

JACOB'S SEED

THE GENERATION OF SEEKERS

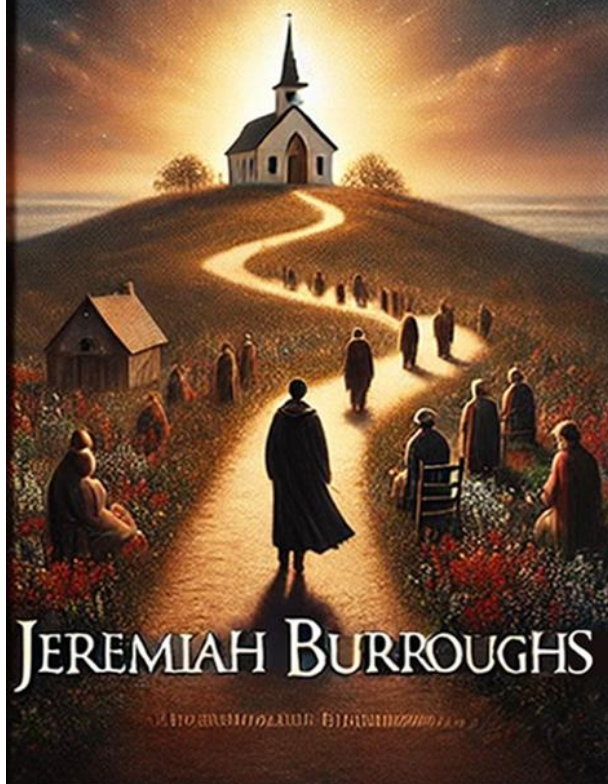


JEREMIAH BURROUGHS

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES H. HARRIS

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JEREMIAH BURROUGHS

JOHN BURROUGHS ILLUSTRATED

JACOB'S SEED

Or The Generation of Seekers.

And DAVID'S DELIGHT: Or The Excellent on Earth.

By The late reverend preacher of the Gospel

JEREMIAH BURROUGHS.

Psalm 27:8. *When thou saidst, Seek ye my face: my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.*

Proverbs 12:26. *The righteous is more excellent than his neighbour.*

Originally Printed by Roger Daniel, Printer to the University of
Cambridge, 1643.

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To the Reader

Christian Reader,

Thou art presented here with a small treatise of this reverend author, deceased; who by his worthy works (as Abel by his faith) being dead yet speaketh (Hebrews 11:4). The work is but of small bulk, yet has many excellent truths contained in it, concerning two of the most necessary duties in a Christian's course. The seeking of God's face, a thing so needful in these troublesome days, and yet so generally neglected. Also, concerning the excellence in, and the high esteem

that true saints have for their fellow-saints, which is so rare to find in these disjointed and divided times.

The work had come abroad ere this, had not the private ends of some been an obstacle in the way. I am confident that of all the works of this worthy author that have been published since his death, none can so justly claim him as the father as this, both for its matter and form, as anyone who used to hear him may perceive. The former part of this work was delivered by him in two separate sermons (though now thought convenient to be joined as one). The first, before the Right Honourable the Earl of Warwick, in his own house. The second, at Cree Church in London, upon November 5th, the annual commemoration of our deliverance from the Gunpowder Plot, it happening also to be a day of public humiliation. The last was preached in another church in London.

Accept the work, then, with the same candour as it is intended, and that thou mayest be furthered in holy walking by it, is the desire of

Thy Christian friend.

JACOB'S SEED,

OR, The Generation of Seekers

I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain. - Isaiah
65:19

As Christ, formerly having the book of this prophecy given to him when he came into the congregation, read a part of it, then shut the book, and began his sermon unto the people: "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21), so may I say of this that we have in this prophecy read unto you. Behold, this day the Lord has fulfilled this word of his in our ears, before our eyes. And therefore it is that we are all met here this day before the Lord, that we may witness to this good word of his, that he has not said to the seed of Jacob, "Seek ye me in vain."

In this chapter, the Lord promises to raise up a great deliverer for his people and tells them that they shall find him otherwise than those who worshipped idols found their gods towards them. What he says to his people, he speaks plainly and openly: *"I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth."* The heathen gods spoke darkly and ambiguously to their worshippers, so that they knew not what to make of their words; but I have not done so to you, says God. They would have you worship them, but they cannot help you when you have done so; it is not so with me. *I said not to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain.* To the seed of Jacob, that is, to the Church of God, to the saints.

You will say, why are the people of God called the seed of Jacob rather than the seed of Abraham or the seed of Isaac? Abraham is our father; he is the father of the faithful. But here it is the seed of Jacob, not of Abraham, nor of Isaac. The reasons may be these two:

First, because all of Jacob's posterity were the Church of God; all Jacob's children, the patriarchs, were every one of the Church. All that came from Abraham were not so—*Ishmael* was not so. All that came from Isaac were not so—*Esau* was not. But all Jacob's children were. Therefore, speaking of the people of God, of the Church that

shall be to the end of the world, they are said here to be the seed of Jacob rather than the seed of Abraham or of Isaac.

Secondly, the seed of Jacob, because the Lord is here speaking of the blessing of his seed, namely, in the hearing of their prayers. Now, because Jacob was the most eminent in prayer (though Abraham and Isaac, no doubt, were mighty with God in prayer), yet the Scripture does not put such an eminence on either Abraham or Isaac for prayer as it does on Jacob. You have the most eminent expression for prayer that was ever spoken of any man, never the like, *Genesis 32:28* — "*And he said, thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.*" Oh, how eminent was he in prayer! Therefore it is rather said the seed of Jacob than of Abraham or Isaac.

But you will say, then they should rather have been called the seed of Israel, for his name of Israel was given to him upon his prevailing with God.

We must not be too inquisitive. These names are used interchangeably. But this is one reason that is given, and it seems to have some probability: In Scripture, when God speaks of the Church in a low condition, he puts the name of Jacob on them rather than Israel. "*Fear not, thou worm Jacob:*" and it follows, "*ye men of Israel*" (Isaiah 41:14). He reminds them of their low condition by this name rather than Israel: "*Fear not, thou worm Jacob.*" For before Jacob's name was changed, you know what a low condition and what straits he was in. So here, the Lord, speaking of his Church's deliverance out of distress, calls them the seed of Jacob, so that they might see how by their prayers they were brought out of their straits, just as Jacob was brought out of his straits by prayer. When he was

Jacob, before he became Israel, he was in great straits; so shall the Church be until they seek God.

I said not to the Seed of Jacob, seek ye me, in vain.

That is, first, (as some would interpret it) I required this of them, and my requiring prevailed with them: I did not exhort them to it, or require it, and my words fell to the ground, and they did not seek me. But what I required of them was accomplished in them. When God speaks to a people, and they do not do what He requires, His word may seem to be in vain, as if there were no efficacy in His words to prevail. But, says God, *I did not say unto them, "Seek ye me," in vain*. That is, I did not call on my people to seek me, only for them to go their own way; but what I spoke to them prevailed with them and in them, and they did what I required. This is a blessed thing—when that which God says is not in vain, but we do that which the Lord requires of us. That is the first.

Secondly, *I said not unto them, "Seek ye me," in vain*: that is, I did not only tell them that they should seek me, but I showed them by what way and means they ought to seek me in a right manner, so that my speaking to them might not be in vain. For if a minister comes in God's name to set you upon any duty and exhorts you to do such and such a thing, and merely tells you what you should do without showing how you should do it, where you shall have strength, and in what manner you should do it, he will have spoken in vain. There are an abundance of sermons in vain, where only good things are commended to people, and they are taught what they should do, but not the way how, nor the manner, nor where they should find strength to do it: then the word is in vain. But, says God, *I said not unto you in vain*, that is, I did not only bid you seek me, but I taught you the way how, and in what manner you should seek me.

Thirdly and lastly, I suppose that the principal scope of the Holy Spirit is that which the words plainly present to our view: I did not require the seed of Jacob to seek me to no purpose, so that nothing should come of it; but I required that they should seek me, and they have found an abundance of good by seeking me.

So, this point arises plainly out of the words: when God requires a people to seek Him, He will make it good to them that it shall not be in vain.

Before I open this point, I will give you a scripture or two: one in the Old Testament and another in the New. *Deuteronomy 4:7*—"For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?" Here is an example of the fruit of seeking God, and it is spoken to show the honour of God's people, the privilege of the seed of Jacob, and the eminent condition they were in. God is nigh to them in all things they call upon Him for: therefore, they are not required to seek God in vain.

So, *Matthew 21:22*—"And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." A very remarkable expression: here might seem to be a tautology. One would think it large enough to have said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask, ye shall receive:" but here is, "all things, whatsoever." We would not speak so in ordinary language. "I will give you all things whatsoever." Yet, it may be this is intended, and I believe it is: "*All things*," here is the general promise, that all things you ask you shall receive; and "*whatsoever*" may refer to particulars, every particular thing you ask you shall receive.

You will say, anyone who understands reason or logic knows that particulars are included in the general. But unbelief has this illogical reasoning: that though we agree to the premises in general, yet when

we come to particulars, we think they will not be made good to us. I suppose you find your unbelieving hearts so irrational that, though they believe the general promise, yet when it comes to particulars, and you cannot but say that such a particular is included in the general, yet your hearts will not accept it. Therefore, our Saviour says not only "*all things*" in general, but also "*whatsoever*" in particular.

