

The Most High a Prayer Hearing God

by Jonathan Edwards

The Most High is a God who hears prayer and delights in being sought to by prayer.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:13, 1 Kings 3:12, Psalm 65:2, Isaiah 65:24, Matthew 7:7, 1 Corinthians 10:20, Ephesians 3:20, Hebrews 4:16, James 1:5, James 5:16

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Gods Character"

Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches on the character of the Most High as a prayer-hearing God, emphasizing that God graciously takes notice of the prayers of His people, accepts their supplications, and acts in accordance with His acceptance. Edwards explains that God is distinguished from false gods by His ability to hear and answer prayers, and he delves into the reasons why God requires prayer for the bestowment of mercies and why He is so ready to hear prayers. He encourages believers to approach God in prayer with faith, sincerity, and submission, highlighting the privilege and importance of seeking the Most High in prayer.

Transcript

The Most High A Prayer-Hearing God

Dated January, 1735-6 (and 1752). Preached on a fast appointed on the account of epidemical sickness at the eastward of Boston.

Psalms 65:2

O thou that hearest prayer.

THIS psalm seems to be written, either as a psalm of praise to God for some remarkable answer of prayer, in the bestowment of some public mercy, or else on occasion of some special faith and confidence which David had that his prayer would be answered. It is probable that this mercy bestowed, or expected to be bestowed, was some great public mercy for which David had been very earnest and importunate, and had annexed a vow to his prayer. And that he had vowed to God that if he would grant him his request he would render him praise and glory. -- This seems to be the reason why he expresses himself as he does in the first verse of the psalm, "Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Sion; and unto thee shall the vow be performed," i.e. that praise which I have vowed to give thee, on the answer of my prayer, waiteth for thee, to be given thee as soon as thou shalt have answered my prayer; and the vow which I made to thee

shall be performed.

In the verse of the text, there is a prophecy of the glorious times of the gospel, when "all flesh shall come" to the true God, as to the God who heareth prayer, which is here mentioned as what distinguishes the true God from the gods to whom the nations prayed and sought, those gods who cannot hear, and cannot answer their prayer. The time was coming when all flesh should come to that God who doth hear prayer. -- Hence we gather this doctrine, that it is the character of the Most High, that he is a God who hears prayer.

I shall handle this point in the following method:

I. Show that the Most High is a God that hears prayer.

II. That he is eminently such a God.

III. That herein he is distinguished for all false gods.

IV. Give the reasons of the doctrine.

I. The Most High is a God that hears prayer. Though he is infinitely above all and stands in no need of creatures, yet he is graciously pleased to take a merciful notice of poor worms of the dust. He manifests and presents himself as the object of prayer, appears as sitting on a mercy-seat, that men may come to him by prayer. When they stand in need of anything, he allows them to come, and ask it of him, and he is wont to hear their prayers. God in his Word hath given many promises that he will hear their prayers. The Scripture is full of such examples, and in his dispensations towards his church, manifests himself to be a God that hears prayer.

Here it may be inquired what is meant by God's hearing prayer? There are two things implied in it.

First, his accepting the supplications of those who pray to him. Their address to him is well taken, he is well-pleased with it. He approves of their asking such mercies as they request of him and approves of their manner of doing it. He accepts of their prayers as an offering to him. He accepts the honor they do him in prayer.

Second, he acts agreeably to his acceptance. He sometimes manifests his acceptance of their prayers by special discoveries of his mercy and sufficiency, which he makes to them in prayer, or immediately after. While they are praying, he gives them sweet views of his glorious grace, purity, sufficiency, and sovereignty, and enables them, with great quietness, to rest in him, to leave themselves and their prayers with him, submitting to his will and trusting in his grace and faithfulness. Such a manifestation God seems to have made of himself in prayer to Hannah, which quieted and composed her mind, and took away her sadness. We read (1 Sam. 1) how earnest she was, and how exercised in her mind, and that she was a woman of a sorrowful spirit. But she came and poured out her soul before God, and spake out of the abundance of her complaint and grief. Then we read that she went away and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad, verse 18, which seems to have been from some refreshing discoveries which God had made of himself to her, to enable her quietly to submit to his will and trust in his mercy, whereby God manifested his acceptance of her. -- Not that I conclude persons can hence argue, that the particular thing which they ask will certainly be given them, or that they can particularly foretell from it what God will do in answer to their prayers, any further than he has promised in his Word. Yet God may, and doubtless does, thus testify his acceptance of their prayers, and from hence they may confidently rest in his providence [and] in his merciful ordering and disposing, with respect to the thing which they ask. Again,

