering into covenant with him; and such, in fact, is the manner in which they are described. In speaking of the churches of Macedonia, Paul says, "they first gave their own selves to the Lord." 2 Cor. viii. 5. This, indeed, is the first duty of the sinner upon hearing the gospel offer. He must first give himself to the Lord, before any religious service of his can be accepted. It is also the first duty of the christian in whatever circumstances he is placed. Has he services to perform, afflictions to bear, or difficulties to overcome? Let him first give himself to the Lord,

as the best preparation for whatever is before him. Does he wait on the ordinances and look for a blessing on them? Does he wish by giving, like the Macedonians, to the poor, or contributing to the maintenance of the gospel at home or abroad, to present an offering to God of his worldly substance? His intentions are good; by all means let him be encouraged to carry them into effect, but he must begin by first giving his own self to the Lord.

Although the propriety of self-dedication in general will not be disputed among serious persons, there are many who may not be prepared to hear that it ought regularly to form a part of their secret devotions. They understand that vows are undertaken in baptism, and that these vows are renewed every time they approach the Lord's table; they are not unwilling to admit that, on some extraordinary occasions, it is fitting they should renew their covenant with God in secret;—but that this should be done daily, or even frequently, is more than they have been accustomed to suppose. It might tend to give more correct views of this subject, were professing christians generally to reflect, that the covenant relation between God and his people is recognized in every act of worship, whether public or private. This relation is in fact recognized by God himself, in all the invitations and promises of the gospel. When sinners are addressed, they are regarded as in a state of alienation and enmity, in conse-

quence of which all friendly intercourse between them and their Maker has been broken off; but they are earnestly invited to come and reason with him, and for their encouragement it is said to them, "Come out, and be ye separate, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." 2 Cor. vi. 17, 18. Unless his approaches to God are intended to imply acceptance of this invitation, the sinner only increases his guilt by professing to offer divine worship; for, as he neither relies on the promises nor closes with the overtures of the gospel, he comes not in that way by which alone he can be accepted. To draw near to God, therefore, in the only acceptable way, implies the entering into covenant with him. If it be objected that, although the sinner in first returning to God, enters into covenant, it is otherwise with persons who are already returned, and have already surrendered themselves to his service; we answer that every fresh application to the throne of grace, implies a renewal of their covenant engagement. In coming to their heavenly Father for whatever blessing, they necessarily recognize that covenant relation by which he has become their father, and they have become entitled to the privileges of his children. And as the privileges of this relationship cannot be separated from its duties, every action by which it is recognized implies

a renewed surrender of themselves to his service.

This will appear still more clearly if we attend a little to the various parts of prayer, as bearing upon the subject of self-dedication. Is adoration offered to God? It is in his covenant character alone, that he can be regarded by the sinner who acceptably presents it. Moreover, in adoring the divine perfections, the worshipper acknowledges the absolute right which God possesses to the love, worship, and obedience of all his rational offspring, and by this very acknowledgment he virtually consecrates himself to the service of his Maker. Every ascription of praise and glory to the great Jehovah, is an admission that we are bound, whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, to do all to his glory. Is sin confessed in the presence of the Searcher of hearts? The confession, if it means any thing, includes at once an acknowledgment of our obligation to do not our own will, but the will of God, an expression of sorrow for having acted inconsistently with this obligation, and a promise of amendment for the future. Are blessings asked by petition to the Hearer of prayer? These blessings are conveyed only through Christ; and therefore the very exercise of asking them supposes the acceptance of him as our only Saviour, and an acquiescence in all the terms of the gospel, including an entire surrender of our hearts and lives to his service. To the same conclusion are we conducted, by

adverting to the nature of those blessings which the true christian is accustomed to ask. We cannot pray for pardon, without coming under an obligation to refrain from a repetition of the offence ; we cannot ask holiness in sincerity, without an honest and steadfast resolution to avoid all unholiness in thought, word, and deed ; we cannot ask protection from temptation without engaging, implicitly if not in express words, that we shall carefully avoid every approach to temptation, and every appearance of evil ; we cannot entreat strength for the performance of duty, without promising that in the enjoyment of that strength our duty shall be performed ; in one word, we cannot pray for any blessing without virtually covenanting to use all the means that may be required for obtaining that blessing. Do we pray for faith, or love, or humility ? These graces cannot have any value in our eyes, unless it is our desire to live not to ourselves but to God, and unless we are prepared to enter into the feelings of the apostle when he says, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live ; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me : and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Gal. ii. 20. The same remarks will apply to the exercise of thanksgiving. Does the Christian acknowledge with gratitude the mercies which he daily receives, his temporal comforts, his spiritual privileges, his blessed hopes ? The acknowledgment of

God's goodness is the acknowledgment of his own obligations. How can he be thankful for blessings received, without resolving to manifest his gratitude by his conduct? So close is the connection between the feeling of thankfulness and the exercise of covenanting, that we find the injunction given, "Offer unto God thanksgiving, and pay thy vows unto the Most High." Psalm l. 14.

It thus appears that every act of religious worship implies the principle of self-dedication—that every prayer, every confession, every song of praise and thanksgiving, is the sign and pledge of solemn covenant engagement. Is any one afraid of the idea of daily renewing his covenant with God, on the ground that the guilt of his daily transgressions might thereby be increased? The objection is not a solid one, and if really acted on, should beget a suspicion in the bosom by which it is entertained, that there is still a lurking attachment to sin, and a secret unwillingness to guard against its approaches. Besides, this objection, if good for any thing, might, with equal propriety, be urged against every kind of religious exercise whatever. Sins committed after devotional exercises have been engaged in, are unquestionably all the more aggravated by the profession which these exercises exhibit; but to argue that on this account it would be safer to abandon devotion entirely, is to say, that because a remedy for some deadly evil may, by being misapplied and perverted, become productive

of injury, it should therefore be disregarded, however excellent and suitable in itself. But as no argument of this kind will be employed against the duties of religion, except by those who aim to overturn the foundations of religion itself—a class of persons whom we do not now address—it may be sufficient for our present purpose to show, that those who refrain from daily repeating the dedication of themselves to the Lord from the fear of aggravating their daily offences, proceed upon a principle from the full application of which they would themselves shrink with alarm. Far safer and more consistent with his duty, is it for the christian to make the inconsistency between personal covenanting and living in sin, the basis of an argument which will conduct him to the opposite conclusion. Let him daily give himself anew to the Lord, in order, among other reasons, that he may be reminded of his obligation to greater watchfulness against sin.

A similar reply may be made to another objection to frequent self-dedication, namely, that it is calculated to encourage a legal spirit. Like every other duty, it may be substituted in the place of Christ, instead of being used as a means of leading us to Christ; and may be employed to work out a righteousness of our own, instead of that righteousness of God which is made over to us when we truly enter into covenant with him. But like the former objection, this, if it proves any thing, proves too much. It is not so much an argu-

ment against daily covenanting as against covenanting itself; and it is an argument not against covenanting merely, but against every kind of religious duty; for all devotional exercises, and even external acts of obedience, are liable to the same abuse. Although, however, without weight as an objection, it suggests to us an important practical hint as to the manner in which this duty should be performed. In giving ourselves to the Lord, we first, accept of Him as our covenant God and Father, through Christ Jesus; secondly, we receive Christ with his perfect righteousness to justify us, and all the blessings of his salvation to satisfy our every want: thirdly, we declare our reliance on the teaching, the illumination, the sanctification, the strength, the grace, of the Holy Spirit, to whose blessed agency we look for the implanting and preserving in our souls of every holy desire and purpose; fourthly, we declare ourselves the property of God, and acknowledge his right to do with us, and to require of us, what he pleases, to give us health or sickness, prosperity or adversity, to make our days on earth longer or shorter, and to place us in stations of prominence or obscurity, as may seem good to himself; fifthly, we promise and engage to do or to suffer whatever He may require, to take his law for the rule of our actions, to resist sin and all its temptations, to perform with fidelity and constancy the duties of those stations in which we are placed, to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour by

walking in all his commandments and ordinances blamelessly, and all this in the strength of that rich and plenteous grace which, on his part of the covenant, God engages to bestow.

Now, there are various cases in which a legal spirit connects itself with the exercise of covenanting. First, when the exercise consists merely of a promise to perform certain duties. In this case the most important part of the work is left undone. The covenant transaction which we have just described, includes the embracing of Christ, and the receiving through him of strength to perform duty, as well as an engagement that the duty shall be performed. The error here, therefore, lies in covenanting being made simply a work of promising, instead of being at the same time a work of receiving. Secondly, as an evangelical spirit opens the heart, whilst a legal spirit is narrow and niggardly, the latter principle may be detected in its leading the individual to engage, and even to practise, great exactness in certain duties or observances, whilst others of equal or greater importance are overlooked. That covenanting which is consistent with evangelical sentiments, embraces an engagement to perform all duty and to avoid all sin, so far as they are known; and this engagement has special reference to those duties which are most important, or which are most in danger of being neglected, and to those sins which are most aggravated, or to which the temptation is

most powerful. Thirdly, a legal spirit leads the mind to rest in the covenant transaction, as in itself good and meritorious, and therefore acceptable to God; whereas, this exercise, if properly engaged in, not only includes the acknowledgment that we are guilty, hell-deserving sinners, and that our only hope of safety lies in the riches of free grace; but it distinctly proceeds upon the supposition, that we can truly and honestly give ourselves to God, and promise to serve him, only in so far as we are enabled by his Spirit so to do. Fourthly, the advantage of personal covenanting may also be defeated by the same legal spirit leading us to trust, if not in the inherent merit of the transaction, at least in the excellence and acceptableness of those duties which are engaged to be performed. If, however, there is a real surrender of the heart to God, there will also be a very deep feeling of the utter worthlessness of our performances as well as our promises, and of our absolute dependence upon God for that strength which is required by the one as well as by the other.

In these and similar ways, may that spirit be discovered, the danger of encouraging which, has been considered an objection to the exercise we wish to recommend. And now we may be permitted to add, that even in those cases where the attempt to dedicate one's self to God is afterwards discovered to have been made in his own strength, and consequently in a manner neither properly acceptable to God nor calculated to yield direct

benefit to himself; this very attempt may, indirectly, be productive of advantage. It is easy to conceive of an individual who has some sincere and honest desire after a truly religious life, but who has not yet learned the deceitfulness of his own heart, nor his absolute need of divine grace,—as well for the daily regulation of his thoughts and temper, and the right performance of every religious exercise and moral duty,—as for the justification of his person and the general renovation of his character. Such a person having heard that self-dedication is a duty, resolves to give himself in covenant to God. He accordingly engages in a transaction of this nature, and in solemn prayer makes a surrender of himself to the Lord, promising that in all time coming he will consider himself as no longer his own, and that he will take the divine law as the rule of his thoughts, desires, purposes, and actions. This exercise produces by its solemnity a deep impression upon his mind at the time; and for a longer or shorter period he is watchful over himself, and endeavours to guard on all sides against temptations to sin. In the course of a few days or weeks, however, he begins to feel the restraint irksome; the pleasures of sin appear increasingly inviting, and, the fervour of his devotion having worn off, spiritual objects lose their charms, and religious exercises become uninteresting and repulsive. His corrupt propensities and habits return with all their former power, the temptations which formerly led him astray resume

their ascendancy, his resolutions and vows are forgotten, and his goodness disappears like the morning cloud and the early dew. All this seems very disastrous. He is as far as ever from being truly devoted to God, and to all his other offences he has now added the guilt of covenant-breaking. There is, however, one advantage which may indirectly result from all these evils; and happy will it be for an individual in the circumstances we have described, should he be directed to seek and to find it. He has been taught how easy it is for a person to deceive himself, by believing that he has given his heart to God, when in reality he has only been practising an act of self-righteousness; he has been shown the strength of his sinful propensities, and the extreme feebleness of his good resolutions; he has provided himself with a most convincing proof of the worthlessness of all human promises and performances, as a means of satisfying the demands of God's law and justice; and he has been taught a most salutary lesson as to the indispensable necessity of divine grace, in all we do and in all we purpose. In the exercise of that contrition, self-abasement, and simple-hearted reliance upon the strength and teaching of the Holy Spirit, which those lessons, if deeply pondered, are fitted to produce, let him again approach the throne of grace; and once more, as a returning prodigal, let him offer himself to that God who delighteth to pardon, and who is still saying to him, "Come, now, and let us reason together, though your sins

be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." One great and never-failing source of comfort remains to him; he is still invited to come as a sinner to ask and receive. His disappointment has arisen from his inability to change his own heart, which he had vainly imagined that his attempts at self-dedication would enable him to do. This is God's work, and in nothing are we more encouraged to approach the throne of grace than with the daily and constant prayer that he would give us hearts devoted to his service.