So, *James 5:16*—"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." There is but one word in the original, ἐνεργουμένη, "the working prayer," but it is translated by two: *effectual*, *fervent*. Surely, then, prayer and seeking of God is the ordinance which He has appointed for turning about the great affairs of the world. This is the inward engine that does it: indeed, there are many outward wheels used, but the spring of all is within; prayer turns all about. God never made use of any created power as much as this. He never did such great things by any created power as by the ordinance of prayer. The Word is appointed for the converting of souls, but a great part of the blessing of the Word depends on prayer.

In opening this point, I will first give you some evidence of it; secondly, show you what great things prayer will do; thirdly, explain wherein the efficacy and power of it lies; fourthly, answer the objections of troubled unbelieving spirits against it, and then come to apply all.

The evidence hereof is, first, the many famous records in Scripture of the noble and glorious exploits of prayer. If any of you should come to ask me, as that king did of the prophet's servant, *2 Kings 8:4*, "What great things hath thy master done?" so, what great things has prayer done in the world? Truly, we might spend hours and days answering, for a great part of Holy Scripture is devoted to this very argument. And it is a very good exercise for you at night, when you

cannot sleep, or at other times when you are troubled, to do as that king did in *Esther 6:1*—call for the book of the records of prayer. You who read the Scriptures, mark what you read. The Word of God will tell you how prayer has stopped the sun in the firmament, opened heaven and shut it again, raised from death to life, opened prison doors, and what not?

Secondly, all God's people are able to tell you great stories of what they have gained by prayer. *This poor man cried*, says David of himself (Psalm 34:6), *and the Lord heard him*. Who is it that cannot tell histories of God's gracious dealings with them upon seeking Him? To be sure, our nation has many things to say in this regard, and every godly soul has many things to say: they would not lose their income of prayer for all the world.

Thirdly, surely it is not in vain to seek God, for there was never any faithful seeker of Him who ever gave up, but would continue seeking Him as long as they lived: they would seek His face evermore. If it had been in vain, they would have stopped. When we see a bee stick on a flower, and refuse to be driven off, or if it is driven off, it returns again—we conclude that it certainly finds honey there. So, all the saints of God who have ever sought Him truly would never be beaten off this way. Let the world do what it will, persecute them, set spies to watch them in their meetings of prayer, let it punish and imprison them, let all the malice and rage of men be against them, yet they cannot be hindered either from praying in their closets or from enjoying the benefit of the communion of saints in prayer. Daniel would rather lose his life than be kept from his prayers, even for a single day. Pray he would, and that openly—yes, three times a day, as he was accustomed—he would not forbear one time. He stuck to prayer, finding honey and sweetness in it. Oh, how unlike we are to Daniel! Though the performance of this duty was exceedingly

hazardous for Daniel, yet he would not be deterred from it; but every light trifle takes off our hearts.

Again, it is not in vain for the seed of Jacob to seek the Lord, for it is not in vain even for wicked men to seek Him, though they are not able to seek God as they ought. *The prayer of the wicked is abominable* (Proverbs 15:8). This is not to be understood as the prayer of every unregenerate person, for wickedness is not so taken in that place. For we know that God has regarded the prayers of unregenerate men. The prayers and fasting of Nineveh were regarded by God; the prayer and fasting of Ahab were regarded by God. God has granted the wicked some mercies; He has looked on them as His creatures. Though God sees enough in their prayers to cast them off, yet He has manifested His regard to them. Therefore, if it is not in vain for the wicked to seek the Lord, much less is it in vain for the seed of Jacob to seek Him.

Yes, the Lord hears the cry of the very ravens and the beasts (Psalm 147:9; Psalm 104:21, 27, 28). Therefore, the people of Nineveh would not let the beasts eat anything so that they might cry unto God (Jonah 3:7, 8). Surely, if the brute beasts and the fowls are heard when they cry, it is not in vain for the seed of Jacob to seek God.

Again, it is evident that it is not in vain because the people of God, who have been wise and have conversed with God and have known much of the mind of God, have given up themselves and all their strength to this duty. Now, it would be a weak and idle thing for anyone to give up their strength and all their might to something that is vanity, and by which no great thing can be obtained. It is said of Jehoshaphat, *2 Chronicles 20:3*, that he feared and set himself to seek the Lord. It is translated as *composuit faciem suam*—he set his

face, he gave himself up fully to seek the Lord. Those who give up themselves wholly to seek God know what they are doing.

Indeed, carnal hearts condemn the people of God because they see them so earnest in things they think to be vain. For it shows weakness in any person to give up themselves with all their strength to things that are vanity and have no substance. Therefore, because carnal men look upon the way of religion as something that has no purpose, they think it foolish for people to be so earnest and to give up their strength and their whole souls to it. But the saints of God know what they do when they give themselves up to seek the Lord—they know it is not in vain.

Again, there is much advantage in prayer, as is evidenced by wise and holy men who have highly prized the prayers of the saints and have made great account of them. Mark the Apostle's words, writing to the saints for their prayers, *Romans 15:30: Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that you strive together in prayer with me to God for me.* The Apostle Paul, so great a man and one who had a mighty spirit in prayer, writes to private Christians in the Church of Rome and beseeches them for the Lord's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, to strive in prayer for him. He knew there was much to be gained this way.

Further, God is found by those who did not seek Him, *Isaiah 65:1*. Then surely it is not in vain for the seed of Jacob to seek Him.

Moreover, when God intends to show no mercy, He gives a direct charge to His people not to pray, or He shuts up their hearts so that they are not able to pray. This is an argument that prayer is powerful because when God will not show mercy, He does not want such a precious thing to be wasted in vain.

Lastly, it is not in vain because if it were, then a praying heart would not always be a mercy from God—but certainly it is. Therefore, though you may not receive the thing you pray for, yet to have a continual praying heart is a great mercy from God. And those who are spiritual often prize the continuation of a praying heart more than the granting of the thing they pray for. All these taken together are full evidences that it is not in vain to seek the Lord.

There are many other evidences, which I pass by on purpose, so that I may allow as much time as possible for application.

But now, how does it appear that it is not in vain to seek the Lord? What does prayer do?

First, it is not in vain to seek God, if there were nothing else in prayer but the right exercise of the faculties of our souls and of our graces; this alone would be worth our time. The graces of our souls must be exercised about something, and prayer serves as the exercise of all graces.

Secondly, it is not in vain, even if it were nothing but the performance of our duty as creatures to God. There are many people who grow weary of prayer because they do not receive from it what they expect. But know that there are two purposes to prayer: the performance of duty, and the obtaining of mercy. If it were only the former, that alone should suffice to keep you praying as long as you live.

Thirdly, it would not be in vain, even if it were nothing but the rendering of that homage and worship which we owe to God. Prayer is not only a duty but a great part of the worship that God has in the world. While we are worshipping God, it is worth the time.

Again, it is not in vain, even if it were only this: that we come and show whose side we are on—that we join and stand with God against His adversaries and for His people. But these are not the things intended here.

Further, it is not in vain, because there has never been a faithful prayer made that God has not accepted in heaven. There has never been one of the seed of Jacob who has put up a faithful petition to God without God taking it in His hand and reading it. A king, or any superior, when you come with a petition, may refuse to take it, but God never refuses to take any petition from a faithful soul. Therefore, the Psalmist says in *Psalms 6:9*, *The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer*. He will take it, look upon it, and read it; and not only that, but He will also accept it and take pleasure in it. A prince may take a petition, look upon it, and then frown or show anger in his countenance; but God does not do so with the prayers of His people. *The prayer of the upright is his delight (Proverbs 15:8)*. He never reads a petition that His people offer without a smiling countenance. If it is a faithful petition, He accepts it from them and receives it graciously.

Luther speaks of the prayer of a contrite heart, saying that even the least sigh of such a heart fills heaven with noise, so much so that no other noise from either heaven or earth is heard at that time but the noise of prayer. Certainly, a faithful prayer greatly touches the heart of God. Indeed, every faithful prayer is recorded in heaven. You keep your letters on file so that you may easily find them when you need to look at such a letter sent from a certain country. Likewise, God has His file in heaven where all faithful prayers are kept on record. Just as princes have their archives where transactions between one state and another are kept, so the Lord has His prayer office, where He

keeps all the prayers of His saints that have ever been offered to Him.

In *Revelation 8:3*, *Another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer, and there was given him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints.* Where were those prayers of all the saints that he had to take a censer and offer incense with? God had them recorded with Him, and now they were to be offered to Him. And see what great things follow upon the offering of the prayers of the saints in verse 4: *The smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer, etc., and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.* These followed upon the prayers of the saints. It signifies the time when all things come into remembrance before the Lord, as if an angel were offering—yes, Christ, the Angel of the Covenant, has a time to take the prayers offered long ago and present them to God with His own incense. They are all recorded in heaven, therefore they are not in vain. When a petition is taken and put on record, the petitioner does not petition in vain; his petition is not discarded.

If a petition is presented to Parliament and they take it, telling you it shall be kept on record, instructing the clerk to keep it there, and assuring you they will take due time to consider it, you would not say such a petition is in vain. God does the same with all His people: He takes their petitions and records them; they are all filed in heaven.

Yet further, there is no faithful petition but that God puts His *fiat* to the bottom of it at the very instant it is presented to Him. There is a decree in heaven issued for mercy at the moment the petition is put up. God does not deal with us as men do, who are considered very gracious if they merely tell us they will consider our petition. No,

your petition is granted immediately. A petitioner, when time is taken to consider his petition, trembles and shakes for fear it may not be granted. But the petitions of the seed of Jacob are granted at once.

