THE

**THEOLOGICAL WORKS**

OF THE

**REV. THOMAS SCOTT,**

AUTHOR OF A COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE.

CONTAINING

THE FORCE OF TRUTH,—TREATISE ON REPENTANCE,—GROWTH IN GRACE, SERMON ON ELECTION AND FINAL PERSEVERANCE,—SERMONS ON SELECT SUBJECTS,—ESSAYS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT SUBJECTS IN RELIGION, AND THE NATURE AND WARRANT OF FAITH IN CHRIST.

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THOMAS NELSON AND PETER BROWN.

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ESSAY XXIII.

On Prayer.

As “every good and every perfect gift cometh from above,” so nothing can be done aright, in any of those things that accompany salvation, except as we seek communications from God by the prayer of faith. It must, therefore, be considered as essential to the design of this compendious publication, to treat expressly on a subject of such great use and importance. The worship, which the Lord requires of us, may be distinguished into adoration, thanksgiving, and supplication. Contemplating the glories of his nature, as displayed in his works, and revealed in his word, we express our reverential awe of his greatness and majesty, and our admiring love of his infinite excellency, by adoring praises, and by celebrating the honour and harmony of all his attributes: recollecting our personal obligations unto him as our Creator, providential Benefactor, and Saviour, we express our grateful sense of them in thanksgiving, general and particular: whilst the desire of happiness, and love of our fellow-creatures, joined to a conviction of our weakness and poverty, and a confidence in the Lord’s goodness and mercy, dictate prayers for ourselves and others: and in all these respects we render to the Lord the glory due to his name. In speaking, therefore, more particularly concerning prayer, it is not meant to exclude or overlook the other parts of divine worship, but rather to consider them as connected with it, and as bearing a proportion in experience to the enlargement of our hearts, “in making our requests known unto God.” Yet, as prayer is especially the employment of poor and helpless sinners on earth, and the introduction, as it were, to those praises and thanksgivings which are here anticipations of the work and worship of heaven, so it may be proper, in this place, to confine our inquires principally to this part of divine worship.

Prayer, in its very nature, is the expression of dependence, indigence, desire, and expectation. Petitions can scarcely be offered with propriety to those on whom a man has no kind of dependence; the rich will rather buy than beg; but he that has no money, and is unable to earn any, is likely to be induced by necessity to the humiliating expedient of supplicating relief; yet he can heartily ask for nothing of which he is not in want, or which he feels no desire to obtain; and at last, whatever his dependence, indigence, or desires may be, he will not be disposed to petition any one, whom he considers as totally unable or unwilling to relieve him. Prayer, therefore, in the most general sense, implies a belief, and contains an acknowledgment of the being and perfections of God, of his presence with us, and of our dependence on him for “life and breath and all things.” It includes a consciousness, that we are insufficient for our own happiness; that we cannot defend ourselves from dangers and calamities, nor secure our lives, health, limbs, senses, mental powers, possessions, relatives, &c.; that we cannot obtain the sure supply of all our wants, nor find comfort in life or death; and that all our fellow-creatures are unable to do these things for us. It further supposes, that we earnestly desire the things for which we pray; and believe that the Lord is able, and hope that he is willing, to grant the request which we present unto him: “He that cometh unto God, must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him,” (Heb. xi. 6.) It is, therefore, evident, that all, who deny the particular providential government of God, and so ascribe everything to second causes, independently producing their effects, by chance or necessity, as to exclude the immediate operation of the Great First Cause, cannot with any propriety of language be said to pray. Whatever sense they may have of their indigence, and whatever may be their hopes and desires, they cannot feel a dependence, or fix their expectations on God; and every expression, which seems like prayer, is either used by such men as a mere expletive without meaning, or it must be a virtual renunciation, *in that instance,* of their avowed principles. But we are not so much concerned to inquire about the prayer that might be offered by rational creatures, who, however faultless, are *in themselves* indigent and dependent, as about that of fallen and ruined sinners, for such we all are. This part of worship, indeed, may be considered as a duty required by the divine law: for the command “of loving God with all our hearts,” &c., certainly requires all men to seek to him to make them happy in his favour and presence; and sinners (if allowed to hope for such a blessing) must surely be bound to desire and ask for this forfeited felicity; for how could any reasonable being be supposed to love God supremely, who did not desire, and would not request, restoration to his favour, renewal to his image, the enjoyment of his love, and the capacity of glorifying him?