God manifests his acceptance of their prayers, by doing for them agreeably to their needs and supplications. He not only inwardly and spiritually discovers his mercy to their souls by his Spirit, but outwardly by dealing mercifully with them in his providence, in consequence of their prayers, and by causing an agreeableness between his providence and their prayers. -- I proceed now,

II. To show that the Most High is eminently a God that hears prayer. This appears in several things.

First, in his giving such free access to him by prayer. God in his Word manifests himself ready at all times to allow us this privilege. He sits on a throne of grace, and there is no veil to hide this throne and keep us from it. The veil is rent from the top to the bottom. The way is open at all times, and we may go to God as often as we please. Although God be infinitely above us, yet we may come with boldness. Heb. 4:14, 16, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." How wonderful is it that such worms as we should be allowed to come boldly at all times to so great a God! -- Thus God indulges all kinds of persons, of all nations. 1 Cor. 1:2, 3, "unto all that in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours; grace be unto you," etc. Yea, God allows the most vile and unworthy: the greatest sinners are allowed to come through Christ. And he not only allows, but encourages and frequently invites them, yea, manifests himself as delighting in being sought to by prayer. Pro. 15:8, "The prayer of the upright is his delight;" and in the Song 2:14, we have Christ saying to the spouse, "O my dove, let me hear they voice; for sweet is they voice." The voice of the saints in prayer is sweet unto Christ, he delights to hear it. He allows them to be earnest and importunate, yea, to the degree as to take no denial, and as it were to give him no rest, and even encouraging them so to do. Isa. 62:6, 7, "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest." Thus Christ encourages us, in the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, Luke 18. So, in the parable of the man who went to his friend at midnight, Luke 11:5, etc.

Thus God allowed Jacob to wrestle with him, yea, to be resolute in it, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." It is noticed with approbation when men are violent for the kingdom of heaven and take it by force. Thus Christ suffered the blind man to be most importunate and unceasing in his cries to him, Luke 18:38, 39. He continued crying, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me." Others who were present rebuked him, that he should hold his peace, looking upon it as too great a boldness and an indecent behavior towards Christ, thus to cry after him as he passed by. But Christ did not rebuke him, but stood and commanded him to be brought unto him, saying, "What wilt thou that I should do to thee?" And when the blind man had told him, Christ graciously granted his request. -- The freedom of access that God gives, appears also in allowing us to come to him by prayer for everything we need, both temporal and spiritual, whatever evil we need to be delivered from, or good we would obtain. Phil. 4:6, "Be careful for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

Second, that God is eminently of this character, appears in his hearing prayer so readily. He often manifests his readiness to hear prayer, by giving an answer so speedily, sometimes while they are yet speaking, and sometimes before they pray, when they only have a design of praying. So ready is God to hear prayer, that he takes notice of the first purpose of praying, and sometimes bestows mercy thereupon. Isa. 65:24, "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." We read, that when Daniel was making humble and earnest supplication, God sent an angel to comfort him and to assure him of an answer, Dan. 9:20-24. When God defers for the present to answer the prayer of faith, it is not from any backwardness to answer, but for the good of his people sometimes, that they may be better prepared for the mercy before they receive it, or because another time would be

the best and fittest on some other account. And even then, when God seems to delay an answer, the answer is indeed hastened, as in Luke 18:7, 8, "And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you, that he will avenge them speedily." Sometimes, when the blessing seems to tarry, God is even then at work to bring it about in the best time and the best manner. Hab. 2:3, "Though it tarry, wait for it; it will come, it will not tarry."

