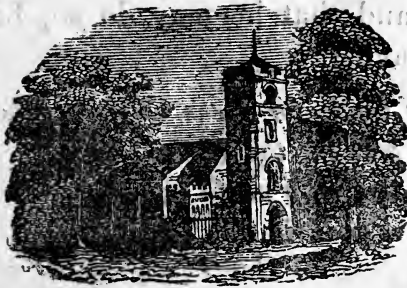


Mr. George Cobb

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Wonston Tracts.

PLEADING IN PRAYER.



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May every person who reads this Tract find a blessing in it; and that he may do so, he had better begin by saying,

*O God, for Jesus Christ's sake,
give me the Holy Spirit,
that I may profit by whatever
is good in this Tract.*

PLEADING IN PRAYER.

THE power which God has been pleased to assign to faithful prayer is so much beyond the reach of the expectation of man, that often he cannot persuade himself of the reality of what God gives him; so that, while not a few lose the benefit by an ill advised and enthusiastic assumption that their self-will is God's will, too many lose it altogether by not presuming to take it. Yet it has pleased God to detail in the Scriptures, some remarkable instances of an effectual mode of pleading in prayer; a cursory, or superficial, examination of which has led to many failures, and much neglect of a marvellous privilege. As one instance of this, take the pleading of Abraham for the inhabitants of the devoted cities. This may afford a guiding lesson in appealing to Jehovah Jesus, "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever," if we examine some of the less obvious workings of the heart of Abraham in this matter.

THERE was in Sodom one whom Abraham loved, though he had neglected the great privilege to which the mercy of God had admitted him. He had chosen his portion according to this world's advantages, rather than live in peaceable communion with the "friend of God." Yet Abraham loved him; and Abraham was a servant of God. The love of God's servants has its expression in prayer. When trouble had befallen Lot, Abraham only remembered his love for him; and he brought back the spoils of Sodom for the sake of his despoiled nephew. But a heavier affliction than the loss of property was coming upon Sodom—the wrath of God was to be

poured upon it. The Lord was pleased to communicate his will in this matter to Abraham (Gen. xviii. 17-20) : and he who Abraham loved was in the midst of that people who had ripened for destruction.

How precisely this instance pictures the case of thousands of the children of God ! The wrath of God hangs over the devoted world :—it is ready to be outpoured. But, to Christ's people now, as to Abraham then, Jehovah says, "Shall I hide from them the thing which I do ?" To those whom the Lord knows to be "commanding their children, and their household after them, that they should keep his ways," he communicates by the light of His Spirit on his word how he will bring upon them that which he has spoken in promise ; and how he will come down and see the world's accumulated rebellion, that he may destroy the children of the world utterly : and amongst such how many there are that are dear to the hearts of Christians, as Lot was to Abraham's. The ties of kindred, too, will urge their claims upon the affections of this life : Lot was Abraham's nephew. And then again the waywardness of those who have been brought up in the truth, but have been drawn into the world, and tempted into inconsistency ; oh ! how such are still bound to the yearning hearts of those who have been taught to love by the magic of Christ's love.

When Abraham heard that God meant to destroy Sodom, what an impulse of earnestness is manifested in him at once. The mysterious Three had turned their faces from him, and were going about the work of destruction ; but Abraham who was in the attitude which is said to be "standing yet before the Lord," "drew nearer" than standing before him. Stirred with that which the Apostle calls "boldness and access" (Eph. iii. 12), he ventured to put some-

thing like a daring question to the Lord,) but they may dare who have Christ's message to bring to the Father—who have to ask the Father in Christ's name (John xvi. 22), "Wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked?" What righteous man did Abraham think was in Sodom? Here appear the affections of his heart: his nephew Lot instantly rose to his mind, when he heard that the people among whom he lived were to be given up to the wrath of God. But did he ask for Lot alone? Or did he plead on behalf of any individuals in the cities of the plain as his friends, irrespective of the glory of God in their manifested character? Abraham's prayer was not of this kind. He loved Lot. He hoped, in spite of his inconsistency, that yet he was one of the righteous people of God. Abraham's heart was enlarged by divine love: he hoped all things; and his interest in Lot directing his compassion towards the wretched people who surrounded him, he asked largely—he asked time for yet an opportunity of salvation to a whole city. This was a bold request, and therefore he grounded it upon the hope of finding fifty such as Lot amongst them—a sprinkling of salt so to savour the abominable thing as to make it palatable to the patience of God yet a while.