When Daniel had been seeking God at the time of the evening sacrifice, an angel came to him and told him that, at the beginning of his prayer, there was already a decree to grant it, and that the angel was sent to him at the start of his prayer (*Daniel 9:23*). And in *Psalms 56:9*, "When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know, for God is for me." Did David not cry often, and yet his enemies did not turn back when he cried? He often cried when his enemies prevailed. Yet he says, *When I cried, then mine enemies turned back: and this I know, for God is for me*. The meaning must be this: at the instant that he cried, there was a decree in heaven; the thing was done. He looked upon it as accomplished, as surely as if he had seen it with his eyes.

This is the reason the saints, after they have prayed, though the thing is not yet done, begin to praise and bless God. We have a notable example in Jehoshaphat, of whom we read in *2 Chronicles 20:3*, that, being in great fear, he set himself to seek the Lord and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. He did not seek God casually, but set himself earnestly to seek the Lord. And what his prayer was, you may see from verses 6 to 12. Jehoshaphat said, *O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven, and rulest over all kingdoms?* Mark how he pleads with God for the covenant He had made (verse 8), speaking of the sanctuary they had built for His name's sake: *If, when evil comes upon us, such as the sword, judgment, pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in thy presence (for thy name is in this house), and cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help*. He urges the promise made

to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple. For that prayer of faith which Solomon made, and which God accepted, carries the strength of a promise within it.

O our God, he says, wilt thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that comes against us, neither know we what to do, but our eyes are upon thee. Though he confessed that his enemies were so numerous that he did not know what to do, and that they had no strength to resist them, yet after his prayer was finished, and before the battle had even begun, he consulted with the people and appointed singers unto the Lord, to praise Him for the beauty of holiness as they went out before the army, saying, *Praise the Lord, for His mercy endureth forever* (verse 21).

Mark this: he had not yet gained the victory, the battle was not fought, yet as soon as he had ended his prayer, he praised the Lord, for His mercy endures forever. He believed the thing was done; it was decreed in heaven. Therefore, surely, the people of God do not seek Him in vain.

Moreover, it is not only decreed, but soon God will satisfy His people and fill their longing souls with goodness (*Psalms 107:9*). A time shall come when they will declare their prayers are heard, and they have enough. Yes, the Lord sometimes gives even more than His people mention in their prayers. They ask for temporal blessings, and He bestows spiritual ones; yes, He gives them Himself, which is all in all. Surely, then, the prayers of the saints are not in vain.

But where lies the efficacy of prayer? What makes prayer so powerful and present with God?

One reason is that God delights in mercy and in communicating Himself to the children of men. He takes more pleasure in doing

good than any person can take in seeking it, yes, even more than any can take in receiving it from Him. Our hearts cannot be so strongly set to seek any mercy from God as His heart is set to communicate mercy to us. *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 forever, because he delighteth in mercy (Micah 7:18).*

Another thing that renders prayer so effectual is God's covenant and promise to His people. It was the saying of Archimedes, *Give me a place to set my engine, and I will shake the whole earth*. Let prayer have a sure foundation to rest on, and it will do mighty things. Now, the promises are the foundation of prayer, and we have them in great abundance. In *Numbers 23*, you will find an abundance of promises to the seed of Jacob, under the name of Jacob, when Balaam was brought to curse the people. But in *Deuteronomy 33:26* and onwards, there are admirable promises to Jacob: *There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and on the sky in his excellency. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee, and shall say, Destroy them. Israel then shall dwell in safety alone; the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also, his heavens shall drop down dew. Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! Thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee, and thou shalt tread upon their high places.*

Here is the promise to the seed of Jacob, the fountain of Israel (as he is called). He shall have all things that are good, and God will manifest Himself, especially against his enemies. Let any of the seed of Jacob go and plead this with God, and it cannot be in vain. There

must be a mighty efficacy in such a plea when there are such large promises. Similarly, in *Isaiah 14:1*, there are several promises to the seed of Jacob: *For the Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the stranger shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob. And the people shall take them and bring them to their place: and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of the Lord for servants and handmaids: and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were, and they shall rule over their oppressors. And it shall come to pass that the Lord shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage wherein thou wast made to serve.*

I make no question that some of the seed of Jacob have been pleading this promise in prayer, where the Lord has promised to have mercy on Israel and to give him rescue from his sorrows, fears, and hard bondage. It was hard bondage that we were made to serve in not long ago; here is a promise that God will give us rest from it. Upon the pleading of this promise, God has made it good to the seed of Jacob.

In *Isaiah 41:8*, there are large promises in that chapter to the seed of Jacob: *But thou, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend, thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth.* It does not matter that they are a poor, despicable people by themselves; only a few of the poor people do this, while the gentry and nobility go another way. Verse 10 says: *I have called thee from the chief men of the earth. I left them and called thee, and said unto thee, thou art my servant. I have chosen thee and not cast thee away. Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed, for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee, yea, I will help thee, yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.*

Here are five declarations, five times "I": *I will strengthen thee, I will help thee, I will uphold thee*. Look at those five "I"s together, and there are several expressions of help, strength, and upholding. How? *With my hand; with my right hand*; that is, with my right hand I am engaged. I have given thee my hand to help thee, and that shall be the hand of my righteousness. Some men give their hand to their friends when they make promises, but the hand they give does not always prove a hand of righteousness—often it is a hand of deceit. But when God gives His hand to His people, it is a hand of righteousness. *I will uphold thee with the hand of my righteousness*. And what follows in verse 11? *Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded*.

O God, make this good today! Our enemies are incensed—they are mad, they rage, and they swear, blaspheme, stamp, fret, and would have their way. They would do such things, but all who are incensed against thee shall be confounded. Some of the seed of Jacob have been with God and have pleaded this promise, and that is the efficacy of their prayer—that the enemy is confounded. *They shall be as nothing, and they that strive with thee shall perish*. You think they are a great army and have great strength; but *they shall be as nothing* (verse 12). *Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them*. Where is the army now? It is so scattered that you cannot find it; even if you seek it, you cannot find it. *They that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nothing*. Enquire where the army is now—you shall not find them. *For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not, I will help thee* (verse 13).

O, but we are weak and poor! *Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy redeemer, the holy one of Israel* (verse 14). *Behold, I will make thee a new sharp*

threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff (verse 15). Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them (verse 16). And this we should labour to see fulfilled. *Thou shalt rejoice in the Lord, and glory in the holy one of Israel,* when I have done all this. Here is the fruit—not to rejoice in our armies or in outward strength, but to rejoice in the Lord and to glory in the holy one of Israel.

Here are promises for prayer to set its foot upon. No wonder it has so much power and efficacy.

There are many other aspects of the efficacy of prayer, especially as it depends upon the promise and covenant that God has made with His people. Every promise is but a distinct branch and expression of God's covenant; therefore, we are to refer them all to the covenant. I will give you just one Scripture: *Jeremiah 30:10–11: Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, neither be dismayed, O Israel: for lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity, and Jacob shall return and be in rest and quiet, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee: though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure, and will not leave thee altogether unpunished.*

There is something that God does, yet still, He remembers His promise even in the midst of affliction, ensuring that He will not leave anything undone. Therefore, though His people are under great afflictions, the Lord will be good to them according to His promise.

Once again, the Lord will regard the prayers of the seed of Jacob. The efficacy of their prayers depends on this, because it is God's own

work. What is the work of God is never in vain; God has made none of His works in vain. Now all their seeking of God is from God—it is God's own work, and a most glorious piece of the work of God. Every prayer that comes from the poorest of the seed of Jacob—every gracious and faithful prayer—is a glorious piece of God's work. It is a work of the Holy Ghost, and therefore it is not in vain.

Furthermore, just as their prayers come from God, they seek God from God. They seek God for God—they seek the Lord for His own sake. If the seed of Jacob sought God only for corn, wine, and oil, or if they sought Him only for their own ease, outward liberties, accommodations, or the lives of their enemies, perhaps they might seek in vain. No, but when they seek God, they seek God for God, and it is for this reason they prevail so much with Him. *Ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it on your lusts (James 4:3)*. You pray to God often to be delivered from enemies, and you may think your prayers, especially at times like these, are in vain. No wonder, if you pray simply to gain liberty for trade or deliverance from taxes (though these may be sought). But the house of Jacob seeks God for His name, that it may not be dishonoured, and for His Gospel, that it may not be taken away, and that the power of godliness may not be trampled like dirt in the streets. When they seek God for God, no wonder it is not in vain.

The greatest efficacy of prayer is this: it is part of the purchase made by the blood of Christ. That God hears the prayers of the saints comes from the merits of Christ—it is a part of His purchase that God should regard them. It is in Christ's name that we pray, as we are taught. It is by Christ that we have access to the throne of grace. Our privilege of seeking God is one that Christ purchased by His blood. Thus, our seeking of God is not only a duty and a benefit to us, but it is a high privilege, purchased by the blood of Christ. By Him, we have

access with boldness—the word is, "with liberty of speech." Liberty of speech is made possible by the blood of Christ, so that we may come before the Lord and open our minds fully. Certainly, there is great efficacy in prayer. Whatever our prayers are, though they may be vain as they come from us, take them as Christ's purchase—herein lies the great efficacy of prayer.

Do not think that the efficacy of prayer lies in earnestness or in the extent of its expression. Though it is a comfort and an evidence that God enlarges us by His Spirit (for it is not our abilities that enlarge, but the Spirit), the virtue of prayer does not lie here. The strength by which prayer accomplishes great things lies deeper, in secret, in the purchase of Christ.

Again, Christ takes all the prayers of the seed of Jacob and renders them up to His Father for acceptance. We have a more glorious way of coming to God than Adam had in innocence—yes, in some respects, even more so than the angels—by having such an Intercessor who takes all our prayers and carries them to His Father.