It was the practice of the excellent Dr. Doddridge, to make the renovation of his covenant with God a part of his regular devotions every morning. When the manifold labours of this excellent minister of Christ are considered, it will appear that want of time can never be pled as a satisfactory apology for omitting this or any other religious exercise; indeed it cannot be questioned that one reason why he accomplished so much, and seemed from day to day scarcely ever to lose a moment of time, is to be found in the circumstance we have now mentioned. It cannot be denied that where the heart is most devoted to God, there will be the most activity in all that is good; and when we consider how much time is wasted in idleness, or at best only half employed, even by serious persons, it cannot be doubted that the advantage arising from more entire devotedness on the part of professing Christians generally, would be unspeakably great. In the absence of those

motives to activity which arise from the love of wealth, of power, or of distinction, christians are in constant danger of becoming slothful and indolent, or of giving way to difficulties and discouragements, unless they are continually supplied with energy from the fountain of life. And certainly one important means of obtaining this supply, consists in daily giving ourselves anew to the Lord. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Rom. xii. 1.

The importance of daily renewing his covenant with God on the part of the christian, might be shown on grounds very similar to those on which the necessity of daily prayer can be demonstrated. As it is not enough that we on one occasion pray to God, but must approach him in prayer daily; so it is not enough that on one, or a few occasions, we give ourselves to him in covenant. Faith, love, penitence, are not principles which are to be entertained once and afterwards forgotten; they must have an abiding place in the heart, and from day to day must be called in to exercise. Such is the appointment of God, who knows infinitely better than we, how it is most for our own advantage and for his glory, to train us for a better state of being. The fountain of grace is provided, not in us, but in Jesus our covenant head; and all that we are promised is a daily supply, suited to our daily wants. It is not enough that the heart

be once given to God; when this has really been done it is a great attainment; but it must again and again be surrendered in renewed acts of self-dedication, in order to the maintenance of any thing like fidelity and steadfastness in his service. A daily recognition of our relationship to Christ, is full of comfort and encouragement, and is at the same time invaluable as a means of sanctification. How precious the privilege of being able in all difficulties and dangers, to speak of the great Jehovah in the language of Paul,—“God, whose I am, and whom I serve!” Acts xxvii. 23. How powerful the argument, in applying for deliverance from evil of whatever kind, employed by the psalmist,—“I am thine, save me.” Psa. cxix. 94.

Should the eye of any one pass over these pages, who has never yet truly given himself to God, let us in the conclusion of this chapter address a few words to such an individual. God requires your heart, and it is not more your duty than your interest to comply with this command. The great God of heaven and earth is offering to enter into covenant with you; he offers to preserve, protect, provide for you, save you from all evil, and confer upon you everlasting joy in the world to come. Will you not accept of the offer? Have you indeed made up your mind, that the body is more valuable than the soul, that things temporal are more considerable than things eternal, that the service of Satan is safer and more pleasant than the service of

God? If you have not decided on this, then choose this day whom you will serve. Let not your heart fly off from the question, and leave it undetermined. It is of infinite and everlasting importance, and demands immediate attention. Oh, be persuaded to come unto Christ, to embark with him on the voyage of life, to adventure your safety for time and eternity into his hands. Are you content to steer your course alone and unprotected, to continue at a distance from God, and from peace, and from the hope of heaven? Cast yourself upon Christ for righteousness to deliver you from wrath, for wisdom to rescue you from fatal ignorance or error, for sanctification to renew your affections and inclinations, for redemption to save you from hell and the grave. Yield yourself to the Lord, make a full surrender of all you have,—your time, your health, your talents, your labours, your enjoyments, your influence, your hopes. If God inclines your heart to do this in reality, then indeed “the lines have fallen unto you in pleasant places, and you have a goodly heritage.” Your path, like the shining light, shall become brighter and brighter; you shall become increasingly a blessing to the church of God, and to all that are around you. Having entered the service of the Lord Jesus, it may be said that “of the increase of his government and peace [in your heart] there shall be no end.” Isa. ix. 7. As the property of God who takes care of his own, you shall be safe from fear of evil; all your wants shall

be supplied; your portion is boundless and everlasting. "All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." 1 Cor. iii. 21—23.

CHAPTER IX.

INTERCESSION.

IT has been already remarked that the institutions of divine worship are admirably adapted to the nature of man, who, whilst he is a social being and dependent on his fellows for much of his improvement and happiness, is at the same time possessed of certain powers which for their development require him to cultivate retirement. To this observation it may now be added that the influence of those around us, of our friends, relatives, and associates, operates not only when they are present, or when there is any direct interchange of sentiment and feeling, but even when they are absent, and when all intercourse with them is suspended. Every one knows by experience, that the thoughts and feelings of the heart are ever inclined to follow, in absence, those by whom they have been awakened; and that impressions received, whether pleasant or painful, whether profitable or unprofitable, and whether made upon the understanding, the imagination, or the affections, remain long after separation. To this important feature of the social principle in man, there is also a wise adaptation in the exercises of devotion, in which we are permitted to hold communion even with the ab-

sent. There is no affection really good which can be entertained towards our fellow-creatures, but may find expression in the exercises of secret prayer. Thanksgiving as well as petition in behalf of his fellow Christians, whether he had seen their face in the flesh, or had only heard of them through his brethren in the ministry, seems to have formed part of the daily employment of the apostle of the gentiles. Well would it be for professing Christians generally, if the impression left on their minds by mutual intercourse, or by correspondence, or by even hearing of one another,—were such as that each could with truth say to his brethren, as Paul said to the Philippians, “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.” Phil. i. 3.

It is scarcely necessary to explain that by intercession, the part of secret devotion which we now proceed to consider, is meant prayer in behalf of others. It would have been strange indeed had this formed no part of the duties of the closet. The affections arising out of the natural relationships of human life, prompt us to cherish wishes for the welfare of those who are dear to us; and why should not these wishes find expression in the language of prayer? Moreover, we are commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves, that is, we are to desire his well-being, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, as we desire our own; and as no proper regard to our personal welfare can be entertained unless it prompts us to pray for ourselves, so it is

obvious that we can have no proper regard to our neighbour unless we are prompted to offer intercessions in his behalf. Indeed, the thoughtless manner in which persons who have no sense of religion take the name of God in vain, whilst they use the words of prayer for a blessing on the objects of their affection; and even the blasphemous imprecations of the profane swearer against any one who happens to be the object of his hasty resentment, might be referred to as showing the importance of the duty of which we speak, and as putting to shame many who profess to live in the fear of God. The irreverent blessings of the irreligious, and the profane cursings of the openly wicked, alike recognize the truth that God is the Hearer of prayer addressed to him in behalf of others; and that we are encouraged and even required, to give utterance in the language of intercession, to all the affectionate emotions which our fellow-creatures may lawfully awaken.

There is no ground for supposing that the duty of remembering others in our prayers is superseded, or its obligation in any degree lessened, by the fact that Christ is the great Intercessor who pleads the cause of his people with God. Very different, indeed, is his intercession from ours. He, a divine person, equal with the Father, the appointed Mediator between God and man, having by his death made perfect satisfaction for the sins of his people, possesses a rightful claim to be heard

in the court of heaven; and, founding his plea on the covenant of redemption and his own complete fulfilment of its stipulations, can appeal to the law and justice of the supreme Ruler in behalf of the ransomed. We, sinful worms of the dust, possessing no right to approach the great Jehovah except that which arises from his own most gracious permission, and having nothing to plead but rich and boundless mercy flowing through an atonement not of our providing, can point to nothing in ourselves, or in those for whom we intercede, but the deepest unworthiness. The intercession of Christ is perfect, powerful, uninterrupted, and all-prevailing; our intercessions are exceedingly weak and imperfect, often attended with much unbelief, and liable to be influenced by the mistakes and foolish partialities of our fallen nature. But, as the intercession of Christ does not supersede the necessity of praying for ourselves, so neither does it discharge us from the obligation to pray for others. Prayer, and all other means of grace, are adapted in infinite wisdom to serve the most important ends; and the daily and constant practice of bringing before the throne of grace, the circumstances and wants of our fellow-creatures, whether saints or sinners, friends or enemies, ministers of the gospel or private Christians, is in many ways fraught with the richest advantage both to us and them.

Nor let it be supposed that the duty of which we speak, devolves exclusively on

ministers of the gospel or office-bearers of the church. Those who minister in holy things are assuredly required by the very nature of their office, to abound in prayer in behalf of those among whom they labour, and of the church at large. This is not more their duty than their privilege; and the epistles of Paul show how much it was practised by that eminent servant of Christ. "God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing, I make mention of you always in my prayers." Rom. i. 9. The apostle seems to have considered it as a distinct and very important part of his work, to give thanks and offer petitions in behalf of his fellow-christians, and even to make mention of them one by one in his prayers. But he was, at the same time, far from supposing that this exercise of intercession was the peculiar province of the apostles, or even of the ordinary rulers and ministers of the house of God. Far from this, he again and again requests an interest in the supplications of all the members of the church, and counted upon the efficacy of their prayers as influencing the future course of his own labours. "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; that I may be delivered from them which do not believe in Judea: and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints." Rom. xv. 30, 31. And again, "I trust

through your prayers I shall be given unto you." Philem. 22. The doctrine of the peculiar merit and efficacy of the prayers of the clergy, has been a most fruitful source of error and corruption in the church of Rome. How little countenance this doctrine receives in scripture, is obvious from the passages just quoted, and many others of similar import,—in which a minister of Christ, although invested with the honour of an inspired writer and with the authority of an apostle, entreats the prayers of the humblest private christian. The exercise of which we speak, is at once the duty and the privilege of all.

For whom are our intercessions to be offered? This question is natural, and it is not difficult to answer; the difficulty here consists in condensing within the necessary limits, what is proper to be advanced. In general, we are to pray for all men,—high and low, rich and poor, rulers and ruled, friends and enemies, countrymen and strangers, Christians, Jews, Mahomedans, Pagans,—the whole family of man. All are our brethren, partakers of the same nature, descended from the same parents, having the same blood in their veins, standing in need of the same salvation, and equally the subjects of God's moral government here, and of a righteous judgment hereafter. In all that is most important, the whole race of mankind stands upon a level. The gospel, setting at nought the artificial and temporary distinctions of rank and station, proceeds on the principle of man's immortality,

deals with him as a sinner, provides deliverance from the plague of the heart, offers true and solid enjoyment, and presents to the understanding the simple but all-important statements of eternal truth. Adapted alike to all in its offers, promises, and provisions, it suffers us not to regard with indifference any one partaking of our common nature. "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men." 1 Tim. ii. 1.

But there are some who have special claims upon our remembrance at the throne of grace. That we are permitted to make particular mention of earthly relatives, is obvious from the approved prayer of Abraham in behalf of his son Ishmael, even although he was not the child of promise; "O that Ishmael might live before thee." Gen. xvii. 18. That this prayer was heard, and answered in the bestowal of spiritual blessings upon Ishmael himself, as well as in the conferring of energy and courage upon his posterity, is probable, not only from the distinct promise made in reply, "As for Ishmael I have heard thee;" but also from the respectful mention that is made of Ishmael on the occasion of his father's death, and likewise from the manner in which his own death is mentioned in scripture. Ishmael took part with Isaac in paying the last tribute to the remains of their venerable sire; and afterwards of himself it is said, that he died and "was gathered unto his people." an expression which gives reason to hope that he was an heir of

that heavenly inheritance, to which his father by faith looked forward. But there are other ties besides earthly relationship, by which our intercessions are to be directed. The church of God, whether understood as consisting of the professors of religion at large, or embracing only those who are true believers, must never be forgotten. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee." Psalm cxxii. 6—8. The sentiments here expressed by the psalmist were not merely Jewish feelings, or awakened only by a regard to the literal Jerusalem. The spiritual Zion, the Jerusalem which is from above, the church of the living God, the mystical body of Christ, is that which in every age has endeared itself to the believing heart. The same principle which led the Old Testament saints to say, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy," Psalm cxxxvii. 5, 6, prompted the apostle John, in other circumstances, to declare, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren," 1 John iii. 14, and led the apostle Paul to remember without ceasing in his prayers, all those with whose faith in the Lord Jesus and love to the saints he had become acquainted.