And so it is even now. What christian has heard of the dangerous illness of one in the world whom, in spite of all his worldliness and inconsistency, he loves, without at once and instinctively "drawing nearer" to God than his habitual position of "standing before him"—venturing upon a boldness that has almost startled himself. Yet such a christian has never asked that God should tolerate the sins of this dear one. He has never asked that he should be saved in his unrighteousness; but he clings to every feeble token for good, amidst a multitude of

evil signs, and ventures to ask "wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked" portions? At first afraid of venturing too far in asking the salvation of such a one, he exaggerates to himself the hopeful tokens. What were fifty amidst all the inhabitants of the plain? Yet Abraham thought that fifty would serve the purpose of warding off the wrath of the just God. What are those charitable acts—those decent compliances—those cold assents to truth, in the loved one? What, compared with the daily mass of worldly, selfish, ungodly doings which are connected with these hopefulneses? Yet does the christian heart feel the love of Christ to be so large, and the justice of God to be so sure in not rejecting one true work of the Spirit, that it gathers up all the tokens it can find in the character of a dear one, and says, 'Peradventure this is of the Spirit of righteousness in Christ; wilt thou destroy, and spare not for this?'

But prayer, in such a case, is not the impulse of an instant: the love of a christian heart can only be satisfied with habitual pleading; and this habit of heart, being intercourse with God, leads the christian to spiritual consideration, by which warm exaggerations are reduced. When Abraham bethought him of all the foul fame of Sodom, he felt that to look for fifty was too large a hope. The Lord conceded all he asked:—if there be fifty I will spare all. But could there be fifty? thought Abraham. Let me say five-and-forty—forty—thirty—twenty. And so it is with the affectionate heart of a christian for his worldly kindred. The process of a little pleading brings him to see the foolishness of extravagant hope; and by degrees he learns to give up the expectation, which occasional tokens for good had led him fondly to entertain, that such were signs of spiritual life. He gives up the kind disposition as a

token—he lays no stress upon the regularity of attendance at public ordinances—he will not press the hope that arose when family prayer was tolerated. Thus he reduces the scale of his hope from fifty to forty—thirty—twenty. He knows from the word of God, that if any one of these were true signs of real conversion, the difficulty would be at an end—the averted wrath would already have spent its force upon the cross at Calvary. Even as God consented that forty, thirty—twenty should have saved Sodom, and yet the pleader pleaded on; so the loving heart of the christian pleads on in anxious doubt of the object, though knowing that if such fruits of the Spirit were really brought forth, the salvation would have been settled. Oh! how the realizing of eternity for a loved object on the verge of the grave brings down the high imagination of hope, that went up before like a bubble-balloon from every frothy excitement of apparent seriousness. God desires us to leave the object in his hands; and all our searchings in the divine word, only lead us to see his sure but merciful dealings with a sinner: yet does he also require that we should exercise our affections in such pleading with Him, as draws out fresh experience of his love through his replies, and prepares us for his compliance upon the essential petition; which, springing forth from a christian heart, shall be answered as soon as it has been disentangled from the encumbering carnality with which it is allowed in the children of Adam.