Indeed, not only this, but He joins with us before the Father. There is a passage in Hebrews, quoted from the Psalms, that shows Christ praises God in the congregation. It is not only the saints who praise God, but Christ Himself. *Hebrews 2:12* says: *I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the Church will I sing praises unto thee*. Christ, in the midst of the Church, sings praise to God. When people meet to praise God, Christ praises Him. This is a mighty encouragement in praising God. Likewise, in prayer, when we meet to seek God, Christ seeks Him, for He is at the right hand of the Father, making continual intercession for the saints. Christ Himself joins with them in the work, so they do not seek in vain.

Moreover, it is the style and title that God glories in: to be a God who hears prayer, and therefore He will not allow it to be in vain.

Prayer is also the pouring forth of the spirit to God, a spirit that is beautified with the graces of His own Spirit. Now, the pouring forth of such a precious spirit to God, so adorned and enriched with the graces of the Holy Ghost, certainly cannot be in vain. Indeed, the Scripture says of the heart of the wicked that it is of little worth: let their heart be poured forth, God takes little notice of it. But the heart of the righteous is of great worth, very precious before God. Therefore, when their hearts are poured out, and God sees the beauty and glory of His graces upon them, it is exceedingly delightful to Him, and such a pouring out of their hearts cannot be in vain. If God has a bottle for all their tears, He surely has a bottle also for all their expressions and the pouring out of their hearts in prayer.

Furthermore, the exceeding delight that God has in the seed of Jacob must cause Him to regard their seeking, that it should not be in vain. They are His darlings. Now, no one who delights in another loves to deny a request from the one they cherish. We have a notable expression concerning the seed of Jacob when they pray: *Thou art my King, O God; command deliverance for Jacob (Psalm 44)*. There comes a commanding power from God for the deliverance of Jacob when Jacob comes to plead with God.

Finally, it would not be for the honour of God to send His people away empty, making them seek Him in vain. It is said of Titus, though he was a heathen emperor, that he would not allow any man to leave the presence of the prince sorrowful. God counts it an honour that none should leave His presence sad. Therefore, those who seek the Lord are called upon to rejoice: *Let the hearts of them rejoice that seek the Lord (Psalm 105:3)*. Not only let the hearts of

those who find the Lord rejoice, or those who obtain what they seek, but even those who seek the Lord—while they are seeking—should rejoice in the act of seeking Him.

Now, because I would like to proceed to the application of this point, I will pass by other things and focus on addressing the great objection and reasoning that often arises in the hearts of men against this truth.

You tell us that the prayers of God's people are not in vain, and by God's mercy, we occasionally experience some comforting answer from heaven. But ordinarily, we find it otherwise. How many prayers have we offered to God, yet have not seen the result? We pray, and pray, and the enemies prevail, though now and then God gives us help.

Now, to remove all unbelieving reasonings against this point, I will not depart from the text at this time.

Therefore, the first answer is this: You say you have sought God and have not received what you desire, and therefore you think it is in vain. (Though perhaps this very reasoning is in vain.) Yet it does not make the text void. Remember what has happened before: in times past, you have sought God, and it was not in vain. Remember the days of old; let that thought stay with you for the present. It was this that sustained the Psalmist. He began to reason as you do, thinking he had sought God in vain: *"Will the Lord cast off forever? And will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy completely gone forever? Does his promise fail forevermore?"* (Psalm 77:7–8). This appears to be as much unbelief as is in your reasoning, but note what follows in verse 10: *"And I said, 'This is my grief: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High.'"* O, it is my sin and weakness that I should reason in this way. I do not consider what I

am doing when I reason like this. *"But 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 the wonders of old." (Psalm 77:10–11). "I will meditate also on all thy works, and talk of thy doings. Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: who is so great a God as our God? Thou art the God that doest wonders: thou hast declared thy strength among the people. Thou hast with thine arm redeemed thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph." (Psalm 77:12–15).*

Mark this: at length, he recovers himself by this—though present circumstances seem difficult, he remembers what God has done in the past. Do the same in your case. In *Isaiah 40:27*, you find a similar complaint from unbelieving hearts, as though God had been sought in vain: *"Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, 'My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God'? Are you one of the seed of Jacob, and have sought God, and now say it is in vain? God reasons with you and will confute your unbelief. 'Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.'" (Isaiah 40:28–31).*

Has God not done great things in the past—during 1588 and the Gunpowder Plot, and at other times? And though we are in some straits now, remember what God has done before.

This should calm your hearts. Even if you have not had an immediate response for the specific thing you seek, consider this: you are dealing with a God whose understanding you cannot fathom. It may be that God allows the adversary to prevail for a time. I cannot tell what glory God may obtain through it. I cannot conceive how God might bring His own glory to pass when Israel flees before the Philistines. But why do you speak like this, O Jacob? There is no searching of God's understanding. God sees further than you can see. The very thing you think will harm His name may, in fact, bring glory to it. Therefore, lay your hand upon your heart. *"He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might."* God waits until men have no might, until they faint and are ready to fail, and then He comes and helps them. This is the meaning of the Scripture in *Luke 18:7–8*, where Christ says, *"God will avenge his elect that cry day and night unto him, though he tarry, he will avenge them, he will hear their prayers: it is not in vain."* But what follows? *"Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on earth?"* I truly believe that the lack of faith mentioned here refers specifically to the promise that God will hear His elect who cry out to Him. God may wait so long that, by the time He comes to fulfil His promise, the people may lose faith. At the very time God intends to act, it may be a time when their faith has faltered, and they begin to give up and think they have sought Him in vain. And usually, the time when God comes to fulfil His promise and answer the prayers of His people is when they are at their weakest and ready to sink.

This may be another reason: it may be that you have not truly believed this promise. You say you have prayed, and you think it has been in vain. But have you believed this promise in the text? Have you relied on it? God has not said to the seed of Jacob, *"Seek ye me in vain."*

The word of God will be fulfilled, but how? Through our faith. It will be fulfilled to us if we believe. No matter how godly we may be, no matter how well we pray, if we want the promises fulfilled, it must be through faith. If you have not laid the weight of your soul on the promise, you have no reason to say that God has not made His word good. It may be that you lack faith. Learn to believe the word, and then you shall see it fulfilled. You want the promise fulfilled first, and then you want to believe it. No, you must first believe the word, and then expect God to fulfil His promise.

Again, God is a great God whom we seek, and it is fitting for us to wait, and to wait long. He is great, and we seek great things, and we are poor, mean, vile wretches. God has His prerogative—sometimes to answer immediately, sometimes not. Elijah was a great praying man, set as an example of prayer. At one time, he prayed for fire to come upon the sacrifice, and fire came down immediately; another time, he prayed for rain, and then he prayed seven times, bowing his head between his knees and sending his servant again and again. At one time, God comes in at the first request; at another time, not until the seventh. It is God's prerogative.

And take this note: it is a true sign of a gracious spirit, that though God may delay, the soul still clings to God, thinks well of God, of the ways of God, and of the duty of prayer. It is an excellent sign, and the sure way to find favour with God. You sometimes see two beggars asking for alms. One may have true need, pure need, and is of a soft, tender spirit. The other is a sturdy, rugged beggar. You deny them both. The one with pure need and a tender spirit thinks himself unworthy, even though the other man is bountiful, and he falls to weeping. Yet he still thinks well of the man and would be ready to ask him again on another occasion—he harbours good thoughts of him. But the sturdy beggar rails and breaks into an angry, passionate

mood, vowing to ask no more. Which of these two is likely to prevail—the soft spirit with an ingenuous disposition, or the sturdy spirit that soon breaks off?

Likewise, there are many passionate hearts that may not be froward with men, but are froward with God. They come and ask for mercy from God, but their hearts are stiff, froward, and stubborn. If they do not receive what they want, they immediately break off and say, "Why should we wait on God and cry? It is in vain to seek the Lord." But a gracious, tender, ingenuous disposition—though the desired thing does not come—justifies God in all matters, speaks well of God, and values prayer, continuing in it. Such a soul is likely to prevail.

Further, (to answer from the text) perhaps you have not truly sought God. "*Seek ye me,*" says God. It may be that you have sought something else in prayer other than God. Though you mention God's name in your prayer, your heart may have been more focused on creaturely helps, valuing armies and strength more than prayer itself. If you have relied more on the help of creatures rather than on God, then you have not truly sought God all along. Or perhaps it has been only outward safety that you have sought, rather than the face of God. You have not truly sought God. "*Seek my face,*" says God (*Psalms 27*). "*This is the generation of them that seek thy face, O Jacob*" (*Psalms 24*). You do not seek God unless you seek His face—unless you seek God for Himself.

Ordinarily, people do not seek God but rather their own welfare. They cry out because of the danger they are in, not for the sake of God Himself. Therefore, you have no reason to say it is in vain. Look again at your prayers; examine them. Do as fishermen do: if they catch nothing, they take up their nets to inspect them—there may be a hole or a rent in the net. Or like an angler, if the fish do not bite, he

checks his bait—there may be something wrong with the hook. So, look at your prayers. Perhaps it is not God you have truly sought. Take them up and see what is amiss in them.

Another answer is this: it may be that your prayers have been mere vanity; no wonder, then, if nothing but vanity comes of them. Surely, God will not hear vanity, as *Job 35:13* says. If your prayers consist of nothing but vanity, how can you expect God to hear them? The word here, "in vain," is the same word used in *Genesis 1*. At the beginning, everything was without form and void—a confused chaos. So, too, are our prayers, often without form and void, full of vanity and confusion. Not that God regards the outward form of a man's words—whether they are polished or well-arranged. For the groans and sighs of the Spirit of God are accepted, even if they are not methodical, like a speech made to men. God does not look for that.