Third, that the Most High is eminently one that hears prayer, appears by his giving so liberally in answer to prayer. Jam. 1:5, 6, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not." Men often show their backwardness to give, both by the scantiness of their gifts and by upbraiding those who ask of them. They will be sure to put them in mind of some faults when they give them anything, but on the contrary, God both gives liberally and upbraids us not with our undeservings. He is plenteous and rich in his communications to those who call upon him. Psa. 86:5, "For those art good and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all that call upon thee." And Rom. 10:12, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." -- Sometimes, God not only gives the thing asked, but he gives them more than is asked. So he did to Solomon. 1 Kin. 3:12, 13, "Behold, I have done according to thy words; lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee, before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour; so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee, all thy days." Yea, God will give more to his people than they can either ask or think, as is implied in Eph. 3:20, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

Fourth, that God is eminently of this character appears by the greatness of the things which he has often done in answer to prayer. Thus, when Esau, was coming out against his brother Jacob, with four hundred men, without doubtfully resolved to cut him off, Jacob prayed and God turned the heart of Esau, so that he met Jacob in a very friendly manner, Gen. 32. So in Egypt, at the prayers of Moses, God brought those dreadful plagues, and at his prayer removed them again. When Samson was ready to perish with thirst, he prayed to God, and he brought water out of a dry jaw-bone, for his supply, Jdg. 15:18, 19. And when he prayed, after his strength was departed from him, God strengthened him, so as to pull down the temple of Dagon on the Philistines: so that those whom he slew at his death were more than all those whom he slew in his life. -- Joshua prayed to God, and said, "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon." And God heard his prayer and caused the sun and moon to stand still accordingly. The prophet "Elijah was a man of like passion" with us, "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. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit;" as the apostle James observes, Jam. 5:17, 18. So God confounded the army of Zerah, the Ethiopian, of a thousand thousand, in answer to the prayer of Asa, 2 Chr. 14:9, etc. And God sent an angel and slew in one night an hundred and eighty-five thousand men of Sennacherib's army, in answer to Hezekiah's prayer, 2 Kin. 19:14-16, 19, 35.

Fifth, this truth appears, in that God is, as it were, overcome by prayer. When God is displeased by sin, he manifests his displeasure, comes out against us in his providence, and seems to oppose and resist us. In such cases, God is, speaking after the manner of men, overcome by humble and fervent prayer. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," Jam. 5:16. It has a great power in it: such a prayer-hearing God is the Most High, that he graciously manifests himself as conquered by it. Thus God appeared to oppose Jacob in what he sought of him. Yet Jacob was resolute and overcame. Therefore God changed his name from Jacob to Israel, for says he, "as a prince thou hast power with God and with

men, and hast prevailed," Gen. 32:28. A mighty prince indeed! Hos 12:4, "Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed; He wept and made supplication unto him." -- When his anger was provoked against Israel, and he appeared to be ready to consume them in his hot displeasure, Moses stood in the gap, and by his humbled and earnest prayer and supplication, averted the stroke of divine vengeance, Exo. 32:9, etc. Num. 14:11, etc.

III. Herein the most high God is distinguished from false gods. The true God is the only one of this character. There is no other of whom it may be said, that he heareth prayer.