A special interest may be expected to be felt in that portion of the visible church with which we are more immediately connected, and in those Christians among whom our lot is cast, and with whom we have direct opportunities of holding communion. Among such, there may be those from whom we have received spiritual profit, and others for whose benefit we have laboured, and whose progress in divine things we have carefully watched. These and other circumstances endlessly diversified, render it unavoidable that, even among those who are genuine Christians and equally dear to the Saviour, there should be some who have more powerful claims than others, upon our affectionate remembrance at the throne of grace.

The relation subsisting between a pastor and his flock, is not properly regarded unless it is felt, both by him and them, as laying the foundation of mutual, earnest, and daily intercessions. Prayer for his people can never be neglected by the minister, without serious injury to himself as well as to them. His private studies, his public labours, all his attempts to serve God in the gospel of his Son, must be accompanied by prayer. In the choice of subjects, in the mode of handling them, in conducting every part of public worship, in administering the word and sacraments, in catechizing, in teaching from house to house, and in tendering censure or encouragement as circumstances may require, he stands in constant need of direction and strength from on high,

and these he must expect in answer to unremitting supplication. Nor is it enough that he ask a blessing upon his labours; the case of those among whom he labours, collectively and individually, must be thought of and remembered, and made the subject of special intercession. It will be the part of wisdom when offering prayer in their behalf, to allow the families and individuals of his charge, to pass before his mind, with their various circumstances and temptations, so far as he is acquainted with them. The young, the aged, the backsliding, the self-righteous, the afflicted, must severally be remembered. And the advantage of this will be felt, not only in those blessings which may be directly expected in answer to prayer; but also in the effect produced by such an exercise upon his own feelings and studies. The minister who so acts, is thereby in a great measure protected from the danger of either neglecting his pastoral duties, or of performing them in a cold, inefficient, and aimless manner. Such frequent and affectionate reference in secret to the particular circumstances of his people, will insensibly guide him to what is most for their benefit in the selection of subjects for the pulpit, and in the general strain and tendency of all his ministrations, public and private.

It is delightful to think of the endlessly diversified advantages, that result from the exercise among Christians of mutual intercession at the throne of grace. If the prayers which a minister offers in behalf of his people, are

attended with blessings both to him and them; the same thing may be said of the prayers of the Christian people in behalf of their ministers. The apostle of whom we have already spoken, was accustomed to say, "Brethren, pray for us;" and much more, we may well suppose, do the ordinary teachers of Christianity stand in need of that favour which even an inspired apostle felt it necessary to ask. This eminent and highly-honoured man was sometimes led to dispense with the assistance of certain churches, in regard to the supply of his temporal wants; but he never could afford to dispense with their prayers. The ministry itself is a blessing which is granted in answer to prayer. "I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." Jer. iii. 15. And seeing it is God who alone giveth the increase, the members of the church must not be contented with merely enjoying the ordinances, but must look unceasingly for the accompanying blessing. When the people pray for their minister, his power of doing them good is greatly increased, their own affection towards him is strengthened, brotherly love is promoted, and what is best of all, the presence of Christ is likely to be enjoyed in the ordinances. The minister of a prayerful people, will receive grace and strength for the discharge of his duties in answer to their prayers; the very consciousness that his people are daily and affectionately remembering him at the throne of grace, will give life and

energy to his labours, both in the study and the pulpit; whilst by the exercise in question, the people are prepared to unite with him in the devotions of the sanctuary, and to listen with attention to all his instructions.

But the intercessions of Christians must, at the same time, take a wider range. The promotion of the glory of God upon earth, the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, the conversion of the Jews, the overthrow of anti-christ, the evangelization of the heathen, the revival of true godliness at home and abroad, are objects in which all will take an interest in proportion as they really believe and value the gospel. "As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord." Num. xiv. 21. "His name shall endure for ever; his name shall be continued as long as the sun; and men shall be blessed in him; all nations shall call him blessed." Psa. lxxii. 17. The promises of the divine word, are to be converted by us into prayers; as the prayers which it records are to be regarded in the light of promises. It has pleased God to confer the greatest honour upon the prayers of his people, by intimating that all the blessings which he has in store for our race in the coming ages of the world, shall be conferred in answer to their requests. "And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste, and desolate, and ruined cities, are become fenced, and are inhabited. Then the heathen, that are round about you, shall know that I the

Lord build the ruined places, and plant that which was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it. Thus saith the Lord God, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." Ezek. xxxvi. 35, 36, 37.

The connection between intercession for others and petition for ourselves, is much more intimate than might be at first imagined. The man who does not feel his own spiritual wants, is not likely to care for the spiritual wants even of those whom he loves; and much less is he capable of having any proper regard to the kingdom of Christ, or the conversion of the world. On the other hand, the person who has been taught the truth, and certainty, and infinite importance of divine and eternal realities, and the surpassing preciousness of the gospel, in relation to his own personal interests, will be constrained to contemplate the same all-momentous truths in relation to those around him. Indeed, the same individual will feel that, in proportion as his prayers in his own behalf are frequent and fervent, such also are his intercessions in behalf of others; and that when he falls into comparative carelessness in regard to his own best interests, he becomes proportionally indifferent to the spiritual welfare of his friends. Nor is this all: the exercise of praying for his fellow-men, is uniformly found by the Christian to have the happiest influence upon his own heart. It is directly calculated to promote the purest and warmest benevolence, a

principle which secures the happiness of the bosom by which it is entertained. It tends to keep before his mind, the spiritual blessings which are needed by himself as well as by his friends, and the sufficiency of Christ for the supply of all his wants; and thus multiplying his errands to the throne of grace, he is more and more made to feel how good it is to draw near to God. Moreover, the person who daily and constantly presents intercessions for others, will find it necessary to pray for himself for the sake of those others in whose behalf he intercedes. The parent who sincerely desires the salvation of his child, must not only pray for his child, but for himself also, that he may have grace to discharge his duties as a parent. The minister who remembers his people in his approaches to God, is not remembering them aright unless he is led to pour out his heart for strength and fidelity to himself, in ministering among them. The people, on the other hand, are not interceding aright for their minister, unless they, at the same time, make it their request that they, on their part, may be enabled so to act as to strengthen his hands and encourage his heart in the work of the Lord. The individual Christian is not praying as he ought for his brethren in the church, for his fellow-men in the world, and for the advancement of Christ's kingdom, if he is not by so doing reminded of his obligation to do good to all as he has opportunity, and consequently excited to ask grace for this end. When the

Lord shall build up Zion, he will do so in answer to the prayers of his people; and when he converts the heathen, it will be, in the first place, by granting a more copious effusion of his Spirit upon those who are already converted. In proportion as the spiritual prosperity of the church is increased, will the hopes of the heathen at home and abroad become brighter. "God be merciful unto us and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us; that thy way may be known upon the earth, thy saving health among all nations." *Psa. lxxvii. 1, 2.*

Intercession for others, like petition for ourselves, ought to be minute and specific. This requires some knowledge of the circumstances of those for whom we intercede; and hence the importance of friendly and confidential intercourse among Christians. Our prayers in behalf of those with whom we are unacquainted, must be of a very general nature. The more we know, on the one hand, of the imperfections, difficulties, and temptations of our fellow Christians, or on the other, of their graces, attainments, and enjoyments, the better are we qualified to sympathize with their sorrows and joys, and to offer up special petitions or thanksgivings on their account. "Wherefore, I also," says Paul to the Ephesians, "after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers." *Eph. i. 15, 16.*

When we speak of intercession being mi-

nute and specific, we mean that those for whom we pray should be remembered and made mention of, one by one, and that their individual circumstances, so far as known to us, should be particularly dwelt upon; so that we may give full utterance to our sorrows, our thanksgivings, and our anxieties, in their behalf, in the presence of Him who seeth in secret. For example, when a parent prays for his children, he should not content himself with a general allusion to them. In the hearing of others, general language in this as in every part of prayer must be employed, but as it is secret devotion of which we speak, the general language must as much as possible be laid aside, and his children, one after another, specially thought of and mentioned. Abraham did not content himself with a general mention of his household, when he said, "O that Ishmael might live before thee." When Jacob was about to leave the world, he called to him his twelve sons, and pronounced a distinct and well-known blessing upon each, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. The prophetic character of what he then uttered, does not prevent his conduct from being an example to parents in every age, so far as regards the offering of distinct addresses to God in behalf of their children individually. It was the practice of Job to offer burnt-offerings for his family "according to the number of them all." Job i. 5. The special intercessions presented by a Christian parent, must necessarily

have reference to the different circumstances of the various members of the domestic circle. Some are younger, others more advanced. Some are naturally gentle in their dispositions, others more violent,—and what is of greater moment, some are perhaps giving evidence of a saving change, whilst others are growing up in habits of carelessness and vice. A similar diversity of circumstances belongs to those for whom it is our duty to pray, whatever be the ties by which we are bound to them, (the ties of natural relationship, of church fellowship, of Christian friendship, or merely those of our common humanity,) and our thanksgivings and petitions must be directed accordingly. Indeed, it were well if some little time were regularly devoted to the exercise of meditating on the circumstances of our friends and others, for the very purpose of assisting us in our intercessions. We are not recommending the use of written forms of prayer; but it might be well for parents to assist their memories by writing, from time to time, a summary of those blessings which they ought to ask in behalf of their children severally; and for ministers to preserve a list of their people to be frequently reviewed in the closet, when the members of the flock, youthful and aged, careless and awakened, weak and experienced, persevering and backsliding are brought before the Lord; and for Christians generally, to keep memoranda of the names and circumstances of those for whom it is their privilege to intercede.

Reader, how do you stand affected to this department of secret devotion? How much of your time is daily spent in the work of intercession? Do you esteem it one of your highest privileges that you may, as much and as often as you please, remember those who are dear to you at the throne of grace? Are you accustomed to give utterance to the overflowings of affection, in earnest and persevering supplications for the everlasting welfare of those whom you love? Do you feel your heart knit by the bonds of a holy brotherhood, to all the people of God, to all who bear the lovely image of Christ? Do your bowels yearn with compassion for perishing sinners? are you afflicted in all the sufferings and discouragements of the church, and are you daily pleading the promises of the divine word for the conversion of the heathen, the restoration of Israel, and the universal reign of truth and righteousness? If such are your feelings and exercises, be persuaded to persevere in a course so fraught with present blessings to yourself, and with future good to the church and the world. "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night; ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence; and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." Isa. lxii. 6, 7.

Perhaps some one may pass his eye over these lines, who is a comparative stranger to the exercise of which we speak. He does

not live wholly without prayer; but a few hasty petitions for himself is all that he is accustomed to utter. Not that he is destitute of natural affection, his heart is warm, and, it may be, his disposition generous. Will such a person pause whilst we address to him a few sentences? The prayers you offer for yourself prove that as a professed believer in Christianity, you acknowledge the interests of the soul and of eternity to be of transcendent importance. Are not the souls of those around you, your relatives, your family, those for whose temporal maintenance perhaps you willingly toil and labour, infinitely precious? Why then do you not pray for them? why do you neglect this most important means of promoting their true welfare? Be persuaded to begin. If you do not pray for those who are under your charge, or within the range of your influence, how do you know that they may not perish through your neglect of intercession, and your consequent irreligious example? How do you know that some have not already perished from this cause, and that the ruinous effects of your prayerless habits may not be extended and perpetuated after you are yourself in the grave? Your opportunities of interceding for those who are dearest to you, as well as of imploring mercy to your own soul, are every hour passing away. Neglect this duty no longer. Ask the same blessings for those around you, which you ask for yourself. If you feel a coldness of heart and want of ear-

ness in this exercise, pray for grace for yourself that you may be enabled to intercede; your very deficiency in this matter, discovers that you have much yet to ask in your own behalf. Thus it is always in religion; attention to one part of duty, if given in honesty and good faith, supplies motives for the discharge of another. Implore that God may give you his Holy Spirit as the Spirit of supplication, that you may so feel the certainty of eternal things as to render you incapable of restraining prayer either for yourself or for others, and to fill you with amazement at the folly of your past neglect. Seek to understand what is meant by the apostle, when he speaks of travailing as it were in birth, till Christ should be formed in the hearts of those he loved. And your humble, believing, earnest intercessions, shall not be in vain. "It shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

CHAPTER X.