But they are without form and void if they are vain, that is, if they have no purpose, or at least not a good one. Many pray, but they do not know why, except that others are doing the same. They do not set forth the true end of prayer.

I appeal to your conscience. When you have gone to pray to God, have you set this as your purpose? *I am going to offer up the worship and homage that I, a poor creature, owe to the infinite, glorious First Being of all things.* You sometimes call your family together for prayer and never think about what you are doing or aiming for. *I and my family are now going to seek the great God in prayer. I am now going to join with my father or my master. We are all together in this family to offer up that worship and homage that we, poor creatures, owe to that infinite, glorious First Being of all things, as a testimony of our high respect and esteem for Him.*

Now, if your prayer is a mere customary habit, it is vanity; it has no right end.

It may be that you go to prayer merely to satisfy your conscience. Or some have this wicked intention in prayer: they think to satisfy God for their former sinful, wicked ways. They indulge in the company of others, drink, and please the flesh, and just as they served themselves then, so now they will serve God, as if setting one against the other. Sometimes they give liberty to the flesh for their contentment, but they will not always do so—sometimes they will be devout and serve God. There is no one so wicked as to be constantly engaged in acts of wickedness; but they think that God must have His turn, just as they must have theirs. And this is the prayer of many people—to put their sins in one scale and so many devout prayers in the other, believing the two will balance each other. This is vanity. This is not the true purpose of prayer.

Then a thing is vain when it is empty, when there is no substance in it. When the heart is empty in prayer, the words are merely wind. The Lord does not see the strength of your spirit; you do not set yourself before the Lord in prayer. Your expressions are merely empty; God does not see your words filled with the graces of the Spirit. This is vanity. Beware of vain expressions, when there is nothing but the natural man in prayer. Even if there is great earnestness in prayer, if it comes only from a natural spirit, it is vanity. We must pray in the Spirit, as Scripture commands.

And beware of sluggishness in prayer, for that makes it vain. The breath that comes from life in a man's body is warm, but the breath that comes from bellows is artificial and cold. Some men's breath in prayer is artificial and cold, but the prayer that comes from life is warm breath that rises up to God.

Furthermore, vanity is present when all is eaten up by vain thoughts. Your heart wanders in prayer; you do not know where you are, and you cannot even call what you are doing prayer. A prayer filled with vain thoughts is like beer or wine that has gone flat and lost its spirit. Vain thoughts are like worms that eat away at the strength of your duty. Would you present a dish to your superior that was worm-eaten or gnawed at beforehand? When we let our thoughts wander during prayer and present them to God, they are worm-eaten and torn—the strength of the prayer is completely gone.

After you have prayed, be careful not to make your prayers vain by neglecting to look for their fulfilment, or by becoming proud of your prayers and gifts, or by resting in them.

It is vanity when you undo everything as soon as you have finished praying by acting contrary to your prayer in your life, not adding watchfulness to your prayer. If a man labours to weave a web and spends many hours on it, but then unravels it all, is he not spending his time in vain? So it is with most people and their prayers. They pray for mercy and grace, and as soon as they finish, they act in a way that contradicts their prayer, unravelling and undoing everything. Is this not vanity? No wonder you think your prayers are in vain when there is nothing but vanity in them.

Also, take care not to make the prayers of others vain. Luther once wrote to Melanchthon, angered by his fear of the power of their adversaries, saying, "*You make our prayers void.*" So it may be said of many who are cold, lukewarm, and dead-hearted, who do not take to heart the cause of God, and who fear the displeasure of one group or another: "*You make our prayers void.*" You who have praying friends—perhaps fathers or mothers who are now dead, but whose prayers were offered in heaven—be careful not to make their prayers

void. Do not give them cause, if they were to live again, to weep and cry out, *"O, how are our prayers made void by the prayers of such and such!"*

But you will say, *Lord, what will become of us? We have an abundance of vanity in our prayers.*

Therefore, that you may not be discouraged, know that although there may be many vain thoughts in prayer, if there is sighing, mourning, humbling of the soul, and panting of the heart after God with groaning and sighing—though there is a mixture of vanity—yet there is still a working of the Spirit of God and of grace in the heart after God. Know that the Lord will not charge this vanity against you. The Lord will do away with your sin, so do not be discouraged by that. The efficacy of prayer does not lie in the excellence of your words but in the merits of Christ and His mediation. Christ only desires some effort from you in your prayer—He wants your heart to pant and reach for Him. But though there may be an abundance of vanity, you may draw a line and make a blot, then another line and another blot—yet Christ draws it all fair again and presents it to His Father.

But another question is this: You say it is in vain to pray. Can you prove that you are one of the seed of Jacob? This privilege belongs to them. It may be that you are of the seed of Esau.

What is the seed of Esau?

The Apostle speaks of Esau and his ways in *Hebrews 12:16*, warning: *Take heed that none of you be like Esau, lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.* Now, if you prove to be a fornicator, you are of the seed of Esau, or if you are a profane person. What does that mean? Esau sold

his birthright for one morsel of food—to please and satisfy the flesh, he gave up his birthright, which was the land of Canaan and symbolized the privileges of God's Church, even a type of heaven itself. His birthright had a spiritual significance, referring to the spiritual privileges that the saints of God have today in all the ordinances of God.

Any man or woman who values any carnal satisfaction above spiritual privileges is of the seed of Esau, not Jacob. You may think that favour lies in money, a good trade, and good cheer. You may think that a day like this, November 5th, is better than a fast day because of the feasting, but you consider the spiritual duties of the day—coming to magnify God and attending to His Word—merely as circumstances or trivial matters. And if you are troubled because a sermon is too long and delays your dinner, then you are a profane Esau. All that I have said does not apply to you, for you do not belong to Jacob but to Esau, as you prefer carnal pleasures of the flesh over the spiritual privileges of the saints.

But how shall I know that I am one of the seed of Jacob?

How do you know that you are a child of someone? By your likeness to your father. One who has the spirit of Jacob is of the seed of Jacob. There are many things the Scriptures say concerning Jacob—see if you resemble them.

First, Jacob was a mighty man in prayer, a wrestler with God. He wrestled until the break of day and was as strong at the last as at the first. Do you have the spirit of your father Jacob? Are you not discouraged in prayer? Even if mercy does not come immediately, do you continue to wrestle through the night, resolving that, come what may, if you die, you will die wrestling? This is a child who resembles the father, and therefore, you are of the seed of Jacob.

Secondly, Jacob was one who feared God. When God appeared to him, he regarded the presence of God as dreadful: *How dreadful is this place! (Genesis 28:17)* because God was there. Do you look upon the presence of God as dreadful? Can you say that the fear of the great God rests upon your soul when you come into His presence? Mark this well, for this is the expression in the Psalm: *Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; all the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye seed of Israel (Psalm 22:23)*. If you want to be sure that you do not seek God in vain, but that you may praise Him in seeking Him, *fear the Lord, all the seed of Jacob*.

Hence we read that when there was an oath between Laban and Jacob, the oath he took was by swearing "by the fear of his father Isaac." God was the fear of Isaac, and Isaac so feared God that he was identified by his fear. Now, Jacob, swearing by the fear of his father Isaac, shows that the fear of God was upon Jacob, just as it was upon his father. And do you walk in the fear of God? Do you have a bold spirit that follows in presumptuous, careless ways? This is not like Jacob, who looked upon God's presence as terrible.

Thirdly, Jacob's heart was not bound to the things of this world. A little of the world was enough for him. In *Genesis 28*, Jacob says, *"Lord, if thou wilt give me meat to eat and raiment to put on,"* he looked for nothing more. He did not concern himself with great matters. Therefore, in *Psalm 24*, where the generation of Jacob is described, it says, *"He that hath not lifted up his soul to vanity."* The men of the world set their eyes on great things—things that are vanity in God's sight, even if they seem great in theirs. They lift up their hearts to them. But the sons of Jacob do not lift up their hearts to vanity. When the things of the world are present, their hearts are unmoved; they do not rise. But if God, Christ, and heavenly things are presented, their hearts are lifted up. If your heart is lifted up to

vanity, if it is like iron drawn up by the magnet of worldly vanities, then you are not a son of Jacob. A little was enough for Jacob, even though he was a great heir. He was a plain man, dwelling in tents (*Genesis 25*), with a simple spirit. He did not seek after great things, while Esau sought after grand things out in the world.

Again, Jacob had a tender spirit. In the account of his wrestling with the angel, it is said that he prevailed, yet he wept and made supplication to him: *"He found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us."* That story of Jacob concerns us, as it shows how God dealt with our father. If you now have a tender spirit, as Jacob had—if when you go into God's presence your spirit yields, melts, and relents—then you are like your father Jacob.

Further, in times of distress, Jacob turned to the covenant, which gave great comfort to his heart. He relied on the covenant, clung to it, and held it as the main support of his spirit. In *Genesis 32:9*, Jacob said, *"O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which said unto me, return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee."* When Jacob heard that Esau was coming against him with many men, what did Jacob do? He turned to God: *"O God of my father Abraham, and of my father Isaac, the Lord which said unto me, return into thy country."* He went to the covenant: *"Remember thy covenant with Abraham and Isaac, and with me too. I went on thy word."* This was Jacob's practice. Can you, in times of distress, turn to a word, a promise, brood over it, clasp it closely, and say, *"This is the promise that must and will do me good?"*

Moreover, Jacob had a humble spirit. He said, *"I am not worthy of the least of thy mercies."* He marvelled at God's mercy—that he had anything at all. And God's mercies made him more humble. This is

an excellent disposition. Often, we are humble and lowly when under the afflicting hand of God. But when mercies make us humble—when the more God is gracious to us, the more lowly we become in our own eyes—that is something truly excellent.