Nevertheless, prayer is here considered especially as a means of grace to which we are directed and encouraged by the gospel. It is therefore, in this sense, an expression of our entire dependence on the unmerited mercy of God, as justly condemned transgressors, for pardon, acceptance, and all things pertaining to eternal salvation. It springs from “poverty of spirit,” or a humble consciousness that we are “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked,” (Rev. iii. 17, 18); that we have neither wisdom, righteousness, holiness, strength, or any disposition and ability for those things to which we are exhorted by the word of God; and that none of our fellow-creatures can give us any effectual help in this our deplorable condition. It implies sincere and vigorous desires, yea, hungerings and thirstings after God and spiritual blessings, (which cannot be bribed, diverted, or assuaged by worldly things), arising from a deep conviction of mind, that the declarations of Scripture concerning a future state, the resurrection of the dead, judgment, heaven and hell, are great realities, compared with which all else is a vanishing dream and an empty shadow. It imports also, that we have a prevailing persuasion and hope, that notwithstanding our sinfulness and helpless misery, the Lord is ready to bestow eternal blessings on all who apply for them in the way of his appointment. These dispositions, or preparations of heart for prayer, (Psalm x. 17), admit of various degrees, but without some measure of them no man is capable of praying aright. They who are wise in their own eyes, cannot be disposed to ask wisdom of God; the Publican’s prayer cannot be the language of the proud Pharisee’s heart; nor can the sensual, avaricious, or ambitious, *sincerely* request the mortification of their favourite passions, or the renewal of their souls to the Divine image, unless some contrary influence hath begun to change their judgment and dispositions. Hence arises that difficulty which men generally experience about prayer, and the need they have of forms and helps, even in their most secret retirement; for, *in this case*, such forms are often a vain effort to teach a man to pray for those blessings which are diametrically opposite to the prevailing dispositions and inclinations of his heart. The starving wretch, whose urgent wants have overcome his reluctancy to beg, needs only encouragement, and words flow spontaneously from his genuine desires of relief; but the rich man who should choose to act the beggar, must learn his part, and how to perform it, by rule, study, and practice. The fears, hopes, and desires of the condemned criminal inspire him with an energetic, though perhaps rude eloquence, when allowed to supplicate the clemency of his prince; and even the little child finds apt words to ask his parent for food, and to complain of cold or pain. Why then cannot men find language, when they would beseech the Lord to give them the blessings promised in his word? Because the state of their hearts is so contrary to those blessings, that they feel no want or desire of them. Did experience prove, that the Lord uniformly conferred health, long life, wealth, success, honour, &c., on all that prayed for them, men would generally get over their reluctancy to this humiliating service, (notwithstanding their natural independence of spirit), and find no difficulty in framing pertinent, earnest, and importunate petitions for things so suited to their carnal minds. Yet they find themselves not only reluctant, but strangely at a loss, when they would pray for spiritual gifts: wherefore? because they are not congenial to the desires of their hearts. When our Lord on earth “went about doing good,” they who felt their miseries, and earnestly desired relief, expecting it from his power and love, applied to him with suitable and energetic petitions: but others were more ready to say with the unclean spirit, “What have I to do with thee, Jesus;” or to “entreat him,” with the Gadarenes, “to depart out of their coasts,” than to cry after him, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy upon me!” Pride, therefore, a carnal mind, alienation from God, contempt of spiritual blessings, and unbelief, are the sole reasons why men neglect prayer, or are unable to pray aright, except by the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

But when we consider how great, glorious, and holy the Lord is, and how guilty and vile we are; the question seems not so much to be, whether the sinner ought to pray; as whether he may come with his supplications into the presence of his offended Sovereign? The humble and self-abased will not doubt but that the permission given to a rebellious worm, to present a petition for pardon and salvation to the glorious God, is an act of grace. Indeed it is always looked upon as such, when a prince receives a petition from a rebel under a deserved sentence of condemnation. But the Scripture places this matter in a much stronger light: for the whole *legal* constitution concerning the sanctuary, the veil, the priesthood, and high-priesthood, the sacrifices, burning of incense, &c., and especially the great day of atonement, (on which alone even the high-priest might enter within the veil to the mercy-seat, with the blood of the sin-offerings, and the smoke of the fragrant incense;) were most evidently designed to show what intervening obstacles must be removed, before the God of infinite justice and holiness could, consistently with his glory, permit sinners to approach him, even on a throne of grace, to present their humble supplications for pardon and reconciliation. And, though under the New Testament we are invited “to come boldly to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy,” &c., yet we have no access, except by “the new and living way, which Jesus hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say his flesh,” given as a sacrifice for sin, (Heb. iv. 16; x. 19‒22); and by his high-priesthood, which is the substance of all those ancient shadows. Whilst therefore we speak of the encouragements given to the vilest of sinners, even from the first moment that they desire mercy, to present their prayers before the throne of grace; and whilst we determine, that prayer is a part of the worship required of us by the Divine law, and therefore an universal duty, we should never forget, that it is a most surprising instance of the Lord’s condescension and compassion and one of the most valuable privileges, that we are allowed to make our requests known unto him, with well-grounded hopes of acceptance; for those actions may be *our* indispensable duty, which through our guilt and pollution it may yet be totally improper for the Lord to accept at our hands, (Isaiah i. 1‒15).