READING THE SCRIPTURES.

WHETHER we consider the divine origin of the Bible, its high antiquity, the purity of its code of morals, the infinite importance of its doctrines, or even the simple sublimity of its style, its claims on our attention are incomparably superior to those of all other writings. It may and ought to be examined as the storehouse of knowledge and wisdom, the discovery of the mind and will of God, the revelation to dying man of eternal life through a crucified Redeemer. By the study of this sacred volume the intellect is disciplined and improved, the mind stored with pure and lofty sentiments, and the heart warmed with love, hope, and joy. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." Psalm xix. 7, 8.

The scriptures may be read in many various ways, and from a great diversity of motives. They are examined by the scholar who is anxious to become familiar with the original tongues; by the man of taste who wishes to enjoy their beauties; by the divine who labours to collect materials for his theo-

logical system; and by the controversialist who seeks about on all sides for arguments to be employed in noisy debate. It is scarcely necessary to say that the reading of the scriptures of which we are now to speak, is widely different from what takes place in any of these cases. It is the devotional reading of the word of God, to which we wish at present to invite attention.

And by this we do not understand the mere reading of a chapter of the Bible at regular intervals as a task; much less do we intend to intimate that the pronounciation of the words and sentences of scripture will operate as a charm upon the devotee by whom it is performed, or be accepted as an atonement for his sins. Such a view is not more repugnant to common sense, than it is opposed to the true nature of devotion as delineated in the word of God itself. By the devotional reading of the scriptures, we mean reading them in connection with prayer and praise, for the purpose of affording direction and encouragement in our approaches to God, and of awakening and exciting devotional feeling. Nothing could be more fanatical or farther from truth, than to suppose that the mere act of reading the Bible, even when its meaning is neither understood nor attended to, can be acceptable to God, or in any way advantageous to the performer. The influence which this part of worship has upon the mind and feelings of the worshipper, is in all respects consistent with reason and good sense, and

susceptible of being made perfectly intelligible to the most common understanding.

Is it not by the word of God that we become acquainted with the great and ever-blessed Object of worship, and with those glorious perfections which it becomes us to adore? Is it not there also that we obtain information as to those works of God, which illustrate his character, and demand the admiration and praise of his intelligent offspring? Where, but in the scriptures, is the way of access to the Father made known through Jesus the Mediator between God and man: and those offers and promises presented to us, which form our only warrant for approaching the throne of grace?—There our guilty and ruined condition by sin is revealed, together with the doctrine of free forgiveness through the blood of Emmanuel. And in the same treasury of divine truth are there innumerable examples of devotional exercises, in which every feeling of the devout heart is expressed in all the varied circumstances in which a sincere worshipper can be placed. The sorrows produced by earthly calamities, or by conviction of sin and a dread of wrath, the breathings of a pious soul after communion and fellowship with God, the joy and gladness which are produced by the light of the divine countenance, the love of the believer to the word of God, and his deep interest in the prosperity of Zion, are all portrayed in the most graphic colours by the finger of inspiration. On these circumstances we cannot at present dwell, but

the slightest reference to them suffices to render perfectly obvious the importance of reading the scriptures as a part of secret devotion.

There is reason to fear that this exercise is in a great measure neglected, even by many who give some attention to secret prayer. Such persons are in every way losers by the omission; for in addition to the disadvantage arising from neglecting that word which is the instrument of conversion and sanctification, as a hammer breaking the stony heart in pieces, and as a sword piercing to the dividing of soul and spirit, the very exercise of prayer itself cannot be properly engaged in unless accompanied by a constant reference to the scriptures. These two exercises cannot be separated without the greatest injury to both. The author of grace in the heart is also the author of the sacred volume; both bear his image, and have in consequence a mutual resemblance, as face answereth to face in a glass. The same Spirit by whom the word of God was inspired, is also the Spirit of grace and of supplication. The state of mind in which the doctrines and precepts of revelation are most clearly understood and most fully appreciated, is that which is produced by fervent prayer. Let all therefore who would enter into the sentiments and feelings of the inspired writers, cultivate the habit of reading the Bible upon their knees. But are there not many whose consciences would not let them rest were they entirely to neglect secret prayer, who yet are comparative strangers to that in-

ward living and feasting upon the divine word which would constrain them to make it their constant companion in the closet?

Doubtless it would be better if the scriptures were more read in our assemblies for public worship. This ought certainly to form a distinct and important part of every devotional exercise, whether public, private, domestic, or secret. But as it is to the last of these several kinds of devotion that our attention is at present directed, we are more immediately concerned to remark that the reading of the scriptures ought regularly to form part of the stated exercises of the closet morning and evening. Let the Bible be the first book that is opened in the morning, and let a distinct portion of time, longer or shorter as circumstances may admit, be sacredly set apart for the deliberate and prayerful perusal of its contents. Let the same practice be invariably followed in the evening, and let care and forethought be used in order to secure the necessary leisure. The rich advantages which will speedily be found to attend such a course, will abundantly repay whatever sacrifice it may require.

But in truth nothing that can properly be called a sacrifice, is implied in the practice we are recommending. If it requires the person who would follow it to rise half an hour earlier in the morning, or to forfeit in the evening, for an equal period of time, the pleasure of mere idleness or of unprofitable conversation, this, although implying a slight degree of self-denial, is even of itself an advantage. The very

act of preferring duty to indolence, of doing what is right rather than following inclination, of bringing conscience to bear upon the distribution of a man's time and employments, is itself a most healthful exercise, considered merely in the light of mental discipline. Moreover, the exercises of devotion, and in particular the prayerful reading of a portion of scripture, may be regarded as a most valuable preparative for all the active duties of life. No mental effort requires greater fixedness of attention, than that which is put forth when the great Object of worship is solemnly addressed, or the Bible perused with the felt impression that it is really a message from God to ourselves. And what is of more importance, the hallowed influence of intercourse with the Father of spirits, enlightening and sanctifying the soul, inspiring every pure and noble sentiment, and purging out irregular desires and earthly passions, cannot fail to impart energy as well as dignity to the character, and to give promise of success in every lawful undertaking. In every sense it is true that godliness is profitable for all things, and has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come.

It is, however, the spiritual profit arising from the devotional reading of the scriptures, which is its chief recommendation. "Search the scriptures," said our Lord to the Jews, "for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me." John v. 39. This was said regarding the Old

Testament, for the New Testament scriptures were not then in existence, and it was said with special reference to the testimony borne to the Messiah by Moses and the prophets, yet it contains a most important intimation both of doctrine and duty, suitable alike in every age. The Jews supposed, and they were right in supposing, that eternal life was revealed to them in their own sacred writings; but they seem also to have imagined that they had eternal life, as it were, in possession, because they had the word of God in their hands. Our Lord exhorts them to search those scriptures with greater diligence and attention, which would have led them to see the exact accomplishment in his character and work of all that had been foretold respecting their promised deliverer; and thus, by receiving him as the Christ, they should really have obtained that eternal life which they vainly supposed themselves already to possess. It is obvious that substantially the same advantages will result from searching the scriptures now, as in the days of our Lord. We have the New Testament as well as the Old to examine, and may as much as we please compare the one with the other, and observe how they both bear testimony to Jesus as the Saviour of sinners. The great argument by which the daily and devotional study of the divine word is urged upon our attention, is that thereby we may be led to the knowledge and faith of Christ, and to the possession in him of eternal life. It is Christ

in the word which renders it efficacious as the means of conviction, conversion, edification, and comfort. He is the bread of God that came down from heaven, and through the word this spiritual provision is imparted to the soul, in a manner suited to its circumstances. "As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." 1 Peter ii. 2. The voice of Christ as heard in the scriptures, awakens in the heart a new and indestructible principle of life. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." John vi. 63. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live." John v. 25.

Nor can we omit to notice the superiority of the pure word of God itself to all human writings, however excellent. Perhaps there is among many a disposition to attach an undue value to the works of men of talent and piety in elucidation and defence of the doctrines of scripture, at least as compared with the degree of attention which is immediately bestowed upon the sacred volume. Far be it from us to undervalue the rich productions of the present and past generations, by which the existing treasures and monuments of sacred learning, theology, devotion, biography, and Christian experience, have been accumulated. The facilities which they supply for the intelligent and satisfactory study of the Bible cannot be too highly ap

preciated, or acknowledged with too much gratitude to the Father of all mercies. All this may be admitted, and yet may there be the greatest reason to fear that the reading of the pure and simple word of God itself, is a duty which, perhaps more than any other, is mournfully neglected.

So long as a man is not in earnest about his salvation, the Bible is dry and uninteresting, and almost any other book has more attractions. He may have pleasure in listening to the sound of the gospel when it is preached with eloquence and energy; he may even have a taste for theology as a science, or perhaps as a field of debate, and may peruse with interest expositions of scripture, and the writings of critics and controversialists. But all the while there is no perception of the reality and certainty of divine truth, nor yet of its own inherent importance. The pleasure enjoyed arises not from the truth itself, but from the circumstances with which it is accidentally connected; and the consequence is, that human thoughts whether spoken or written, suggested by the scriptures, have incomparably more attraction than the scriptures themselves. Far different is the case of one who under the teaching of the Holy Spirit is, day by day, living a life of faith upon the divine promises, and of communion with God. To him the truth is infinitely precious on its own account. Its relation to the glory of God, to the kingdom of Christ, and to his own hopes here and

hereafter, gives it a hold upon his attention and his memory, beyond comparison greater than it could receive from any adventitious circumstance whatever. Human writings he will value, and also use to better purpose than the person who has never felt the power of the truth; for he will use them not as substitutes for the Bible, but as helps in studying the Bible. In the scriptures he finds the source, the foundation, the authority, of all that he is taught elsewhere. There he has a treasure which can never be spent, and which seems only the more inexhaustible every time he returns to it. Moreover, he finds that the manner in which the doctrines, and precepts, and religious exercises, recorded in scripture, are presented to his notice, is perfectly free from all human imperfection, and at the same time perfectly adapted to the desires and feelings of his heart. It is the pure undiluted word of God that he discovers to be more precious than gold, and sweeter than honey; and the most valued books, and the soundest preaching, are prized exactly in proportion as they draw his attention to that word, and enable him more clearly to understand its meaning.

So deeply convinced are we of the importance of an increased attention on the part of professing Christians to the devotional reading of the scriptures, that we should hail it as a symptom of approaching revival, were ministers of the gospel and others interested in the success of the Redeemer's kingdom, to make

a vigorous effort for this one object. There is too much of a disposition in the present day, to devolve religious duties of all kinds almost exclusively upon ministers. They are expected to labour for the people, to pray for the people, to study for the people. In one sense all this is right; but no real good will be effected unless they, at the same time, succeed in exciting the people to labour, to pray, and to study for themselves. No man ever excelled in any thing in which he was not in some sense self-taught, that is, in which he did not learn to think and act for himself. Far be it from us to encourage a haughty, self-sufficient spirit, such as occasionally leads persons to censure all they hear; but this is a spirit which will not be fostered by the exercise we are recommending. That familiarity with the word of God which is acquired by the daily and prayerful study of its contents, is a totally different thing from the knowledge which puffeth up. It implies not only an intimate acquaintance with the doctrines and even the words of scripture, but a conformity of heart to these doctrines, a fellow-feeling with the inspired writers in the sentiments which they express, and in their mode of expressing them; a communion as it were with the mind of God himself as contained in his word. Every one is aware of the tendency of intercourse with the minds of others to produce an assimilation of opinions, of tastes, and of enjoyments; and hence the importance of associating with the wise and good. The

acquaintance with scripture of which we speak, enables its possessor to breathe the same atmosphere with the prophets and apostles, the holy men of God, of former ages. The hopes, the fears, the desires, the enjoyments, the perplexities, the experiences of his own heart, he discovers to have been theirs also; a discovery which, amid the jarring and discordant influences of an ungodly world, is itself most delightful and refreshing. Nay, he is elevated to a holy fellowship with the exercises, the sorrows, the joys, the faith, of the Son of God himself. "That which we have seen and heard," says the beloved disciple, "declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." 1 John i. 3.