Jacob also looked back to his former condition and gave God the glory. He remembered his humble beginnings: *"I passed over this Jordan with my staff."* Many of you came with only your staff, and now God has given you two bands—you have grown great. Are you willing to think of this, to acknowledge the poor estate you were once in, and to give God the glory? *"I was thus, and thus, of poor parentage, and see how God has dealt with me."*

Another remarkable thing is that Jacob contented himself with God alone. He considered that he had enough in God, even if everything else was taken from him. He did not see himself as undone but believed that he had what could sustain him forever. In *Genesis 33*, compare verses 9 and 11, and you will find a notable difference between Esau and Jacob. Although the wording in our translations is the same, the Scripture has been somewhat wronged in the translation. In verse 8, when Esau comes to Jacob and Jacob offers him a gift, Esau says, *"What do you mean by all these droves which I met?"* Jacob replies, *"These are to find grace in the sight of my lord."* Esau responds, *"I have enough, my brother."* It was a strange thing for Esau to say—a covetous man who is always desiring more, always fearing that he will lack before he dies. Such a person does not usually say, "I have enough." Are there not many of you who never say you have enough?

Jacob insists, *"Please accept my gift,"* saying, *"For I have all things."* Esau replies, *"I have enough."* Both men use the word "enough," but with a significant difference. Esau's "enough" refers to his

possessions. He was satisfied with his estate, seeing it as his portion. He had enough and wanted nothing more. They could speak of other matters, but for him, his wealth was sufficient.

Jacob also says, *"I have enough,"* but his meaning is entirely different. Esau's "enough" is material, but Jacob's "enough" is spiritual. Jacob says, *"I have all,"* meaning that he had everything in God. Even though Jacob's outward condition was more meager than Esau's—having only what he had gained through hard servitude—he could still say, *"I have all."* If Esau had stripped him of everything, Jacob still had everything he needed in God. So, if you are one of the seed of Jacob, even in times of want (as some of you may be plundered and think you have lost everything), you can say, "No, if I have God, I have all." There is a promise: *"He that overcometh shall inherit all things."* How is that? *"And I will be his God"* (Revelation 21:7). Therefore, whatever you lack, if God is yours, if you are God's child, you have all.

Furthermore, one of the seed of Jacob is part of the Church of God, for all of Jacob's descendants were part of the Church. Hence the blessing in Ruth: *"The Lord bless thee like Rachel and Leah, who built up the house of Israel."* Why does it not say, *"The Lord bless thee like Rebekah or Sarah?"* It is because Rachel and Leah were the ones through whom the entire house of Israel, the Church, was built. From Rebekah, only Isaac came, and Sarah's only son was Isaac. But from Rachel and Leah came all who were members of God's Church.

That Church then was a type of the Church to come—a group of people elected and called out from the world to partake in the privileges of Jesus Christ. The Jewish people, the seed of Jacob, were the Church of God at that time, and they typified the Church that was to follow—a group called out from the world to partake in the

blessings of Christ. Can you say that you are part of the Church? The word we translate as "Church" refers to a group called out from the world. Can you speak of a time when God called you out from the world? When you were walking according to the ways of the world, did God issue a mighty call, separating you from the world? For it is said of the seed of Jacob in *Numbers 23:9*, "*From the tops of the rocks I saw him, and beheld him; lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.*" The seed of Jacob are separated from the nations. They are called out of the world by a mighty work of God, set apart to partake in Christ and to be members of Him.

In light of this, those who belong to the seed of Jacob have a deep longing for the privileges of the Church. They desire to partake fully in the ordinances of Christ. Those of the seed of Jacob prize the "excellency of Jacob" above all other excellencies in the world. If you ask what this "excellency of Jacob" is, it is the union of God's people in worship, ordinances, and the pure duties of God's service. In Scripture, this is called the "excellency of Jacob." *Psalms 47:4* says, "*He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom he loved.*"

This is an excellent Scripture. It is a blessed thing to surrender everything to God, to let God choose our inheritance. What is our inheritance? *The excellency of Jacob whom he loved*. What was this excellency? It was the worship of God and His ordinances, the joining together with God's people in the way of His ordinances, in His temple. These were the things that, in those times, were considered the ordinances of God. They were called the "excellency of Jacob." And so it is now—the true excellency of a people is found in enjoying God's ordinances.

You have another expression to the same purpose: *"And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor of my mountain, and mine elect shall inherit it, and my servants shall dwell there."* (Isaiah 65:9). What is the mountain of God? God's ordinances in His Church. *"I will bring a seed out of Jacob and Judah, and they shall inherit my mountain."* So, the greatest inheritance of the seed of Jacob is the mountain of the Lord: communion with the Church of God and His ordinances. If you are of the seed of Jacob, your hearts prize and rejoice in this.

In *Psalms 24:3-5*, we see how the seed of Jacob prizes the enjoyment of God in His ordinances: *"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation."* This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face, O Jacob. It is written as "O Jacob" in our Bibles, but the particle "O" is not in the original, so it may be read differently: *"That seek the face of Jacob."* It can be read in the genitive case as well as the vocative: *"This is the generation of them that seek Him, even Jacob."* Then the verse turns to God, *"That seek Thy face."* Because the psalmist's heart was full of seeking God's face, he first mentions *"the generation of Jacob that seek Thy face."* This means they are the generation that prizes God in His ordinances and considers it a blessing from God to join themselves to the Church of God and set up His ordinances and ways. This is the blessed generation; these are the ones who truly seek God. We do not truly seek God unless we seek Him in His own ways and in all His ordinances. We cannot comfort our souls that we seek Him in truth if we are not seeking Him in all His ordinances. Just as we cannot take comfort in our obedience being true unless it is universal to all God's commandments, we cannot take comfort in

our seeking being true unless it is in all His ordinances and ways. Therefore, we must be of the generation of those who seek the face of the Church and the face of God. The psalm continues, *"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, that the King of glory may come in."* Where should the King of glory come but into His Church? *"Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty."* Still, the Church is called to receive Christ in His glory. So, this is spoken of the Church. By this, you may know whether you are of the seed of Jacob.

Moreover, if you are of the seed of Jacob, you have the inheritance of Jacob and count it as your inheritance. What was Jacob's inheritance? *Deuteronomy 33:2* says, *"The Lord came from Sinai, and from his right hand came a fiery law."* The law of God is a fiery law. Yet in verse 4, it says: *"Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob."* So, though the law is strict and severe, it is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. If you are of the congregation of Jacob, you will regard the law of God as part of your inheritance—not just something you are bound to obey, whether you want to or not, but something you rejoice in as your inheritance. For my part, I know no surer sign of a gracious heart than this: one who rejoices in God's law as their inheritance. Look at how David expresses this—he rejoiced in God's law more than in gold and silver, more than in honey and the honeycomb. It is one thing to obey God's law, but it is another thing to rejoice in it as an inheritance. If you are of the seed of Jacob, you will treasure the inheritance of the seed of Jacob.

Another mark of being of the seed of Jacob is faithfulness in the place where God has set you. When Jacob served Laban (*Genesis 31:6*), even though Laban was harsh, Jacob testified that he served his father-in-law with all his power. This is an excellent example for

servants. You may long for time to seek God, and indeed, the poorest and meanest servant should be allowed some time to seek God alone. But if you are of the seed of Jacob, be like him in this: serve with all your strength, even if you have a difficult master or mistress, as Laban was. Even if they treat you harshly, show godliness in your position. Some servants appear godly because they are eager to hear sermons and attend services, and I do not blame them for loving the Word and desiring it. However, for servants to be zealous in hearing the Word and partaking in ordinances while being sluggish and unfaithful in their duties, giving just cause for offense to their employers, is a dishonour. Show your godliness in your relationships and responsibilities. There is no one truly godly who does not display godliness in the relationships and roles in which they are placed. So, manifest yourselves as the seed of Jacob in this way.

Again, the seed of Jacob is a taught seed. God teaches them, as it says in *Psalms 147:19*, "*He hath not dealt so with other nations; He gave His law to Jacob, and His word to Israel.*" Similarly, in *Deuteronomy 33:10*, Levi is appointed to teach Jacob. There is not one of the seed of Jacob who remains ignorant or foolish in matters of religion, for they are taught.

One of the seed of Jacob is also one who takes care of his family. We read in *Genesis 35:1*: "*God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there, and make there an altar unto God who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.'* Then Jacob said to his household and to all that were with him, '*Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean,*' etc. When Jacob was preparing to go into God's presence, he sought to reform his family. When God calls you to fast days or to partake in the Sacrament, do you cleanse your families? Do you examine the evils present in your households and exert your power to cleanse them?

There is one more example that I must not omit. When Jacob was about to die, though he himself was going the way of all flesh, his great comfort—and the comfort of those he left behind—was that God would fulfil His word to His Church and people. In *Genesis 48:21*, Israel said to Joseph, "*Behold, I die, but God will visit you and bring you again to the land of your fathers.*" Jacob said, "*Behold, I die,*" but he died in faith, believing that God's promise would still stand. He did not think the promise would fail just because he was taken away. "*God shall bring you to the land of your fathers.*" When you are on your sickbed, can you say, "*Behold, I die, but continue on; God will fulfil His word. I die in faith that all shall go well with the Church of God. There will come a time when the Church shall gain victory, when Christ shall reign, and the saints shall be delivered from their oppressors.*" This was the spirit of Jacob. If you are part of the seed of Jacob, you will not seek God's face in vain.