In order to encourage the prayers of sinners, the Lord displays his glory on a throne of grace; here he “waits to be gracious,” and to dispense pardons and every blessing to all who ask for them, by faith in Jesus Christ. Had he been revealed merely as seated on a throne of glory, sustaining the character of a righteous Lawgiver, and an impartial Judge, a kind friend to the obedient, but a terrible avenger of the rebellious, it might well have been said, “Jehovah reigneth, let the people tremble;” but as he hath made himself known on a mercy-seat, as “God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,” so it may be said, “the Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.” The whole plan of the gospel, as it relates to the person, righteousness, atonement, and mediation of Emmanuel, is evidently intended to give encouragement to the trembling sinner, to seek mercy from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The general invitations of the gospel supersede the necessity of inquiring, who may come in this new and living way? “Let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will let him come.” The feast of divine love is provided, “all things are ready;” and the messengers of salvation are not only commanded to invite all they meet with, but even “to compel them to come in,” by every argument, persuasion, expostulation, and encouragement they can devise, for these are the means by which the Holy Spirit produces the willing mind, and gives the praying heart. The very appointment of this way of applying is a complete encouragement to all who feel desires after the blessings of the gospel, and are willing to become humble supplicants for them. It implies that the Lord purposes to bestow them as free gifts on indigent beggars, and not on those who would buy, earn, or deserve them: for prayer is the very language of poverty and distress, which guilt alone hath brought on any part of the rational creation of God. Every general command or exhortation therefore to pray, is an encouragement to all who desire to pray; and whatever guilt they have contracted, or in whatever depths of temptation and misery they are plunged, it says to them, “Be of good comfort, arise, he calleth thee.” Such general exhortations abound in Scripture; they are often addressed to the vilest transgressors, and are commonly connected with absolute promises; “for every one that asketh receiveth,” &c. (Isa. lv. 7, 8; Jer. xxix. 11–13; xxxiii. 3; Ezek, xxxvi. 25–27, 37; Zech. xii. 10; Matt. vii. 7–11; John iv. 10; Acts viii. 22). These promises do not indeed engage that God will hear the prayers of the formal, the hypocritical, or the impenitent, who may (like the unclean spirit) pray very sincerely, “torment me not,” and yet hate true religion as much as ever. Such prayers of the wicked are “an abomination to the Lord:” but when the vilest transgressor is so far humbled and softened, as to pray from his heart for mercy and grace, and all the blessings of salvation as “the gift of God through Jesus Christ,” he begins “to offer the prayer of the upright, in which the Lord delighteth,” (Prov, xv. 8, 9). These assurances are confirmed by the examples of Scripture. When Manasseh, vile as he had been, began to humble himself, and pray to the Lord, he was not upbraided with his abominable crimes, but mercifully accepted, pardoned, and delivered, (2 Chron. xxxiii). When it could be said of persecuting Saul, “behold, he prayeth!” no further doubt remained of his acceptance and reconciliation. The Publican, who loathed himself as much as the Pharisee disdained him, and who, not daring to come near, or “to lift up his eyes unto heaven, smote upon his breast, and said, God be merciful to me, a sinner,” went down to his house justified, rather than he who deemed it presumption in such a wretch to pray. Even the short petition of the almost expiring thief, “Lord, remember me, when thou comest in thy kingdom,” received an immediate answer, full of astonishing grace. Nor is there one instance upon record, of a single prayer being rejected, except for the hypocrisy, wickedness, and unbelief, with which it was presented. To all these encouragements we may add the frequent commendations bestowed on importunity, frequency, and fervency in prayer, (Luke xviii. 1–13); and the testimony of all the servants of God to his readiness to hear and save them, from the most tremendous depths, into which their sins had cast them, whenever they were brought to cry unto him, and say, “O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.”