It is proper that something should be said as to the manner of reading the scriptures, in order that such happy results may be produced. It is obvious that they must be read with attention, with faith, with humility, with self-application, and with fervent prayer. They must also be read not merely occasionally and when inclination prompts, but daily and regularly, so as to form a constant habit. Many facilities have been provided for maintaining regularity in this matter. Scripture calendars have been written, showing how the entire Bible may be read through in the course of a year by perusing a few chapters daily. To some, works of this kind may, from difference of taste or disposition, be more useful than to

others: perhaps the best way is, for every individual to form a plan for himself, and to adhere to it invariably. At the same time, the scriptures should also be read with special reference to the circumstances in which we may be placed, the state of mind produced by these circumstances, the duties we are required to perform, or the sufferings we may be called upon to bear. Every experienced Christian knows that certain portions of the word of God are specially suited to him at one time, and other portions are more suitable at other times. Some passages also are more frequently perused than others, not because in themselves more excellent, but on account of their having been rendered peculiarly sweet and precious to the soul. That illumination by which the truth, and beauty, and suitability of the divine word are discovered, is gradual and progressive. The light of the Spirit shines upon one promise after another, and in proportion as it is continued, the boundless riches of the sacred oracles are more and more brought to view.

“Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope.” Psa. cxix. 49. Such is the language of David, and it teaches us that God not only gives his people the promises contained in his word, but also by the operation of his grace in their hearts, causes them to hope in these promises. So obstinate and unbelieving is the heart of man, that the clearest revelations of mercy, and the most condescending offers of salva-

tion, awaken neither gratitude nor hope, unless accompanied by the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, a high privilege conferred upon any one, when he is enabled to speak of any portion of scripture as the word upon which God has caused him to hope, and it greatly adds to his encouragement in prayer. True, the word of God itself, and not any feeling it may produce in our minds, is the proper ground of confidence, but the influence of which we speak merely discloses to the soul what the word contains. It makes no discovery of any new truth, far less does it lead the individual to look to his own frames and feelings in preference to the scriptures; but it makes many portions of scripture which were formerly only a dead letter, to be understood and appreciated, and their beauty and truth to be so perceived as to fill the heart with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

The devout reader of scripture will therefore find it both profitable and pleasant to follow often his own inclination, in selecting for his private perusal those passages which he loves and on which he finds it peculiarly profitable to meditate. At the same time it will be of great advantage to have a systematic plan of reading the Bible from beginning to end. This will prevent any of the sacred books from being overlooked or neglected, of which there would be some danger were no rule followed except the inclination of the moment. It will also supply immediate and pro-

fitable employment whenever the hour of devotion returns, even although the mind should be in a frame so languid and indifferent as to have no present relish for any particular portion of the divine word. Thus also will the person be less liable to allow the solicitations of sloth and indolence to interfere with his devotional exercises. The motive arising from the desire to preserve the habit of daily reading his regular portion, is confessedly an inferior one, and where no higher sentiment exists, the individual sinks down to a mere formalist. Yet even this inferior motive may come to the aid of loftier principles. As it would not be safe or wise for the holiest and most devout Christian to lay aside the observation of the regular seasons of prayer, on the ground that he resolved to pray whenever he felt inclined; so neither would it be advantageous, but the reverse, for any one to disregard every kind of attention to system in reading the scriptures, with the resolution of being guided exclusively by the spontaneous impulse of his own feelings. In either case, the duties in question would often be imperfectly discharged, and not unfrequently altogether omitted.

When the scriptures are read for the purpose of general improvement and of increasing our acquaintance with them, it may be proper sometimes to peruse a large portion at once, a considerable number of chapters, or an entire book; and at other times to confine our attention to a few verses, or even to a

single sentence. By the former method there is obtained a general view of the character and scope of the several books; by the latter a more minute and accurate kind of knowledge is acquired of particular parts. The biblical student will also find it profitable sometimes to read carefully the sacred text by itself, and at other times to avail himself of the aid of commentaries. The use of scripture references also, and the comparison of one passage with another so as to make scripture its own interpreter, cannot be too highly recommended. These various methods of studying the divine word are available, not only to those whose duty it is to prepare themselves for expounding it to others, but also to all Christians however humble their sphere. It is the business of every true follower of Christ to make that blessed book in which the Saviour is revealed his daily and constant companion, and no means within his reach should be left untried for rendering him more intelligently familiar with its sacred contents. Above all, let the teaching of the Holy Spirit be specially requested for this purpose. "Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes, and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart." Psalm cix. 33, 34.

But as it is not so much with a view to general improvement, as to the production of gracious principles and devout feelings that we are at present recommending the reading of God's word; we may be permitted to add

that a very close or critical examination of any passage whether longer or shorter, however proper at other times, does not belong to the duties of the closet. Let the portion of scripture fixed upon for devotional reading be carefully and deliberately perused, the divine blessing having in the first place been humbly and fervently supplicated. If wandering thoughts have prevented the attention from being fixed upon the passage, let it be read a second or even a third time. It is much better that the mind be really brought into contact with what is read, though but a small portion, than that a much larger passage should be gone over in such a careless manner, as neither to awaken the attention nor to impress the memory. Alas, how many hear the scriptures daily read at family worship, who a few minutes afterwards, could give no more account of what they have heard than if they had been all the time fast asleep! And some it is to be feared who do not wholly neglect reading the Bible when alone, might discover in themselves, if they would only observe it, almost an equal degree of carelessness. A conscientious perusal of almost any portion of scripture, repeated two or three times, will in most cases suffice to bring the substance of what is read clearly before the mind; and if even then the meaning of some expressions is not fully apprehended, enough will be understood to supply materials for serious reflection. Instead of waiting to investigate what may still be obscure, let the mind be given to

what is obvious, as that which indeed is generally most important, leaving the other for examination at a more suitable opportunity. And now let the worshipper in humble supplication directly address the great Hearer of prayer, availing himself freely of the promises, encouragements, and directions contained, whether by express intimation or obvious inference, in the passage he has read.

To illustrate what we mean in the most simple manner, let us suppose the first Psalm repeatedly perused as now recommended, and the reader proceeding to make use of it in prayer. His eye again falls upon the words, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful: but his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night." The reflections that will occur to his mind will probably be somewhat to the following effect:—Do I agree with the psalmist in what he here states? Are my thoughts expressed in these words? Is it really my opinion that he alone is blessed who avoids the society of the ungodly, the wicked, and the scornful, and who meditates on the law of the Lord by day and by night? If this is my opinion have I acted accordingly? Have I the blessedness which arises from the course of life here described? Is it my practice to keep at a distance from the ways of the wicked, and to delight myself by meditating upon the divine law? Alas, has not my cen

duct in many instances been the opposite of all this! Let me now confess freely and fully wherein I have erred in these particulars, let me implore forgiveness, and entreat that I may receive grace to follow the course which is here indicated, and to know by experience how blessed is the man whose character is thus described.

We cannot wait to follow out these reflections at greater length; but let us turn to another passage, one of the penitential psalms, the 32d,—“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Do these words express my sentiments? Am I deeply convinced that the man whose transgressions are forgiven is truly blessed? Do I know this by experience? Have I reason to hope that my sins are forgiven, and that the blessedness arising from forgiveness is mine? Or am I still unpardoned, and in a state of condemnation? If the former is my situation, let me sing the praises of that rich grace to which I am so deeply indebted; if the latter, let me implore the divine mercy, that I may feel the guilt and demerit of my sin, and be enabled to accept of that forgiveness which is so graciously offered.—“I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.” Here I have an account of the exercise of one who sought and found the rich blessing of forgiveness. Let me at the present moment imitate his example, confess-

ing my sins one by one, with all their aggravations, before that blessed One who is ready to pardon.—“Thou art my hiding-place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance.” Can I adopt this language? Can I at least be thankful that sinners naturally as unworthy as myself have been enabled to use it? Let me make it my unceasing prayer that the confidence here expressed may be mine, that the songs of deliverance with which the righteous are compassed about, may be put into my lips.—“I will instruct thee, and teach thee in the way that thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.” This is a most gracious promise, am I able to depend upon it? Am I willing to be instructed and taught by God, and to have all my footsteps guided by Him? Have I already experienced the truth of this promise, and felt how good and safe it is to be directed by divine wisdom as well as protected by divine power? And yet have I not too often preferred my own will to the will of God, and my own wisdom to his? Let me now confess how much I have erred in this matter, and supplicate grace to prize more highly such a gracious promise, and to rely more implicitly upon its accomplishment.

It is not necessary that we should multiply illustrations of this kind. Our object will be gained if we can persuade such of our readers as are unaccustomed to use the word of God in this manner, to make the attempt for themselves. Strange as it may seem, we believe

that many are deterred from the devotional reading of the scriptures because they really do not know how to proceed; and they have no idea of any assistance in prayer but that which is derived from the use of a written form. If such persons would learn to rely upon the direction of God's word, and the inward teaching of his Spirit, they would speedily find themselves on the way to improvement. They would soon discover that there is much, very much, in the word of God which any attentive reader, however humble, can easily apprehend. This would give them confidence to persevere; and in nothing will perseverance more certainly make a work easy and prosperous than in a prayerful study of the Holy Scriptures.

Almost any portion of the Bible will furnish matter of prayer, if the following simple rules are observed. First, consider whether the doctrine taught, or the sentiment expressed, corresponds with your own views and feelings. It either does, or it does not. If it does, then, secondly, give utterance in prayer to the corresponding feeling, whether of the nature of faith or repentance, or love, or submission, or hope, or desire. If it does not, then, in the third place, inquire how far your present mind and inclination are at variance with those of the inspired writer, and pray that they may be brought into accord with what you read. Perhaps few exercises would be more profitable than that of reading deliberately Psalm cxix., and pausing at the

end of every verse, to inquire how far you can adopt the language of David as your own. In that most interesting portion of the divine word, there is not a sentiment to which the unrenewed heart can sincerely say Amen, whilst every expression is in harmony with the breathings of a heaven-born soul. Ask your own heart whether you can, with David, address to God such desires as the following:—"O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes." "My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times." "Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight." Inquire how far you can say with truth, "I will never forget thy precepts; for with them thou hast quickened me." "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day." "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth." It is not, indeed, every Christian, nor any Christian, at all times, who could declare that the feelings here expressed exist in his heart in a degree corresponding to what the psalmist must have experienced when he wrote these words; but every true believer does possess these feelings in some degree, whilst unconverted men are entire strangers to them. Even the child of God, therefore, will find such inquiries profitable, as he will thus be reminded of his imperfections, the feebleness of his gracious principles, and the strength of indwelling corruption. By surveying himself in the glass of the divine word, he will dis-

cover how far he comes short of the standard of all excellence. But how much more important the course we are recommending to a man who is yet in his sins, and who has never been made sensible either of his guilt or misery! If such a person could be prevailed upon patiently and candidly to ask his own heart questions like the above (and they might with the greatest ease be multiplied to any extent) this very exercise might by the divine blessing be the means of making him feel that he needs entire renovation of heart, and of pointing his desires and hopes to that Saviour who is at once so able and willing to bestow this and all other blessings. At all events, no one can fail to see how available is the word of God for supplying materials of devout meditation and prayer.