But you may say, "*It is not in vain for some to seek God, but I am a poor, wretched creature, and perhaps it is in vain for me to seek the Lord.*"

There is a verse in the Psalms that fully addresses any objection about our poverty or the inadequacy of our prayers: "*He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayers.*" (*Psalms 102:17*). The prayer of the destitute—the word here refers to a poor shrub in the wilderness, a contemptible shrub trampled by the feet of beasts, one that no one regards. Yet God regards such prayers.

You may think, "*If I could make an excellent prayer, that would be something.*" But no—God does not despise your prayer. It may be that you despise your own prayer, and others might do the same, but God will not despise it.

Perhaps you think this was only spoken to certain people in those times. But look at what follows: *"This shall be written for the generations to come."* This Scripture, this promise of God, is written for future generations. *"And the people that shall be created shall praise the Lord."* We who were not yet created at that time but who have since come into existence must praise the Lord for this Scripture: that God will regard the prayers of poor shrubs and not despise them.

But you may say, *"The things I need are great, and it may be in vain for me to seek such great things at God's hands. Perhaps if I sought only ordinary things, there might be hope, but I am seeking great things—mercies for the Church, for the Kingdom, for the people of God. Is it not in vain for someone as poor as I am to seek such great things?"*

We may think that the things we seek from God's hand are too great for us to ask, but they are not too great for God to give. It is said of Perilla that when Alexander offered him a dowry for his daughter, Alexander immediately promised him 50 talents. Perilla replied, *"It is too much, 10 talents are sufficient."* But Alexander answered, *"If it is too great for you to ask, it is not too great for me to give."* God loves for His people to ask great things of Him. Yes, He loves that even the poorest and most humble of His people should ask Him for great things. There is a gracious promise for that in *Jeremiah 33:3*: *"Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things that thou knowest not."* This promise applies to everyone who is of the seed of Jacob.

But what if I pray in times of affliction, when God's hand is upon me—will it not be in vain to seek Him then?

It is true that neglecting God in earlier times, and only praying when afflicted, is a dangerous condition. However, this temptation often comes to those who have sought God previously. You might think, *"Now you seek God, but this is only because of your affliction—will God listen to you now?"* I say this only to comfort those who have been diligent in seeking God during times of health: yet, even if you have been negligent, it is still possible that God will hear you in times of affliction. Jonah prayed and said, *"I cried out to the Lord in my affliction, and He answered me"* (Jonah 2:2).

But what if my affliction is the result of my sin? The objection may be this: *"If I sought God in affliction that He sent as a trial, maybe God would hear me. But what if His hand is upon me because of my sin? Will God still hear my prayers?"*

The notable example of David can help God's people overcome this temptation. God's hand was upon David for his sin when he fled from Absalom. God had threatened that the sword would not depart from David's house, yet David prayed against the wicked politician and counsellor, asking the Lord to turn his counsel into foolishness. And God heard David's prayer, even in his affliction for sin: *"And the Lord turned the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."*

Let us not be discouraged, even if politicians work craftily or God's hand is upon us, and our conscience accuses us, saying, *"This is because of your sins. That is why God leaves you in the hands of your enemies, why they have such power and favour with the prince."* Even if this is because of our sins, let us still seek God to turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. It has not been in vain before, and it shall not be in vain now. We have experienced that, even in our affliction—and even when that affliction is because of our sin—crying out to God to turn the counsel of Ahithophel into

foolishness has resulted in God graciously answering our prayers, encouraging us more and more to cry out to Him for that purpose.

But why should I seek God at all? Hasn't God decreed and determined what He will do? What God intends to do, He has decreed from eternity. Therefore, whether we pray or not, it shall come to pass. If we do not pray, it shall still happen. If God has determined to deliver me from sickness, it will happen whether I pray or not. And when someone's time has come to die, they will die, and so when a kingdom's time has come to be destroyed, it shall be destroyed, and not before. So, what good can prayer do?

Though I suppose you may be satisfied and think that this objection carries little weight, I will provide an answer with a couple of Scriptures. Consider *Psalms 2*: "*I will declare the decree.*" This refers to God's decree concerning the exaltation of Christ in His resurrection and the success of Christ's work of mediation. "*I will declare the decree; the Lord hath said, 'Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.'*" God had decreed to give Christ the heathen for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His possession, yet Christ still had to ask it of His Father, despite God's decree.

Another remarkable text is in the prophecy of Daniel. *Daniel 9:2* says: "*In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolation of Jerusalem.*" And what did Daniel do? "*I set my face unto the Lord God to seek by prayer and supplications.*" Daniel understood from the Scriptures what God had decreed concerning Jerusalem—he knew God's plan, so why should he pray further? Yet,

after knowing God's decree and His promise, Daniel *set his face to seek the Lord*. Now, we do not always know God's decrees, but even if we did, understanding God's plan of mercy for the land should not hinder us from seeking the Lord—it should encourage us to seek Him more earnestly. Thus, this is a vain objection.

Furthermore, it is not in vain to seek the Lord if we consider what we have already received. Although we may not have all that we desire, when we reflect on the sustaining mercies, the preventing mercies, and the guiding mercies that God has already granted us, we will see that seeking Him has not been in vain. You have received abundant mercies. It is a great error to complain about God's grace when He has bestowed such mercies upon us. You may feel you have nothing because you have not received all that you desire—like a froward child who, not getting everything they want, throws everything away. But God has been exceedingly gracious to us. Other souls would have worshipped and blessed God with their faces to the ground if they had received only a hundredth part of the mercies we have. Yet, because we do not have everything we want, we are quick to think it is in vain. Let us be careful not to dishonour the grace of God.

Further, you may think it is in vain because sometimes God denies in granting, and grants in denying. Many times, God grants what we ask by denying it, and He denies what we ask by granting it. Our denials are, in fact, gifts to us. Woe to us if God granted everything we prayed for! There is much good to be gained from God's denials, for He denies us to do us good and prepare us for greater mercies. Therefore, it is not in vain that you seek God, even when you are denied.

Moreover, it may be that God delights more in hearing your prayers than in hearing your praises. Although you may not receive what you

ask for, allow God to take pleasure in you in whatever way He chooses. There is the praying voice and the praising voice of God's people. You may delight in offering praises, but perhaps God delights in hearing your prayers. Perhaps He would not hear your prayers if you received what you sought. God says to the Church, "*Let me hear thy voice, for it is sweet.*" No one would think that the King denies their petition as long as the King delights in reading it. If someone presents a petition to the King and he does not immediately grant it but calls for it again and again, would anyone think it in vain to present that petition? As long as the King hears it and takes pleasure in it, it is not in vain. Similarly, as long as God loves to hear your voice and to receive your petitions, it is not in vain.

As for your praising voice, God shall have enough of that in heaven, but He shall have none of your praying voice there. So why should you not be willing that God should hear more of your prayers now? All the prayers God will ever hear from you are in this world; after a short time, He shall never hear your prayers again. Therefore, let us be willing to continue in prayer and not wonder why God keeps us in a state of prayer. The time in which God delights to hear the prayers of His people is in this world. As for our praising voice, we may desire to spend all our days praising God for His mercies, but that is reserved for another world.

Furthermore, it may be God's way to wait until He brings a great deal of mercy all at once, rather than in bits and drops. When men deal with great merchants, they do not expect payments in sixpences, shillings, or crowns all at once. Even if two, three, or ten pounds are due, they do not insist on immediate payment but wait for a greater sum. Now, little traders who deal by retail may take payments in pence and small sums. Christians, however, deal with God for great things, and there are great transactions between God and a gracious

heart. Therefore, do not be surprised if God waits to give a greater sum of blessings. Just as God deals with the wicked in justice, He deals with godly people in mercy. He allows the wicked to continue for a long time before bringing judgment, waiting until all the wrath and judgment come together. Similarly, He waits to bestow abundant mercy on the saints, and when God's appointed time comes, mercies will come in full.

Moreover, it may be that God has so much mercy prepared for you that you do not yet have a vessel capable of receiving it. But know this: heaven and earth are working for your benefit. Is the plowing and sowing of the farmer and all the rain in vain simply because the corn is not yet in the barn? We do not think so. Likewise, we must not consider our prayers in vain simply because we have not yet attained what we are praying for.

There are many other answers I could give, but since time is short, I will move on to the application.

Firstly, if it is true that God never says to the seed of Jacob, "*Seek my face in vain*," then surely there are great things ahead for the Church that we can trust God will accomplish in these latter days. Why? Because all the seed of Jacob, ever since Jacob's time, have been seeking God—not just for their own times but for the Church until the end of the world. All their prayers are on file, and one day they must be answered. What a glorious harvest that will be! Blessed are those who live to partake in it. We have received a little now, but certainly, glorious things are yet in store for the Church, for every prayer shall be answered.

Secondly, those of you who are of the seed of Jacob should know your honour, even if you are poor in worldly terms. God has given you something that makes you rich: you have the key to heaven, and

you can open the treasures of heaven, which shall never be in vain. God's people are exceedingly honoured in His sight because they have credit in heaven, and their seeking of God is never in vain. As Bathsheba said to Solomon in *1 Kings 2:20*, "*I desire one petition of thee; I pray thee, deny me not.*" Some translations render this as "*Confound not my face.*" Indeed, denying a petition can bring dishonour and shame, but God will never confound the faces of His people. He never says to them, "*Seek ye me in vain.*" They are His honoured ones.