There are many evidences of the workings of personal grace in Abraham in the progress of this pleading, which it will be well for christians to consider attentively, in order that they may use this fact as a lesson. Much as there was of boldness as well as earnestness in Abraham's first appeal, the

ready and condescending compliance with it received seems to have produced its proper effect upon a heart under the teachings of the Spirit. A sense of the presumption of his request seems to have inspired Abraham with humility: this next word is an apology; "Behold I have taken upon me to speak to Jehovah—I, who am but dust and ashes." Such is the effect produced upon a christian's heart, when the burst of anxiety for the salvation of a loved one of the world in peril of God's wrath has led him to ask more largely, and to speak more daringly, than he would have ventured to do, unless he had been stirred by the fear of God's impending wrath against sin. And then, wondering at himself, he turns to the word of God, and finds that the daring of his love for a perishing soul has not made him overpass the bound of God's wonderful condescension in giving power to prayer. Yet being humbled, he begins to enquire how it was that such a one as he could dare to take upon himself to speak to the Lord, on behalf of such a one as a worldly sinner. This alarm and self-abasement not being checked by anything in the word of God, but rather encouraged, the heart goes on pleading; and that too with all the special wisdom which is gathered up from a spiritual study of the character of God. The special pleading drawn forth in the courts of the Lord before a throne of grace by the Spirit, who is a Spirit of understanding and of love, this is very different from the special pleading with which the scribe and the disputer of this world draw fine distinctions to gain an end by crooked ways. Abraham took the highest point he had reached, and strove to gain the end in view, by gently fathoming with a straight line the depths of God's love. Sodom can scarcely hold fifty righteous ones—how many less than fifty will serve as the salt to keep

from destruction the putrifying mass? And so the christian, pleading for a loved one, doubts and trembles over the mere formal features of a christian character, through which he is forced to discern the lineaments of the old Adam too plainly; and, wondering whether there can be warrant for hopefulness, he gently descends to the depth of God's love, and provides against the possible deceitfulness of his hope on this or that point: he still pleads for the dying one; if this much be of grace—or even thus much less—or even thus little—will not this manifest that the Lord's wrath shall not fall on him, since it has fallen on Christ for him?

But in the course of this pleading, how much of self-distrust constantly appeared in Abraham; "oh! let not the Lord be angry" he said once and again; even "I have taken upon my self to speak." But while he repeats this latter expression of humility, he does so with the very essence of the art of pleading. At first it spoke the language of humility; but when the phrase passes his lips again, there seems to be something in it, rather in the way of justifying his reiterated supplication; since the fact that he had taken upon himself to speak, and had been tolerated, might well be felt to lay upon him a responsibility that would not be discharged, till he had done all that in him lay towards the successful issue of his plea. And who, that has once stood up as "the Lord's remembrancer" concerning the divine promises; and has been permitted to feel the comfort of pouring out the full heart's feelings in prayer—who, in such a case has not felt that, to be called to the work is to be called "to give the Lord no rest" till he has answered and acknowledged the plea?

It was not until Abraham had dared to push his supplication to the very uttermost, that he dared to desist. Yet once more, he says—suppose there be

ten : a petition beyond all bounds of reason, as Abraham must have thought. That thousands upon thousands of most abominable sinners should be leavened by the righteousness of ten—how little could Abraham have ventured upon such a request, when, in the energy of his earnestness on the first thought of the destruction of the cities, he was bold enough to put in the plea on the ground of fifty righteous. But pleading with God occupies us in measuring the length and breadth, the height and depth of his compassion. It fixes our thoughts more and more upon Christ, in whom all the Godhead of love is condensed. And so we learn to dare : and he who has begun to plead for a loved one of the world, under some alarm concerning his state (while on reflection his plea has alarmed himself with the fear that it is enthusiastic), has been taught in the course of his pleading to ask much more ; being led into more intimate self-acquaintance, as Abraham was, and more confident acquaintance with God's readiness to do more than we can ask or think, nay, to shew himself faithful and just in forgiving sins, since he can be just, and the justifier of Him that believeth in Jesus.

But observe well that Abraham never once urged his own personal interest in the object he pleaded for. Lot was in his heart, and doubtless in his mind all the while : but Abraham never said, whether the cities be spared or not, yet for my sake, pity my nephew. All the plea was grounded on the establishment of God's glory. This was put forth in the beginning : " Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right ? " He never imagined a petition which was to make an exception to the rule of God's appointed dealings with man for sin. He relied upon God's character to save the righteous ; and for the righteous' sake to spare yet awhile, the unrighteous.