Nor is it enough that we make it our aim to enter into the feelings of the inspired writers; we must seek to have the temper and habits which they describe. The word of God must be used, not only to awaken proper emotions, but also to produce a corresponding effect on the whole character. A man may admire the beauty of many portions of scripture, and seem to have a certain poetical sympathy with the sentiments they express, who has yet no value for the peculiar doctrines of revelation, nor any conformity of heart and life to the requirements of the gospel. Let no one be mistaken here. "By their fruits ye shall know them," Matt. vii. 20, said our Lord, of the false prophets; and by the same test are

we to judge of every thing in religion, as well as the character of its professors. Feelings and emotions of all kinds are to be judged by their fruits. If they fail to render their possessor more holy, more humble, more self-denied,—if they encourage pride, vanity, or the love of ease, they are not truly scriptural, whatever indirect connection they may have with the scriptures. The apostle James exhorts us “to receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save our souls.” Chapter i. 21. The expression is a remarkable one, and seems to intimate that the word of God not only enters into the heart, but that it remains; and as if ingrafted there, it grows and brings forth fruit, assimilating, by a gradual but certain process, every thing there to itself. The scriptures become the mould, so to speak, in which the character, the dispositions, the motives, the habitual course of thought, feeling, and action, are fashioned. Thus that same precious word which gives the knowledge of Christ, and presents his perfect righteousness as the only foundation on which we may safely rest for pardon and acceptance with God, is also the appointed instrument of impressing his moral image on the heart.

In conclusion, we cannot be too thankful for the privilege which, as protestants, we enjoy, of reading the scriptures in our own language, and of examining them with diligence and prayer every man for himself. Our gratitude for this blessing should lead us

not only to a high appreciation of its value, but also to the conscientious, cheerful, and daily use of it. While we denounce the wickedness of that system which prohibits the common people from perusing the word of God for themselves, let us not forget the deep responsibility implied in the happier circumstances in which we are placed. Ought not those to reflect, who allow the Bible to lie on their shelves from day to day neglected and unopened, that many will rise in the judgment against them, who, rather than be restrained from reading that word which they found to be the life of their souls, submitted willingly to imprisonment, torture, and death? The time may not be far distant which will show, more clearly than is at present perceived, the unspeakable value of the privileges we at present enjoy. The antichristian system seems everywhere to be recovering strength; infidelity, in its grossest form, is also making progress. Under God, there is no defence against the one and the other so effectual as would be provided by an increased attention, among all classes, to the private and devotional reading of the scriptures. Let parents train their children to the habit of regularly practising this duty. It is not enough that they be told of its importance, and enjoined to perform it; parents must make it their care to have it actually performed. In nothing is the distinction between teaching and training more important than in this. A child who is merely told that he ought to read the scrip-

tures with prayer every morning and evening, will, if he is of an obedient disposition, do what he has been told, once or perhaps twice, after he has received the injunction; but unless he is constantly reminded, or has the advantage of a habit already formed, the matter will there rest, till at some distant period the injunction is renewed, and again once or twice the duty will be remembered. Oh, if parents would attend as they ought to this matter,—which, if they are themselves daily feeding upon the divine word, would be an easy task,—they might hope, under the teaching of the Spirit, to render their children wise, happy, useful, and truly prosperous, as long as they live, and to prepare them for that time of trial which is awaiting the church and the nations. No one can enumerate the advantages which he possesses, to whom it can be said, “From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith, which is in Christ Jesus.” 2 Tim. iii. 15.

CHAPTER XI.

WATCHFULNESS.

THAT the exercise denoted by the word we have placed at the head of this chapter is of great importance, may be inferred both from its own nature, and from the frequency with which it is inculcated. Watchfulness supposes the apprehension of danger, together with an uncertainty as to the time or manner in which the threatened evil may overtake us. It also supposes that by forethought, preparation, and constant care, there is a prospect of warding off the evil, which is of such a kind as to make its approaches when we are off our guard. From the manner in which watchfulness is spoken of in the word of God, we must infer that the dangers which beset the Christian in his whole course, and in particular which attend his devotional exercises, are neither few nor small.

Our Lord inculcates the duty in question, when he speaks of what is required of us in reference to his second coming. "For the Son of man is as a man taking a long journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight,

or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning; lest coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch." Mark xiii. 34—37. The exhortation contained in these words is recorded by three of the evangelists, and by Matthew and Mark it is frequently repeated, as something to which their Master was accustomed oft-times and emphatically to direct their attention. It is not consistent with our present object to enter on the consideration of the argument for watchfulness contained in this and the parallel passages; but it may be mentioned as a circumstance claiming our attention, that one reason why "that day and hour" are kept so completely a secret, is that we may be kept watchful. Not only has God required us to watch because, for reasons which are fully known to none but himself, the day of death and the day of judgment are concealed from us; but we have ground for believing that he has exercised this concealment because, among other reasons, he knows that the exercise of watching is of itself in many ways advantageous.

The connection between watchfulness and prayer, is frequently brought under our notice. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation," Mat. xxvi. 41, said our Lord to his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, in view of that trial of their faith which awaited them, unprepared as they were for his apprehension and death. "The end of all things is at hand," says Peter, "be ye there-

fore sober and watch unto prayer." 1 Peter iv. 7. And to the same purpose Paul writes, "continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving." Col. iv. 2. "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." Eph. vi. 18. By these passages it is clearly taught that watchfulness is a necessary concomitant, not only of prayer in general, but also of every part of prayer, of thanksgiving, and intercession, as well as petition, and that without constant vigilance our devotional exercises will either be entirely omitted, or if not, will at least be wholly unprofitable.

We can be at no loss to understand how this should be the case, if we consider the character of those unseen enemies with which the true worshipper has to contend. The god of this world, who blinds the minds of them that believe not, will spare no pains to prevent an exercise so fatal to his dominion as that of prayer. To what extent this wicked spirit may be suffered to influence the affairs of this world, it is not for us to say: we should be thankful to know that all his designs are known and his operations controlled, by One whom he hates as his conqueror, but to whom he is compelled to submit. But when it is considered that he has access to the human heart in such a manner as to present temptations and suggest sinful thoughts and desires, it is obvious that he has the power of influencing the actions of men, and consequently their

circumstances. This power is neither uncontrolled by God nor irresistible by man, nor is it of a kind to diminish in the slightest degree human responsibility; yet its existence must never be either denied or forgotten. Not only can he directly operate on the mind of the person whom he wishes to deter from prayer, by presenting temptations to sloth, to procrastination, or to some kind of sinful indulgence which is always sure to alienate the heart from God; but by operating on the minds of others around, he may render them the instruments of leading the individual into temptation. In addition to all this, there is the natural and powerful disinclination of the heart to all devotional exercises, and especially to those of the closet. Satan has, alas! materials within us on which to operate, which are only too favourable to his wicked and destructive designs. The example of an ungodly world, and even the cares of business, not to speak of the seductions of forbidden pleasure, have all a constant tendency to withdraw the mind from religious exercises. These causes, operating singly and in every variety of combination, keep the great bulk of mankind at a distance from God and from salvation; and whenever any one has become so far convinced of the paramount importance of religion as to resolve to give himself regularly to prayer, he will encounter the full force of their opposition.

But powerful as these enemies are, they may, under the blessing of God, be counter

acted by watchfulness. Satan can compel no one either to commit sin or to neglect duty, against his will. Neither the powers of darkness, nor the influence of the world, nor the example of the wicked, can compel any one, contrary to his inclination, to refrain from prayer. "Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?" 1 Peter iii. 13. The man who receives grace to practise habitual vigilance, is in safety.

Watchfulness might be regarded as a Christian duty, necessary and important on its own account, as well as from its connection with the regular duties of devotion. We ought to watch the dealings of providence towards ourselves, towards the church, and towards the world. We ought to watch the advance of time, and our own progress towards eternity. We ought to watch for the accomplishment of those promises upon which rest our hopes as to the spread of the gospel, the conversion of the world, and the universal establishment of the kingdom of Christ. As professors of religion we ought to watch the progress of grace in our hearts, the gradual weakening of the principles of sin, the advancement of holiness, spirituality, and heavenliness of mind. And as still encompassed with infirmity, we must watch the strength of indwelling corruption, and the temptations by which we are most easily led astray. All these are topics to which our attention is necessarily directed in prayer, and in proportion as watchfulness is exercised regarding them, will they suggest

matter of petition, confession, thanksgiving, and intercession.

But it is to the operation of those enemies of which we have spoken that Christian vigilance must chiefly be directed. There are many ways in which they inflict injury; but in none more than by their influence upon devotion. Tending constantly to produce a strong disinclination to secret prayer, they cause this duty to be first very carelessly performed, and then gradually omitted. Thus many who had begun to think seriously about their everlasting welfare, and some who at one time made a fair profession and even appeared to have considerable enjoyment in divine things, have returned to their former habits of irreligion, and more than ever lived without God in the world, unblessed in time, unprepared for eternity. The latter end of such persons is worse than the beginning: it would have been better for them if they had not been born.

That it may be distinctly perceived how the watchfulness of which we speak is to be exercised, let us invite attention to a few plain and simple directions, which, by the divine blessing, may be useful to those who are truly desirous of forming devotional habits.

In the first place, watch for the regular opportunities of prayer. We take for granted that, agreeably to what was said in a former chapter, the serious reader has a regular time and place set apart for secret devotion. But the season so set apart requires to be carefully

guarded. If this is not done, other things will constantly occur to distract the attention, and to fill every leisure moment. It should be habitually remembered that the danger of performing the duties of the closet in a careless, hasty, and unprofitable manner, is one of daily occurrence, and from which it is impossible to escape without unremitting watchfulness. Here, as in many other things, if a man is in earnest, experience will come to his aid. He will remember the circumstances in which business, or pleasure, or social intercourse, or even a favourite study, left him no time for prayer, or rendered his mind unfit for the exercise; and will learn how the same evil may be prevented in time to come. Oh, if we had only a tithe of the wisdom, the prudence, the forethought, the watchfulness which the men of the world constantly exercise about secular affairs, how easy would it be to appropriate much more of our time than we do to communion with God.

And here we may be permitted to remark the efficacy of watchfulness in securing regularity in all the duties of religion, public and social as well as secret. Look, for example, at its effect in enabling any one who has the opportunity of doing so within his reach, to wait staidly upon a private fellowship prayer meeting. Without some little degree of forethought, the time for going to such a meeting is perhaps forgotten, or when it arrives, the individual is surrounded with various engagements of less or more importance from which

he cannot make his escape. Thus an important duty is neglected, and an example of carelessness, which is sure to be imitated, set before his brethren. But how easily might all this be avoided? A little of that watchfulness of which we speak would not only prevent all danger of the meeting and its business being forgotten, but would also, without the slightest inconvenience, secure the necessary leisure.

Secondly: We ought to watch for special opportunities of prayer. David was not contented with worshipping God at the regular services of morning and evening. He speaks sometimes of praising God seven times a-day; nay, of waiting on him all the day, and even of rising at midnight to engage in the same exercise. In this spirit all must act who would live by the faith of Christ, and maintain habitual communion with their heavenly Father. Every thing here depends upon watchfulness. When a person is really watching for opportunities of doing any thing, it is astonishing how many he will find. The sluggard, always behind with his work, can find time for nothing, and wonders how others can accomplish so much more than he is able to overtake. The person of active habits, on the contrary, has leisure for every thing; and one cause of this superiority is, that he has learned forethought and vigilance. Let those who would experience the advantages of prayer go and do likewise. Let them seek to understand what Paul means when he speaks of "praying always, with all prayer and

supplication in the spirit, and watching there unto." Their opportunities would prove sufficient, and would multiply on every side, if they would only learn to seize upon and improve them.