Many of those things that are worshipped as gods are idols made by their worshippers: mere stocks and stones that know nothing. They are indeed made with ears, but they hear not the prayers of them that cry to them. They have eyes, but they see not, etc. Psa. 115:5, 6. -- Others, though not the work of men's hands, yet are things without life. Thus, many worship the sun, moon, and stars, which though glorious creatures, yet are not capable of knowing anything of the wants and desires of those who pray to them. -- Some worship certain kinds of animals, as the Egyptians were wont to worship bulls, which though not without life, yet are destitute of that reason whereby they would be capable of knowing the requests of their worshippers. Others worship devils instead of the true God. 1 Cor. 10:20, "but I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils." These, though beings of great power, have not knowledge necessary to capacitate them fully to understand the state, circumstances, necessities, and desires of those who pray to them. But the true God perfectly knows the circumstances of everyone that prays to him throughout the world. Though millions pray to him at once, in different parts of the world, it is no more difficult for him who is infinite in knowledge, to take notice of all than of one alone. God is so perfect in knowledge, that he does not need to be informed by us in order to a knowledge of our wants, for he know what things we need before we ask him. The worshippers of false gods were wont to lift their voices and cry aloud, lest their gods should fail of hearing them, as Elijah tauntingly bid the worshippers of Baal [to] do, 1 Kin. 18:27. But the true God hears the silent petitions of his people. He needs not that we should cry aloud: yea, he knows and perfectly understands when we only pray in our hearts, as Hannah did, 1 Sam. 1:13.

Idols are but vanities and lies: in them is no help. As to power or knowledge, they are nothing. As the apostle says, 1 Cor. 8:4, "An idol is nothing in the world." As to images, they are so far from having power to answer prayer, that they are not able to act, "They have hands, and handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; neither speak they through their throat." They, therefore, that make them and pray to them, are senseless and sottish, and make themselves, as it were, stocks and stones, like unto them: Psa. 115:7, 8, and Jer. 10:5. "They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not; they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil; neither also is it in them to do good." As to the hosts of heaven, the sun, moon, and stars: although mankind receive benefit by them, yet they act only by necessity of nature. Therefore they have no power to do anything in answer to prayers. And devils, though worshipped as gods, are not able, if they had disposition, to make those happy who worship them, and [they] can do nothing at all but by divine permission and as subject to the disposal of Divine Providence. When the children of Israel departed from the true God to idols, and yet cried to him in their distress, he reproved them for their folly, by bidding them cry to the gods whom they had served, for deliverance in the time of their tribulation, Jos. 10:14. So God challenges those gods themselves. Isa. 41:23, 24, "Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods; yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed and behold it together. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought; an abomination is he that chooseth you." -- These false gods, instead of helping those who pray to them,

cannot help themselves. The devils are miserable tormented spirits. They are bound in chains of darkness for their rebellion against the true God and cannot deliver themselves. Nor have they any more disposition to help mankind than a parcel of hungry wolves or lions would have to protect and help a flock of lambs. And those that worship and pray to them get not their goodwill by serving them. All the reward that Satan will give them for the service which they do him, is to devour them. -- I proceed now.

IV. To give the reasons of the doctrine, which I would do in answer to these two inquires. First, why God requires prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies, and secondly, why God is so ready to hear prayers of men?

INQ. I. Why does God require prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies?

It is not in order that God may be informed of our wants or desires. He is omniscient, and with respect to his knowledge, unchangeable. God never gains any knowledge by information. He knows what we want a thousand times more perfectly than we do ourselves, before we ask him. For though, speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes represented as if he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people. Yet it is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers. For it is no more possible that there should be any new inclination or will in God than new knowledge. The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by anything in the creature. But the spring of God's beneficence is within himself only. He is self-moved, and whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature, but in God's own good pleasure. It is the will of God to bestow mercy in this way, viz. in answer to prayer, when he designs beforehand to bestow mercy, yea, when he has promised it, as Eze. 36:35, 37, "I the Lord have spoken it, and will do it. Thus saith the Lord, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." God has been pleased to constitute prayer, to be antecedent to the bestowment of mercy. And he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer, as though he were prevailed on by prayer. -- When the people of God are stirred up to prayer, it is the effect of his intention to show mercy. Therefore, he pours out the spirit of grace and supplication.

There may be two reasons given why God requires prayer in order to the bestowment of mercy: one especially respects God, and the other respects ourselves.

First, with respect to God, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgment of our dependence on him to his glory. As he has made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures. And it is fit that he should require this of those who would be the subjects of his mercy, that we, when we desire to receive any mercy from him, should humbly supplicate the Divine Being. For the bestowment of that mercy, is but a suitable acknowledgment of our dependence on the power and mercy of God for that which we need, and but a suitable honor paid to the great Author and Fountain of all good.