This, too, is a feature of christian pleading in prayer. The christian's heart says—correct my beloved one—chasten—purify in a furnace—do anything—only give time that the claims of the righteous One may be conveyed to the unrighteous. If there be one touch of Christ manifested—really of Christ's Spirit, it will leaven the whole—only give time for this. And it is the earnest search for this touch of Christ's Spirit in a poor worldly one—this smallest proportion of true grace in his character, as ten in a million—that occupies the affectionate pleader while he cries to God for time. The large charity of his hope, raised upon sudden alarm, fancies, like Abraham, that fifty might be found. The constant contemplation of the one principle of God's glory alone in the salvation of any sinner, clears the view—distinguishes the character—manifests the true danger—but never makes the pleader give up the principle. His only expectation is linked with the glory of God. The Holy Spirit must glorify Christ in any one, however dear to you or to me. That glorifying must be manifested, or the sinner must perish. Abraham never said, 'save Sodom, whether it contain the righteous or not.'

The last verse of the eighteenth chapter contains much comfort for the timid pleader in prayer. The Lord waited to hear Abraham out. He listened to all he had to say. This passage stands in powerful contrast in one respect with that which describes the interview of Jesus with the woman of Canaan. (Matt. xv. 21—28.) Every approach of the suppliant was met in that case by an apparent discouragement, and in this case by a distinct approval. But in both cases the Lord waited to the very end. And so every pleader who wrestles with God, and seems to say, like Jacob, "I will not let thee go," may be sure that the Lord will have patience with

his pleading : only let him come with the faith of the woman of Canaan, and with the charity of Abraham.

And when Abraham had urged his plea to the utmost, he left the matter, calmly and confidently, in the hand of the Lord, and returned to his place ; while the Lord went his way, when he had left communing with Abraham—His way—yes—the Lord's way. *That* shall be the way taken in every case : and the best preparation of heart for the result is that which enables us to say—"It is the Lord : let him do what seemeth him good."

The prayer of Abraham's heart was granted, though he knew not when, or how : and he must have been a long time under the heavy fear that Lot was lost. In chapter xix., verse 27, we are told that "Abraham rose up early in the morning," and went to the place which had been consecrated by his pleading with the Lord in prayer. From thence he could see the devoted cities of the plain. The beauty and fertility that had tempted Lot to separate from Abraham and dwell there, was marred—disfigured—engulphed in horror,—and "the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace." He must have passed a painful night ; and he left his bed of restlessness early. But he must have felt deep pain of heart when he saw that miniature of hell ;—and where could Lot be, but in the midst ? The fire told the tale, that there had not been found ten righteous within the city ;—but where was Lot ? Many a child of God has felt all that Abraham went through now—restless nights of prayerful anxiety, while yet there lingers life in the loved one, not yet sealed outwardly with the Spirit's mark. But he dies :—the soul separates from the body. The prayerful mourner goes to the place where he has often communed with the Lord—he turns the

pages of His holy word—through them he looks upon the fire that is not quenched—as, for instance, through Mark ix. 42-48, or John v. 27-29. Alas! the smoke of eternity goes up as the smoke of a furnace before his mind—and where is the loved one he has lost? He cannot tell any more than Abraham then could of Lot's escape.

But Abraham's prayer had been answered, though that early morning's gaze must have been a great trial to the Patriarch's faith. Yes! Abraham's prayer *was* answered. The Lord was merciful to the man for whom his heart had pleaded. (Gen. xix. 16.) It was Abraham's prayer that was made the instrument of the escape of Lot, when the things of this world, which had ensnared him to dwell with sinners, were consumed, together with their possessors. We are especially told that when this awful destruction took place, it was God's remembrance of Abraham by which he sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow. (Gen. xix. 29.) Therefore the angels had orders on his behalf, and they could do nothing till Lot was safe. (verse 22.) Who shall despair of a soul that has been prayed for, though it has lived in the midst of the world? and who shall give up pleading with the Almighty the heart-plea of love on behalf of a poor worldly one?