If then the vilest sinner, from the first moment when he desires to pray, is warranted to come, with humble hope of being heard and answered; the same considerations should much more enlarge the expectations, and confirm the confidence of those who “continue” (or *persist)* “in prayer” from day to day; pleading, with persevering importunity, all the promises, in the Redeemer’s name, and earnestly seeking for that wisdom, strength, grace, and consolation, which may enable them to live to the glory of God, as well as for the pardon and salvation of their souls. “We have not, because we ask not;” we are straitened in ourselves, not in the Lord; and did we more enlarge and multiply our requests, with greater fervency and importunity, we should be enabled to exchange many of our complaints for joyful praises. This our experience in a great degree evinces, if we be indeed experimentally acquainted with the life of faith and prayer: for who can deny that his inward supports and comforts, his strength to resist temptation and to endure labour and suffering, have borne some proportion to his frequency and fervency in prayer?

Indeed, the word of God contains the most energetic language on this subject; declaring, that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much:” and the only righteous men on earth are penitent, believing sinners, (Matt. xviii. 19; Mark xi. 24; John xiv. 13, 14; xv. 7, 16; xvi. 24; Eph. iii. 20; James i. 5–7; v. 15–18; 1 John iii. 22; v. 14, 15). Many curious questions have been started on this subject, for “ vain man would be wise but the Lord taketh the wise in their own craftiness;” and such difficulties will presently vanish from the serious, humble mind: yet Christ himself reminds us, that “our Father knoweth what things we have need of, before we ask him,” (Matt. vi. 5–8): and it is obvious, that our prayers cannot be requisite for the information of Omniscience, or to *dispose* the God of all grace to supply our wants. But prayer, when seriously engaged in, tends directly to increase our acquaintance with ourselves, and our own character and situation; to lead our attention to the promises of God; to abstract the mind from all selfish and carnal confidences; and thus to bring us into that humble, dependent, and waiting frame of spirit, which is the preparation for duly receiving and using every Divine blessing. To pray in a suitable manner is in effect to say, “Lord, we are poor, vile, helpless, wretched creatures; we have no other refuge to flee to, we know not what to do; but our eyes are unto thee, because we believe that thou art ever ready to forgive and save all that call upon thee.” As therefore the parent requires the child to ask those things that he intends to give, that the child may feel his dependence and obligation, and be brought to a proper disposition towards the parent; so the Lord requires us “to make our requests known to him,” that we may be prepared to receive his intended benefits with thankfulness, to notice his hand in them, and to give him the glory of them. And when our prayers accord to his precepts, are grounded on his promises, imply submission to his providence, and spring from a supreme desire of spiritual blessings: when we pray for those things that are truly good for us, conducive to the advantage of our brethren, or in any way honourable to his name, we cannot expect too much in answer to them. For “he is able to do exceeding abundantly, above all that we ask or think.” The Scripture abounds with examples of the efficacy of prayer. Abraham ceased to ask, even in behalf of Sodom, before the Lord refused to answer him; and God remembered Abraham, in preserving Lot from the overthrow,” (Gen. xviii. 17–33; xix. 29). Jacob wrestled with God, and prevailed with him; and Esau’s heart was softened and his rage disarmed. He set out an enemy, yet met him as a brother, (Gen. xxxii; xxxiii). When Moses prayed, Amalek was discomfited. When he pleaded for Israel, the Lord said, “Let me alone, that I may destroy them.” The time would fail to speak of David, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Nehemiah, &c. Doubtless the conversion of Saul was an answer to the prayer of dying Stephen. We may suppose that the believers at Damascus were heard in their cries for protection from that cruel persecutor, in a manner beyond their most enlarged expectations; as were those at Jerusalem, when they prayed for Peter’s deliverance from Herod, (Acts xii.) But indeed, except in the case of miraculous interpositions, the same is still experienced. The more any man has made the trial, the fuller will be his assent to this truth. The Christian, who has been frequent, fervent, and particular in his supplications, for a length of time, has doubtless found, that many of his petitions (defective and defiled as he knows them to be) have been manifestly answered, both in his own temporal and spiritual concerns, and in behalf of others, often beyond his expectations, and contrary to apparent probability. Some requests have been granted, not exactly in his meaning, but in a far more desirable way. He hath prayed for the removal of the “thorn in the flesh,’’ but the Lord hath answered him by showing the sufficiency of his grace, and employing the trial “to humble, and prove him, and to do him good at the latter end,’’ (2 Cor. xii. 1–10 :) so that the things that seemed the most against him, have most effectually promoted his highest interest. Or he has found his prayers answered, by feeling his mind wonderfully reconciled to a denial, from a conviction that “he knew not what he asked or by a calm serenity in waiting the Lord’s time for those things, which he had impatiently desired. The causes of his perturbation and anxiety remain, after his prayers have been presented before God; but the solicitude itself has given place to a divine “peace which passeth all understanding” for “he called on the Lord, and was strengthened with strength in his soul.” In short, he can scarcely produce an instance, in which he “poured out his heart,” with earnestness and importunity, that he failed of obtaining the blessing he sought, or was not, after a time, satisfied with the denial. In many cases his intercessions for those around him have been graciously answered; in others he may still retain hope; and in all he may be assured, that they will return into his own bosom. So that the efficacy of prayer, to bring light and wisdom into the mind, peace into the conscience, submission into the will, and purity into the affections; to keep our garments clean, our armour bright, and our hearts joyful: to make us strong for the conflict, for service, or for suffering; to obtain sufficiency for our place and work, and a blessing on our endeavours; to secure peace with our enemies, or protection against them; to carry every point that is truly good for us; to bring down blessings on our families, friends, and country; to procure peace and prosperity to the church, the conversion of sinners, and the spread of the gospel; and for all things, which we can desire or conceive, must be allowed by every man, who reverences the Scriptures, or knows what it is “ to walk with God.”