Second, with respect to ourselves, God requires prayer of us in order to the bestowment of mercy, because it tends to prepare us for its reception. Fervent prayer many ways tends to prepare the heart. Hereby is excited a sense of our need, and of the value of the mercy which we seek, and at the same times earnest desires for it, whereby the mind is more prepared to prize it, to rejoice in it when bestowed, and to be thankful for it. Prayer, with suitable confession, may excite a sense of our unworthiness of the mercy we seek. And the placing of ourselves in the immediate presence of God, may make us sensible of his majesty, and in a sense fit to receive mercy of him. Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of faith in God's sufficiency, that so we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received.

INQ. II. Why is God so ready to hear the prayers of men? -- To this I answer,

First, because he is a God of infinite grace and mercy. It is indeed a very wonderful thing, that so great a God should be so ready to hear our prayers, though we are so despicable and unworthy. That he should give free access at all times to everyone, should allow us to be importunate without esteeming it an indecent boldness, [and] should be so rich in mercy to them that call upon him: that worms of the dust should have such power with God by prayer, that he should do such great things in answer to their prayers, and should show himself, as it were, overcome by them. This is very wonderful, when we consider the distance between God and us, and how we have provoked him by our sins, and how unworthy we are of the least gracious notice. It cannot be from any need that God stands in of us, for our goodness extends not to him. Neither can it be from anything in us to incline the heart of God to us. It cannot be from any worthiness in our prayers, which are in themselves polluted things. But it is because God delights in mercy and condescension. He is herein infinitely distinguished from all other Gods. He is the great fountain of all good, from whom goodness flows as light from the sun.

Second, we have a glorious Mediator, who has prepared the way, that our prayers may be heard consistently with the honor of God's justice and majesty. Not only has God in himself mercy sufficient for this, but the Mediator has provided that this mercy may be exercised consistently with the divine honor. Through him we may come to God for mercy. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No man can come to the Father but by him. This Mediator hath done three things to make way for the hearing of our prayers.

1. He hath by his blood made atonement for sin, so that our guilt need not stand in the way, as a separating wall between God and us, and that our sins might not be a cloud through which our prayers cannot pass. By his atonement he hath made the way to the throne of grace open. God would have been infinitely gracious if there had been no Mediator, but the way to the mercy-seat would have been blocked up. But Christ hath removed whatever stood in the way. The veil which was before the mercy-seat "is rent from the top to the bottom" by the death of Christ. If it had not been for this, our guilt would have remained as a wall of brass to hinder our approach. But all is removed by his blood, Heb. 10:17, etc.

2. Christ, by his obedience, has purchased this privilege, viz. that the prayers of those who believe in him should be heard. He has not only removed the obstacles to our prayers, but has merited a hearing of them. His merits are the incense that is offered with the prayers of the saints, which renders them a sweet savor to God, and acceptable in his sight. Hence the prayers of the saints have such power with God. Hence at the prayer of a poor worm of the dust, God stopped the sun in his course for about the space of a whole day. Hence Jacob as a prince had power with God, and prevailed. Our prayers would be of no account, and of no avail with God, were it not for the merits of Christ.

3. Christ enforces the prayers of his people, by his intercession at the right hand of God in heaven. He hath entered for us into the holy of holies, with the incense which he hath provided, and there he makes continual intercession for all that come to God in his name, so that their prayers come to God the Father through his hands, if I may so say, which is represented in Rev. 8:3, 4, "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar, which is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God, out of the angel's hand." -- This was typified of old by the priest's offering incense in the temple, at the time when the people were offering up their prayers to God, as Luke 1:10, "And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense."