In the third place: Let us notice the importance of watchfulness against hinderances to prayer. Hinderances are of various kinds—external and internal, direct and indirect. By external hinderances we mean those which arise from secular business and the ordinary engagements of life. By internal hinderances we understand those which are occasioned by indolence, aversion to God, spiritual idolatry, and sinful desires. But these two classes of obstacles are more closely connected than might at first sight be supposed. Difficulties of the former kind would be easily overcome, were it not for the latter. A little of the care and attention which are constantly employed in the ordinary affairs of life, would suffice to enable any one to maintain devotional habits amid the greatest pressure of worldly business; but those hinderances which exist in a man's own bosom, are not to be set aside without the practice of that deeper and more self-denying watchfulness with which only true Christians are properly acquainted. When the slothful man says, "there is a lion in the way, a lion in the streets," he tries to persuade himself that the obstacle, which exists only in himself, does really beset his path with outward and visible danger. Were it a real lion it might be slain,

and the removal of such a formidable enemy would render the course of duty easy and safe in all time coming. But when the opposition is seated in the heart, it is not so easily dislodged; for however often resisted and overcome, it will recover its power. Sometimes, indeed, when the believer is made to feel how good it is to draw near unto God, and is permitted to taste the sweets of communion with the Saviour, and has his heart filled to overflowing with gratitude for the love displayed in the gospel,—he is ready to say, “My mountain stands strong, I shall not be moved.” In these favoured moments, it seems impossible that he should ever again depart from his heavenly Father, or regard with indifference the privilege of drawing near to him in prayer. The power of sin seems for the time almost wholly destroyed; and the beauty, safety, and propriety of holiness are clearly and distinctly perceived. But, alas! this happy state of things is not usually of long continuance. Satan recovers his power, the engrossing cares of life resume their ascendancy, the corrupt dispositions of the heart are roused from their temporary slumber, the pleasures of religion lose their charms, the maxims and ways of the world resume their fair and plausible aspect, and the duties of devotion seem cheerless and uninviting. How important the exhortation, “Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.”

We have mentioned a distinction between

direct and indirect hinderances. The former operate by filling up the time that should be given to prayer, or turning the thoughts off in another channel, or suggesting doubts as to the utility of the exercise itself; the latter produce their effect by operating upon the mind at other times, and inducing a general disinclination for devotional exercises. The hinderances external and internal already spoken of, may be considered as belonging chiefly to the former class; those which arise from the practice of sin are included in the latter. A life of wickedness may be consistent with hypocrisy, or even with superstition or fanaticism; but it never can consist with true and simple-hearted devotion. It may therefore be taken for granted as an invariable rule, that in proportion as you indulge in sin you disqualify yourself for prayer. The man who, whatever his professions, indulges in sinful passions, gives utterance to false, profane, or filthy language, practises unfair dealing in his worldly transactions, or gives way to drunkenness or other sinful gratifications, shows plainly enough his neglect of secret devotion. We need no information regarding his private habits. It is not necessary to enter his domestic circle, much less to invade the retirement of his chamber, to understand how the duties of family and personal religion are conducted. These duties, if still in any shape observed, are reduced to a mere shadow, and the very form itself will soon take its departure. In restraining men from

prayer, it is easy therefore to see how many means Satan has at his disposal. If neither the business of the world nor the solicitations of sloth can be directly employed, the work of mischief may still more effectually be accomplished by any of the ten thousand seductions of sin. "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."

It may be expected that in this as in other respects, most danger is to be apprehended from our besetting sins. The temptations which are most congenial to a man's temper and disposition, or which through long habit have obtained the greatest mastery over him, are those which Satan is most likely to employ in withdrawing him from the duty of prayer. The deadly nature of sin appears, not only in its direct opposition to the divine law, but also in its degrading and demoralizing effect upon the mind and feelings, hardening the conscience, rendering the heart insensible to every good impression, and the will opposed to every religious duty. If men would only look at the consequences of their favourite indulgences, and observe how in their own lives sin produces ungodliness, and ungodliness produces sin, and how one sin leads to another, and sinful actions to wicked habits, the heart meanwhile becoming more and more confirmed in its opposition to Christ, and to the gospel, and to the means of grace, they would feel the propriety of the apostle's warning against being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Even among the best and the

holiest of God's people, who has not reason deeply to lament the loss of peace, of comfort, and of usefulness, through the indirect hindrances to prayer of which we speak?

Here then is abundant opportunity for the exercise of watchfulness. Watch those times when prayer is felt as a burden. Examine what have been the causes of inducing this state of mind. If you are accustomed to the work of self-examination, you can be at no loss to discover these. Observe well the times, the circumstances, the employments, the society, the pleasures, out of which these causes arise. And as watchfulness is necessary to perseverance in prayer, so prayer is necessary to perseverance in watchfulness. When you feel the power of indwelling corruption too great for your feeble strength to resist, or when you become weary of that continued and self-denying vigilance which is necessary to your safety, flee to Jesus for protection. Think of his condescension, his love, his sympathy, his knowledge of all your wants, his ability and willingness to defend you. In such circumstances imitate the example of David when he says, "Deliver me, O Lord, from mine enemies; I flee unto thee to hide me." Psa. cxliii. 9.

Let us notice, in the fourth place, the importance of watching against the first approaches to neglect of prayer. No one who has been accustomed to worship God in secret, will all at once leave off this duty. In this case, as in all others, evil makes its ad-

vances gradually; and so very unobservant are men of their own conduct, however ready to notice the faults of their neighbours, that many fall into a course of backsliding which is obvious to those around them, whilst it seems strangely concealed from themselves. They become less tender in their walk, less fearful of sin, less attentive to the Sabbath and to public ordinances, less regular in the observation of family worship and domestic instruction; and the concealed though certain concomitant of all this is, that they have learned to restrain prayer before God in the closet. Guard against this evil in its commencement. Watch with a jealous eye every tendency to remissness. If the duties of secret devotion are neglected or hastily performed to-day, they will be the same to-morrow, and every day after, unless God in some way interfere to arrest the downward course. And let a time be specially set apart at the end of every week, to enquire whether you are making progress in the life of prayer or the contrary; whether each passing day finds you living near to Christ and walking with him in newness of life, or inwardly departing from him and taking up with created things as your portion. These questions may be in a great measure determined by a simple review from week to week, of your daily transactions with the throne of grace.

Let us also recommend the exercise of watching the unholy spirit, and the mixture of impure motives with which the duty of

prayer is often connected. Not only are we prone to neglect our duty, it is frequently performed in a manner that might justly expose us to the indignation of Jehovah. In the time of trouble, how much more ready are we to plead for temporal than for spiritual deliverance! When we are made to smart for our offences, how much more are we grieved on account of the chastisement than on account of its cause! Even when we pray for deliverance from temptation, it is too often not from any real hatred of sin as such, or any genuine regard to the commands and authority of God, but from a dread of the temporal inconveniences with which our unholy conduct may be attended. How common is it to ask and receive not, because we ask amiss! Here is a most important and extensive field for watchfulness. The person who looks narrowly into his own heart, and who observes the circumstances which produce perhaps occasionally greater regularity and fervency in prayer, will soon make most humiliating discoveries. Very frequently will it appear that the sins which are most aggravated are not the most deeply mourned, that the blessings which are most valuable are not those which excite the most lively gratitude, that the mercies which are most needed are not those most earnestly sought. Too often will it be discovered that in prayer the great aim is to have the external duty performed, whilst the interests of eternity are very little regarded, and the glory of God scarcely so much as

thought of. How commonly is self the beginning, middle, and end of all the pleasure we have in doing our duty, and of the pain we have in neglecting it! By habitual watchfulness over himself in these respects, a man will learn more in a few weeks of the evil of his own heart, and of his real wants as a sinner, than he could in a lifetime by merely going the round of devotional observances.

So liable are we to deceive ourselves in reference to every thing connected with religion, that a jealous vigilance becomes necessary over our own conduct, as to those very evils and dangers whose influence upon devotion we profess to lament. Many who complain of indolence, wandering thoughts, and cold affections, take no pains to overcome these enemies. It is always easier to complain of an evil than to make a vigorous effort to have it removed. Nay, the heart may secretly be clinging to and refusing to part with what is spoken of by the lips in the language of lamentation. This subtle hypocrisy, which leads a person to deceive himself, demands the closest vigilance for many reasons. It is in itself deeply wicked and criminal, and therefore exceedingly heinous and provoking in the sight of God. It destroys all hope of deriving profit from religious duties, and reduces devotion to a mere mockery. There is no evil to which any one is liable for which the gospel does not provide a remedy. The means of overcoming every difficulty and of vanquishing every enemy, are placed within

our reach; and if we continue to satisfy ourselves with mere complaints, instead of putting forth vigorous efforts to have the cause of complaint removed, it can be accounted for in no other way than that in which our Lord explains the unbelief of the Jews, "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life." John v. 40. Let the reader be admonished to guard against acting in this manner. Observe diligently what are the hinderances which most frequently obstruct your path; and observe also how far you exercise diligence to have these hinderances removed. What means have you used to obtain dominion over sloth, self-indulgence, wandering desires, worldly afflictions? How often have you fasted, and wept, and prayed over those enemies, and fled for strength and protection to Christ? Our prayers for spiritual blessings cannot be sincere, and they will never be accepted by God, unless the desire by which they are prompted is strong enough to lead us willingly, laboriously, perseveringly, to take any amount of pains, to put forth any degree of exertion, to undergo any measure of toil and self-denial, for the attainment of what we ask. Till a man is prepared for this, he is never really in earnest on the subject of religion; but so soon as he is so, his prayers and pains-taking will assuredly not be in vain. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant-man seeking goodly pearls; who when he had found one pearl of great price, went

and sold all that he had, and bought it." Matt. xiii. 45, 46.

There is a promise attached to the exercise of watchfulness, as connected with self-examination, which deserves a passing notice. "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. . . . For, if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged." 1 Cor. xi. 28, 31. It is here intimated that, for a man to examine himself, is the same thing as to judge himself. Both these ideas include watchfulness, as we can neither examine nor judge ourselves in matters which we have not observed. Now, the words we have quoted contain a promise that, by judging ourselves, we may hope to escape being judged,—that by examining ourselves, we may hope to escape being examined,—that by watching ourselves, we may avoid, not indeed the watchfulness of Jehovah's eye, but the terrible vigilance of his displeasure. It is remarkable how differently the exercise of judging ourselves is spoken of in scripture, from the manner in which our judging of others is characterized. In regard to the latter exercise, our Lord says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged;" Matt. vii. 1. the inference from which, as compared with the language of the apostle, is that, if we would escape the judgment of God, we must at once leave off judging others, and begin to judge ourselves. To judge our neighbour, and to neglect judging ourselves, are equally wrong, and subject to the same kind of punishment. And who

will say that God is not able to judge, to examine, to search, to try, and to make us feel that he is narrowly and jealously watching us? "It shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles." Zeph. i. 12. The omniscient eye of God needs not the assistance of any candle to search out the hidden things of darkness. When He institutes a search, it is for the purpose of adding, not to his knowledge, but to ours. It is to make men acquainted with themselves, to bring to light their own true feelings and character. Sometimes this searching may be performed in mercy; and in this view the psalmist prays for it, when he says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psa. cxxxix. 23, 24. It is often, however, a work of judgment, preparing the way for condemnation and punishment. Thus, the worshippers of Jehovah are represented as saying, "If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange God; shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart." And Job, in replying to his three friends, says, after they had in their own way professed to vindicate the procedure of the Almighty, "Will ye speak wickedly for God? and talk deceitfully for him? Will ye accept his person? will ye contend for God? Is it good that he should search you out?" Job xiii. 7—9

And what are the means which God em-

ploy in conducting examinations of this kind? As it is of his administration in the present world only that we speak, we may reply, that it is accomplished by the dispensations of providence. These may be of such a kind, as to bring to the remembrance of an individual, sins which he had long ago committed, and which were either entirely forgotten, or very little attended to. This seems to have been the case with Job, when he says, "Thou inquirest after mine iniquity, and searchest after my sin." And again, "Thou makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth." Job x. 6. The dealings of divine providence towards this holy individual brought the transgressions of his past life before his view, and made him feel as if the eye of God were more especially fixed upon them. Another remarkable example of this is supplied by the language of Moses, in Psa. xc.; but in order to appreciate it aright, we must give a moment's attention to the circumstances in which he and the people of Israel were placed. When the people sinned in the matter of the golden calf at Horeb, and Moses interceded in their behalf with so much earnestness, it was said for his encouragement, "Go lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee: behold mine angel shall go before thee;" but it was at the same time added, "Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." Exod. xxxii. 34. Not long afterwards the people were conducted to the very borders of the land of promise, but on account

of the report brought by the spies, they refused to go up and possess the land. On this account the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he declared that their carcases should fall in the wilderness, in which they were doomed to wander for forty years, till they should be consumed. It is understood to have been on this occasion that Moses wrote the psalm we have mentioned, in which, among other things, he says, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance." *Psa. xc. 8.* The idolatry at Horeb, and even the secret transgressions of the people, were had in remembrance, and, as it were, brought out into view, when the day of retribution arrived.