Did men speculate and dispute less, and pray more, their souls would be like a watered garden; fruitful, joyful, beautiful, and fragrant. Prayer is the first breath of divine life. It is the pulse of the believing soul, the best criterion of health or sickness, vigour or debility. By prayer we draw water with joy from the wells of salvation: by prayer faith puts forth its energy, in apprehending the promised blessings, and receiving from the Redeemer’s fulness in leaning on his Almighty arm, and making his name our strong tower, and in overcoming the world, the flesh, and the devil. All other means of grace are made effectual by prayer. Every doctrine and instruction produces its effect, in proportion as this is attended to. Every grace revives or languishes according to the same rule. Our grand conflict with Satan and our own hearts is about prayer. The sinner feels less reluctance, and meets less resistance, in respect of all other means, than in retiring to pour out his heart before God in secret; and the believer will find his chief difficulty to consist in continuing instant and fervent in this spiritual exercise. If he succeed in this, all else will eventually give place before him, and turn out to his benefit and comfort.

It should be remembered, that prayer may be either public, social, or secret. Public worship most honours God, and is the grand end of our assembling together: though few seem to understand it so. Social worship tends greatly to maintain brotherly love, and to bring down blessings on families and societies. But secret prayer is the grand means of maintaining communion with God, and keeping alive the power of religion in the soul. Without this, the others will degenerate into formality; and the man himself will be devoid of life, strength, and comfort in the midst of them. Christians should, therefore, remember to prepare for public and social worship by secret prayer, meditation, and reading the Scriptures; and not yield to the temptation of neglecting the one by spending much time in the other. If we desire to pray aright, we must well observe, that the Scripture always calls upon us “to pray in the Spirit,” or “in the Holy Ghost,” or rather “ by the Spirit;” our first petition, therefore, should be, that the Lord would graciously give us his Holy Spirit to teach and enable us to pray: when this is duly attended to, a very heartless beginning will often have a bright and encouraging conclusion, and our desires may be too large even for utterance;but without it, words will often flow, that have little meaning and no correspondent affections, (Rom. viii. 26, 27.) We should also be *particular* in our secret devotions, both in confession, supplication for temporal and spiritual mercies according to our circumstances, thanksgivings, and prayers for others; for whilst men deal in *general* words, they must either be very short and superficial, or run into needless repetition: and occasional ejaculatory petitions are a blessed addition to stated seasons of retirement. All our prayers should be *explicitly* offered in the name, and through the intercession of the Divine Saviour; in dependence on his merits; with realizing expectation of success; and in a loving, forgiving spirit.

Finally, a thorough acquaintance with the prayers contained in the psalms, and other parts of Scripture; and a careful observation of the requests, which the sacred penmen offered, the pleas they used, the order and proportion they observed, and the confessions, adorations, and grateful praises, they intermixed with their fervent supplications for personal and public, temporal and spiritual mercies, will be more useful to the serious Christian, in this part of religion, than all other helps whatsoever. Above all, the Lord’s prayer, well understood and digested, will teach him what the confidence and leading desire of his heart in every prayer should be. What are the blessings especially to be sought for and with what moderation and submission he should ask for temporal mercies, compared with the forgiveness of his sins, and deliverance from temptation and the tempter, from evil and the evil one: that in approaching the throne of grace, he may “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, assured that all other things will be added to him.”