APPLICATION

Hence we may learn how highly we are privileged, in that we have the Most High revealed to us, who is a God that heareth prayer. The greater part of mankind are destitute of this privilege. Whatever their necessities are, whatever their calamities or sorrows, they have no prayer-hearing God to whom they may go. If they go to the gods whom they worship, and cry to them ever so earnestly, it will be in vain. They worship either lifeless things that can neither help them nor know that they need help, or wicked cruel spirits, who are their enemies, and wish nothing but their misery, and who, instead of helping them, are from day to day working their ruin and watching over them as a hungry lion watches over his prey.

How are we distinguished from them, in that we have the true God made known to us: a God of infinite grace and mercy, a God full of compassion to the miserable, who is ready to pity us under all our troubles and sorrows, to hear our cries, and to give us all the relief which we need, a God who delights in mercy and is rich unto all that call upon him! How highly privileged are we, in that we have the holy Word of this same God, to direct us how to seek for mercy! And whatever difficulties or distress we are in, we may go to him with confidence and great encouragement. What a comfort may this be to us! And what reason have we to rejoice in our privileges, to prize them so highly, and to bless God that he hath been so merciful to us, as to give us his Word, and reveal himself to us; and that he hath not left us to cry for help to stocks and stones, and devils, as he has left many thousands of others.

OBJECTION. I have often prayed to God for certain mercies, and he has not heard my prayers. -- To this I answer,

I. It is no argument, that God is not a prayer-hearing God, if he give not to men what they ask of him to consume upon their lusts. Oftentimes when men pray for temporal good things, they desire them for no good end, but only to gratify their pride or sensuality. If they pray for worldly good things chiefly from a worldly spirit and make an idol of the world, it is no wonder that God doth not hear their prayers. Jam. 4:3, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, to consume it upon your lusts." If you request him to give you something of which you will make an idol, and set up in opposition to him -- or will use as weapons of warfare against him, or as instruments to serve his enemies -- no wonder that God will not hear you. If God should hear such prayers, he would act as his own enemy, inasmuch as he would bestow them to serve his enemies.

II. It is no argument that God is not a prayer-hearing God, that he heareth not insincere and unbelieving prayers. How can we expect that he should have any respect to that which has no sincerity in it? God looketh not at words, but at the heart; and it is fit that he should do so. If men pray only in words, and not in heart, what are their prayers good for? And why should that God who searches the heart, and tries the reins, have any respect of them? -- Sometimes men do nothing but dissemble in their prayers. And when they do so, it is no argument that God is the less a prayer-hearing God, that he doth not hear such prayers, for it is no argument of want of mercy. Sometimes they pray for that in words which they really desire not in their hearts, as that he would purge them from sin, when at the same time they show by their practice, that they do not desire to be purged from sin, while they love and choose it and are utterly averse to parting with it. In like manner, they often dissemble in the pretense and show, which they make in their prayers, of dependence on God for mercies, and of a sense of his sufficiency to supply them. In our coming to God, and praying to him for such and such things, there is a show that we are sensible we are dependent on him for them, and that he is sufficient to give them to us. But men sometimes seem to pray, while not sensible of their dependence on God, nor do they think him sufficient to supply them. For all the

while they trust in themselves, and have no confidence in God. -- They show in words as though they were beggars, but in heart they come as creditors, and look on God as their debtor. In words they seem to ask for things as the fruit of free grace. But in heart they account it would be hard, unjust, and cruel, if God should deny them. In words they seem humble and submissive, but in heart they are proud and contentious. There is no prayer but in their words.

It doth not render God at all the less a prayer-hearing God, that he distinguishes, as an all-seeing God, between real prayers and pretend ones. Such prayers as those which I have just now been mentioning, are not worthy of the name in the eyes of him who searches the heart and sees things as they are. -- That prayer which is not of faith is insincere, for prayer is a show or manifestation of dependence on God and trust in his sufficiency and mercy. Therefore, where this trust or faith is wanting, there is no prayer in the sight of God. And however God is sometimes pleased to grant the requests of those who have no faith, yet he has not obliged himself so to do. Nor is it an argument of his not being a prayer-hearing God, when he hears them not.