God, by his providence, not only brings sin to remembrance, but also brings into view our true character by showing what is in us. We do not know the character of any one till it is tried, and God can so deal with us, placing us sometimes in prosperity, at other times in adversity, now gratifying our wishes, and again disappointing them, as to bring into view the various dispositions, and even the most secret principles of the heart. This was one purpose that was served by his dealings with Israel in the wilderness: "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart." *Deut. viii. 2.* It is the same idea, although in a very different connection, to which allusion is made in

what is said of Moab by the mouth of Jeremiah, "Moab hath been at ease from his youth, and he hath settled on his lees, and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel." Jer. xlviii. 11. These dealings of God with his creatures are of much importance, in connection with the duty of watchfulness, to which our attention has in this chapter been directed. They afford an opportunity of observing what is in our hearts, and of obtaining a true acquaintance with ourselves. They show that whether or not we shut our eyes to our own character and habits, they are perfectly known to God, and whenever he pleases, he can expose them to the view of the world. If we will judge ourselves, we shall not be judged.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

THE importance of the subject treated in the preceding pages cannot well be over estimated. One circumstance which shows this is, that perseverance in the duties of secret devotion supplies an evidence of Christian character. In defending himself from the charge of hypocrisy which had been brought against him by his friends, we find Job asking, "What is the hope of the hypocrite? will he delight himself in the Almighty? will he always call upon God?" Job xxvii. 8, 10.— See a sermon by President Edwards upon this text. The hypocrite may call upon God for a time, but he will not do so always; he will not persevere. The motives which lead him to pray in the hearing of others or to unite in public worship although of a selfish and worldly kind, have nevertheless a certain description of substance and power which may ensure his continuing to attend to outward duty; but the emotions which prompted him to secret prayer, were never any thing but spurious and consequently evanescent. Having never possessed the spirit of prayer, he is a stranger to the spirit of adoption, and is still at heart an alien from God. Being still

self-dependent, he has never felt his need of living by faith upon Christ. The power of sin, never having been really destroyed in his heart, returns with fresh vigour under cover of the false hopes he has brought himself to cherish. He never, so to speak, counted the cost of perseverance in seeking God, nor was he ever prepared for the life of care, watchfulness, and labour, which this implies. He has no proper interest in those promises in which God has assured his people that they shall be upheld and all their wants supplied; he has never felt the value of such promises, nor is he at all accustomed to rely upon them. In these circumstances it cannot seem strange that he should gradually leave off the practice of secret prayer, and insensibly come to do so without disturbing his peace. Nay, perhaps, we might go farther, and say that this is ordinarily the case with those who have had convictions of sin, but have never come the length of true conversion.

The wickedness of restraining prayer before God, must be very highly aggravated. One of the names by which God is known is the Hearer of prayer. Says David, "O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come." Psalm lxxv. 2. By this as much as by any thing else, Jehovah the God of Israel was distinguished from the gods of the heathen. To this test the worshippers of Baal were brought, and by it the folly of their worship demonstrated, when they called out

from morning till noon, "O Baal, hear us! but there was no voice nor any that answered;" whilst Elijah tauntingly replied, "Cry aloud, for he is a god." 1 Kings xviii. 26, 27. What infinite condescension has the Most High manifested, in making it known to us that he is eminently a God that hears prayer! He gives us free access to him at all times, although so infinitely exalted, that he humbleth himself to look upon the things that are in heaven. He is well pleased to be addressed by the needy and the helpless, and allows any degree of importunity that may be prompted by honest desire. "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest." Isaiah lxii. 6, 7. Jacob was permitted to wrestle with the angel Jehovah, and to say, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Genesis xxxii. 26. Our Lord speaks with approbation of those by whom the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and who, as it were, take it by force; and his own conduct among the poor and the diseased, furnishes a most encouraging illustration of the efficacy of prayer. The blind men by the way-side were rebuked by the multitude on account of their importunate and unceasing cries, but Jesus did not rebuke them. "What will ye that I should do unto you?" was his answer; and upon receiving their request, he graciously and immediately granted it. Now, whilst all this is full of encouragement to those who live by prayer, it

manifests in a very aggravated light the guilt and ingratitude of those who neglect or discontinue this duty. It is disregarding the kindness, despising the mercy, trampling under foot the infinite love, the divine condescension, of the ever blessed Jehovah. And how can it fail to incur the most terrible doom! "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you; then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me." Proverbs i. 24, 26, 27, 28.

It is scarcely possible for even the most pious and holy to meditate upon this subject without awakening the reflection, how much better it might in many ways have been for them had they been more attentive to this duty. How much have we all lost by neglect of prayer! How much mental culture, how much inward peace and comfort, how many opportunities of improvement to ourselves and of usefulness to others! It is impossible to estimate the sacrifice incurred, the injury sustained, by giving way to sloth, and allowing the solicitations of business or pleasure to withdraw us from intercourse with God. Let it be considered for a moment how great things God has often done in answer to prayer.

When Jacob was informed that Esau was coming to meet him, with an army of four hundred men, all helpless as he and his family were, he prayed in his distress, and God heard him, and averted the danger by turning the heart of Esau from revenge to kindness. In answer to the prayer of Moses, God sent plagues upon Egypt, and again removed them. At the prayer of Joshua the sun stood still upon Gibeon, and the moon in the valley of Ajalon. "Elijah was a man of like passions with others, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months." James v. 17, 18. The army of Zerah the Ethiopian was confounded in answer to the prayer of Asa; 2 Chron. xiv. 9. and in answer to the prayer of Hezekiah, God sent an angel and slew in one night a hundred and eighty five thousand men in the camp of the Assyrians. 2 Kings xix. 35. True we live not now in the age of miracles; but the honour which God has put on the prayers of his servants is intended for the instruction of men under every dispensation. It is still as certain as it ever was that God will give all good things to them that ask him.

Does any one ask why God requires prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies? To enter upon this subject at any length, would not suit the limits of these concluding observations. It has already been mentioned that

he knows our wants infinitely better than we do ourselves; so it is evidently not to obtain information that he directs us to pray to him. But we may be assured that wise and merciful purposes are served by this arrangement. We are thus reminded of our necessities, and prepared for receiving the blessings which he confers. His great name is also honoured by the exercise of that dependence, on the part of the creature, which is implied in prayer. It is, however, enough for us to know that it is the will of God to bestow mercy in answer to prayer; and that even in cases where the blessings conferred had been expressly foretold. In reference to the favour yet in store for the church, he has both given direct promises, and, at the same time, intimations that those promises shall be accomplished through granting an answer to the prayers of his people. In short, God, in arranging his purposes of mercy, has been pleased so to honour the supplications of man, as to constitute them a part of his plan, and to give them a place antecedent to the actual bestowment of grace.

Perhaps some may imagine that a life of prayer such as that of which we have spoken, encourages an ascetic temper, is unfavourable to habits of activity, and renders a man unfit for the society of his fellow-creatures, or even for performing the common duties of life. Two classes of persons may take this view, those who would make it an objection to devotional exercises, and those who may wish

to retire from the world under pretence of a desire for superior sanctity. Both are exceedingly in error. There is a wide difference between superstition and piety. The former springs from selfishness, the latter from love to God; the former closes the heart, the latter opens it; the former is gloomy and slothful, the latter is cheerful and active. Superstitious observances are always attended by a legal spirit, and are fitted to cherish pride, self-confidence, and uncharitableness: true devotion is evangelical, humble, dependent upon God, and preparative for every good work. Whilst therefore superstition or enthusiasm, (for we wait not at present to distinguish the various forms of spurious devotion,) do certainly encourage a meditative, unsocial, and inactive disposition; genuine devotional sentiments and exercises produce a state of mind which qualifies for activity, self-denial, and persevering exertion. Prayer is an exercise which is not rightly engaged in unless the mind is fully employed with it, and the very mental effort which it requires, and the successful resistance of indolence and renunciation of self which perseverance in it implies, produce the most healthful influence upon all the active powers. But apart from these considerations, the man of devout habits knows that the God whom he serves requires other duties besides those which belong to the immediate exercises of worship; and that one of the very things for which it becomes him to pray, is that he may receive

grace to perform with diligence and fidelity every duty belonging to his station. It implies sad mismanagement, and want of economy, to neglect prayer on the pretence of the number or importance of other engagements; and it is equally far from being wise or proper to omit any of the ordinary duties of life, or to fail in giving the necessary attention to worldly business, on the ground of a desire to give the whole mind to devotion.

One reason why the harmony between secret devotion and active duties is so indistinctly perceived, is to be found in the unbelief of the heart, and those consequent unworthy thoughts of God which throw doubts upon the kindness, the generosity, the mercy, and even the sincerity, of the gospel offer. In his approaches to God the fear of the worshipper often predominates over love; and our heavenly Father is supposed to be unwilling to grant the blessings which are asked, until he is reluctantly prevailed upon by importunity and perseverance. The depression and estrangement which are thus perpetuated, destroy the life and enjoyment of prayer and of every other duty. Let the serious reader believe that far otherwise, indeed, are the facts of the case. Vehemence and earnestness on our part, are permitted and encouraged, and are full of advantage to ourselves; but never, never, let it be forgotten, that in the whole controversy between God and sinners, the unwillingness to be reconciled is not on his side, but on theirs

There is no one blessing, nothing that is really for our good, that is withheld one moment longer than we are truly willing to receive it. If this were cordially believed, it would give warmth to our gratitude, and kindness to all our conceptions of that great Being who is infinitely worthy of our love; and it would infuse a new and healthy element, at once, into our devotions and labours.

Although many of the observations in the preceding chapters take for granted the greater danger of neglecting secret prayer than public or even domestic worship; yet would we be far from encouraging those who make their personal devotions an excuse for neglecting either the public ordinances, or the devotions of the more private circle. Great as the advantages are which attend secret intercourse with God, it is not to be forgotten that all the other means of grace have their advantages too, and that attention to them is of indispensable importance. The person who is truly in earnest about the welfare of his soul, will feel that he cannot afford to neglect any opportunity of waiting upon God. Moreover, the duties of the closet are in many ways fitted to prepare the heart for the exercises of the sanctuary; and the latter in their turn produce a favourable influence upon the former. As no one can derive the full benefit of public ordinances who is not personally a man of prayer, so no one can maintain a life of fellowship with God in secret who disregards the privi

leges of the house of God. It was the man who in his retirement offered praise seven times a day, and who meditated on the divine law by day and by night, who said, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! my soul longeth, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord." Psalm lxxxiv. 1, 2.

There are some who seem to think that in order to maintain a life of devotion it is necessary to abstain from taking any part in those public questions, political and ecclesiastical, by which the world is agitated. This opinion is founded on the same kind of mistake with some of those incorrect views to which we have just been alluding. That much strife and discussion have often arisen from questions in themselves frivolous, is certain; and that zeal for truth has frequently been only a pretext for the indulgence of earthly and selfish passions is undeniable. But to infer from this that the Christian should make it a rule to shut his eyes and his heart to all that is passing around him, would be to require him to act a part not more inconsistent with the demands of patriotism and philanthropy, than at variance with his duty as a citizen of Zion and his allegiance to the Prince of the kings of the earth. In this, as in all other cases, secret prayer, instead of withdrawing a man from his duty, will prepare him for discharging it; and by bringing him into contact with the fountain of light and truth, it will give clearness to his understanding, and purity to

his motives. It is not because we are too prayerful, it is because we are not prayerful enough, that we are so little qualified to take part in the public interests of the church and the world. It has been said that Luther was accustomed to spend three hours daily in prayer, at the very time when he was conducting that movement which shook Christendom to its centre, and which awakened the human mind from the slumber of ages.

THE END.







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M'Gill, James
"Enter into thy closet", or Secret prayer.

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