But the Lord did more than save Lot from the overthrow. He gave additional time to those that were bound to him with the ties that will not be broken here. There were three who had grown into the very core of Lot's heart—his wife and his two daughters. Send him forth from the flames, and they must even go too. There was no time to dislocate such an adhesion; and so they were saved from the present destruction. They were infatuated, and in love with death because of its face of sin.

So the end was death to them ; but time to turn was granted them because of Lot, and Lot was saved because of Abraham, and Abraham prevailed because of prayer,—because of that prevailing plea which is placed in the power of a christian now, as it was of Abraham then.

It may be said that Abraham's plea prevailed even to the full. He had grounded it on the glory of God—for the sake of ten righteous all the cities would have been saved :—only one righteous was found—and for his sake one city was saved. May not Zoar have been to the cities of the plain as one to ten ? So that, according to the proportion of strict justice, God granted all that Abraham asked. "See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city, for the which thou hast spoken." Lot had spoken for Zoar ; but God remembered Abraham in saving Lot. Here we may observe the echo of the prayer of Abraham from the heart of Lot, and making itself heard again as the voice of the same Spirit, taking the form of agreement between two, to which a blessing is promised. (Matt. xviii. 19.)

But Abraham was "the father of the faithful." Such faith as his could do all things : but how could our's, all weak and worthless as it too often is, hope to prevail as Abraham's did ? The Lord has been pleased to anticipate this excuse, and to shew that, even under the influence of the weakest moment of his faith, he who is admitted a pleader in the courts of heaven, may, nay must, execute his office ; and that prayer is the appointed instrumentality by which God ordinarily works his mercy, through his people to the unconverted. In immediate connection with this pleading of Abraham in the fullness of his charity for the cities of the plain, we have recorded one of the most striking instances of his

sinful unbelief, and want of confidence in God. The destruction which he had witnessed affected his nerves, and awakened his fears. He fled in alarm from the spot where he had seen such evidence of the wrath of God ; and, taking up his abode amongst the godless nations in Gerar, his trembling faith, and shaken confidence, made him resort to self-confident devices, involving the sin and folly of falsehood. (Gen. xx.) Yet in this disheartened condition, and in spite of this sinful stratagem, God not only pitied and protected him, but gave an open testimony to the power of this faithless sinner's intercessory prayer. The Lord laid a curse on Abimelech ; and explained to the king that it was for the protection of His servant Abraham. He instructed him how to act ; but obedience alone to these instructions would not remedy the evil. He told Abimelech, "Abraham shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live ;" and at the end, it is recorded by the Spirit, that "Abraham prayed unto God : and God healed Abimelech." (Gen. xx. 7, 17.)

Surely this has reference to the previous plea of Abraham which had prevailed. It was established as the privilege of the people of God, that they might plead with Jehovah. And this common law of christianity became the written statute when Jesus said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he shall give it you." The recent memorable instance with reference to the cities of the plain had occurred when the faith of Abraham was in the healthiness of its strength ; now the Lord sets forth its power in spite of all the sinfulness of its weakness. What an immense power is that which christians neglect, when they fail to stand before the throne of grace as pleaders with God in intercession for others. Many an aching heart refuses the balm of that remedy which the Lord has provided for a

loving christian. Every tie of tenderness or of blood is given providentially, as the means of exercising this blessed 'privilege of pleading; and those hearts whose affections have been raised to heaven, and find from thence they are painfully dragged down to earth by the weight of some love for a soul that yet remains in the world, may read in the records of Abraham's pleading, the true way of proceeding in such a difficulty. Let them not cut the string that binds them to the loved one—let them not look down from on high, lest they grow giddy and fall back into the world,—but let them look up and importunately plead with the Most High, who shall at length answer with the words He spoke to Abimelech, "My servant shall pray for him, and he shall live,"

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