III. It is no argument that he is not a prayer-hearing God, that he exercises his own wisdom as to the time and manner of answering prayer. Some of God's people are sometimes ready to think that he does not hear their prayers, because he does [not] answer them at times when they expected, when indeed God hears them, and will answer them, in the time and way to which his own wisdom directs. -- The business of prayer is not to direct God, who is infinitely wise and needs not any of our direction, who knows what is best for us ten thousand times better than we, and knows what time and what way are best. It is fit that he should answer prayer, and as an infinitely wise God in the exercise of his own wisdom, and not ours. God will deal as a father with us, in answering our requests. But a child is not to expect that the father's wisdom be subject to his, nor ought he to desire it, but should esteem it a privilege, that the parent will provide for him according to his own wisdom.

As to particular temporal blessings for which we pray, it is no argument that he is not a prayer-hearing God, because he bestows them not upon us. For it may be that God sees the things for which we pray not to be best for us. If so, it would be no mercy in him to bestow them upon us, but a judgment. Such things, therefore, ought always to be asked with submission to the divine will. God can answer prayer, though he bestow not the very thing for which we pray. He can sometimes better answer the lawful desires and good end we have in prayer another way. If our end be our own good and happiness, God can perhaps better answer that end in bestowing something else than in the bestowment of that very thing which we ask. And if the main good we aim at in our prayer be attained, our prayer is answered, though not in the bestowment of the individual thing which we sought. And so that may still be true which was before asserted, that God always hears the prayer OF FAITH. God never once failed of hearing a sincere and believing prayer; and those promises forever hold good, "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you: for every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."

Another use of this doctrine may be of reproof to those that neglect the duty of prayer. If we enjoy so great a privilege as to have the prayer-hearing God revealed to us, how great will be our folly and inexcusableness if we neglect the privilege, or make no use of it, and deprive ourselves of the advantage by not seeking this God by prayer. They are hereby reprov'd who neglect the great duty of secret prayer, which is more expressly required in the Word of God than any other kind. What account can those persons give of themselves, who neglect so known a duty? It is impossible that any among us should be ignorant of this command of God. How daring, therefore, is their wickedness who live in the neglect of this

duty! And what can they answer to their Judge, when he shall call them to an account for it?

Here I shall briefly say something to an EXCUSE which some may be ready to make for themselves. Some may be ready to say If I do pray, my prayer will not be the prayer of faith, because I am in a natural condition, and have no faith.

This excuses not from obedience to a plain command of God. The command is to all to whom the command shall come. God not only directs godly persons to pray, but others also. In the beginning of the second chapter of Proverbs, God directs all persons to cry after wisdom and to lift up their voices for understanding, in order to their obtaining the fear and knowledge of God. And in Jam. 1:5, the apostle says, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God." And Peter directed Simon Magus to repent and pray to God, if perhaps the thought of his heart might be forgiven him, Acts 8:22. Therefore when God says, do thus or thus, it is not for us to make excuses, but we must do the thing required. Besides,

God is pleased sometimes to answer the prayers of unbelievers. Indeed he hears not their prayers for their goodness or acceptableness, or because of any true respect to him manifested in them, for there is none. Nor has he obliged himself to answer such prayers. Yet he is pleased sometimes, of his sovereign mercy, to pity wicked men, and hear their cries. Thus he heard the cries of the Ninevites (Jonah 3) and the prayer of Ahab, 1 Kin. 21:27, 28. Though there be no regard to God in their prayers yet he, of his infinite grace, is pleased to have respect to their desires of their own happiness, and to grant their requests. He may, and sometimes does, hear the cries of wicked men, as he hears the hungry ravens when they cry, Psa. 147:9. And as he opens his bountiful hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing, Psa. 145:16. Besides the prayers of sinners, though they have no goodness in them, yet are made a means of a preparation for mercy.

Finally, seeing we have such a prayer-hearing God as we have heard, let us be much employed in the duty of prayer. Let us pray with all prayer and supplication. Let us live prayerful lives, continuing instant in prayer, watching thereunto with all perseverance. Praying always, without ceasing, earnestly, and not fainting.

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