Just as it is said of their father Jacob, "*He prevailed as a prince with God,*" so it may be said of the seed of Jacob. They prevail as princes with God and can do great things through Him. Perhaps they cannot do the things that vain spirits can do, but they can accomplish much with God by prevailing in prayer.

O, see your privilege and your riches here! All the prayers you have made throughout your life are trading in heaven; they are not lost. If a man ventures his stock abroad to the Indies and does not hear of it for a long time, he might think it lost and gone. But if he hears certain news that all his stock is safe in the place where he sent it, and those there are faithfully increasing his wealth, his spirit is revived, and he can say, "*Blessed be God! I hope to be a rich man after all.*" I say to you, be of good comfort—your stock is not lost. It is trading in heaven, and every prayer you have sent up is there. We should regard our prayers as riches, as investments sent to heaven, not as children shooting arrows without caring where they land.

Learn this: it is a great privilege to have a praying friend, a praying companion. Many of you love friends who are cheerful, pleasant, and merry; but are they praying friends? Praying friends are the special friends because prayer can prevail with God. To have a friend at

court who can obtain any petition is considered a privilege. How much greater a privilege is it to have a great friend in heaven!

Many people, when they lie on their sick beds, send for others to pray for them. Why don't they send for the companions with whom they drank and swore? O, they dare not! This is enough to convince any person's conscience about who the best people really are, no matter what they say.

Suppose you were lying on your deathbed, and your life depended on the prayers of four or five people. If God were to speak from heaven and say: *"You are at the brink of destruction, but I will grant you this favour. You may choose four or five people to pray for you, and as they pray, so it will be with you. You have liberty to choose anyone in the world."* I ask you, would a drunkard choose four or five fellow drunkards? Would a swearer choose swearers? Would unclean people choose those they delighted in all their lives? If everything depended on it, you would not choose such people. Therefore, your conscience is convinced, even though you know those people are not precious in God's eyes (despite your sinful desires). The better people are the ones who are gracious and have more credit in heaven. Learn to value praying friends who can prevail with God.

Let us also give prayer its due honour for the mercies we receive from God—whether public mercies or private deliverances of friends. Do not attribute it to second causes, to fortune, or to chance. Be careful not to deny God His glory.

It is a sign of a carnal spirit when, after God has glorified Himself by answering the prayers of His people, someone attributes the outcome to other causes.

I recall reading about the Porphyrian atheists, followers of the atheist philosopher Porphyry, who sought to obscure God's work in delivering the children of Israel through the Red Sea. They claimed that Moses, having learned from the Egyptians—who were great astronomers—knew when there would be a low tide and what constellations would cause it. They said that Moses merely took advantage of the time when the tide would be lower than ever in that age, and thus led the people through the sea. In this way, atheists tried to obscure God's work by attributing it to natural causes.

Similarly, I read about an old prophet in Jeroboam's time (as related by Josephus) who, when Jeroboam's hand withered, attributed it to natural causes. He claimed that Jeroboam had been exhausted all day and had developed palsy, which caused his hand to wither. When it was restored, the prophet explained it as a natural recovery, rather than acknowledging that it was the result of prayer.

In the same way, when God has magnified His mercy to England and worked wonders, many carnal, atheistic spirits say it was merely an accident or that the policy of certain men brought it to pass. They attribute everything to natural causes, which is a sign of a wretched, profane heart. For if God has ever magnified prayer, it is in these days.

There are two or three Scriptures that have been more magnified by God's work in our time than at any other time since the world began. One is *Exodus 13*: "*In the thing wherein they dealt proudly, God was above them.*" Never since the world began has this been more fulfilled. Another is in *Psalms 10*: "*The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.*" If there has ever been a time when this Scripture has been fulfilled, it is in our day. A third is the text: "*I said not to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye my face in vain.*" As I said, God has

raised up a spirit of prayer among the seed of Jacob, greater than ever known before. There has never been such a spirit of prayer, nor such things accomplished through prayer.

The Lord has especially honoured the ordinance of prayer now because it was previously dishonoured and persecuted. The people of God could not meet to fast and pray without being accused of holding a conventicle and being persecuted as factious people. Since God saw this way despised, He has now honoured it, and the former and latter mercies we have received are due to His goodness in response to prayer. These mercies were obtained by prayer. Let us be encouraged to continue seeking God for what we need, for He has said that it is not in vain to seek His face.

There are many of us now who can do little else: if God has delivered you from sickness and other evils, know that He has delivered you to pray. The less you can do in other ways, the more you should do in prayer. I have read of a heathen, Numa Pompilius, who would never go about anything without first going to the temple to pray. You, who are entrusted with our lives and liberties, have great need to pray. Go into your closets and sanctify all your thoughts and resolutions by prayer so that your help and assistance may not be in vain to us. And all others should assist you in seeking God through prayer.

We have this encouragement: none of us seeks God alone, but we join with thousands. Why should our place be empty? Why should our prayers not join with the rest? We shall meet many prayers in heaven—the prayers of our forefathers and of those who are now dead and gone, who did not live to enjoy the fruit of their prayers. Yet, when we pray for mercies, our prayers join with theirs in heaven. Therefore, let us be encouraged to seek the Lord.

If mercies do come, what a conviction it will be to our hearts if we realise that the mercies have arrived, but we did not seek them! And if mercies do not come, conscience will rebuke us, reminding us that we were sensual, carnal creatures. It may be for our neglect in seeking God that He has denied us the mercies we expected.

This should also serve as a rebuke to those who begin to seek God but do not continue. O wretch, why have you stopped? Where are you going? Is it in vain to serve the Lord? Certainly, you were never truly acquainted with God and His ways. You will find it a dreadful change when it becomes clear that you have forsaken God, the fountain of living water, and have sought after vanity, forsaking your own mercy.

The main point of all this is to apply it to the present occasion. The Lord has made good His word this day: He has not said, "*Seek ye me in vain.*" Today testifies to the truth that prayer has accomplished great things. I have heard many years ago, from credible testimony, that on this very fifth of November—when we received such a great mercy so many years ago—many godly people in the city kept the day in fasting and prayer. It was widely known and passed from hand to hand at the time, and you know what God did.

But what has He done lately? If our fathers were to rise from their graves and we were to tell them that now the High Commission, which troubled them so much, has been abolished, that there shall be no more Star Chamber, that the practice of cutting off ears is gone—they would wonder how all this came to pass. And whereas Parliaments used to be dissolved suddenly, now this Parliament is to continue by as firm an Act as any law in the land. As for the oppressors, all the courts and bishops' chanceries—they are gone,

God has extirpated them. They were first cast out of the House, and now out of the kingdom.

Even though an army rose up and sought to bring us into slavery, God has given us victory (though some have suffered greatly), and He has brought our adversaries very low, causing them to surrender their towns, castles, and arms. And here we are, to rejoice in God and to bless Him for all these things.

If many of our ancestors were to rise and hear us speak, and see how we lift up our hands to bless God, with what hearts would they join us in praising Him! They would marvel that such things have been done. Let not the grace of God be in vain, as God has not said to us, "*Seek my face in vain.*"

What use shall we make of this?

Let us give God real praise, not merely come to repeat it and tell God of it, but let us *make His praise glorious*. Let us put a glory on it. We do this when we make right use of His mercies and do not receive His mercies in vain.

What does it mean to make use of the memorial we celebrate?

Firstly, the remembrance of these mercies must humble us; this is a sweet humbling. It is better to be melted by the beams of the sun than by the scorching of fire.

You may ask, "*Humbled for what?*"

There are three things for which we have cause to be humbled, upon considering God's mercy towards us:

First, the sin of unbelief. Think back to when we were in distress, when we heard bad news—when our armies retreated and faced danger—how our spirits sank as though all hope was lost. Let us rebuke our hearts, for God rebuked us kindly. We might have faced a more severe rebuke.

Secondly, let us be humbled for all our murmuring, complaining, and discontent. *"Oh, we never thought the wars would last so long! Oh, the taxes are unbearable! Our estates have been taken away!"* How many are there who would rather that all the good God has done for His people during these times had never been done, just so they wouldn't suffer any loss in their outward possessions? Be rebuked for all your murmuring and complaining about the difficulties you've encountered in God's great cause.

Thirdly, let this mercy humble us for any time we may have harboured the thought that it would have been better not to have gotten involved so deeply. Did the enemy's apparent success lead you to think, *"It might have been better for me not to have taken such a stand. I see now how things are going; the enemy is likely to prevail and overrun everything. Wouldn't it have been wiser if I had kept quiet, done as little as possible, and only acted when forced? When the King's party comes, they can do no more than force us anyway."* If you have had such thoughts, pray to God to forgive them. Let what God has done rebuke you. Are you sorry for what you have done? Do you see now that God would accomplish His purposes without you? If you have been a public instrument for good, yet out of fear of the outcome you have regretted it, God rebukes you today.

Then, strive to love prayer as long as you live, as David says, *"I will call upon God as long as I live."* Prayer tips the scales and has the advantage.

First, the other side did not fear much suffering if they were defeated; they believed they had a leader, and they thought they would be where he was. They expected that he would support them and secure their position. But on this side, if they had been defeated, they would have been utterly undone. What a mighty advantage one side had over the other!

Then, if the King's side had prevailed, he had places of dignity to bestow; but if the Parliament's side prevailed, we would simply be where we were before. We would only maintain what we had and could not expect to elevate our condition. Yet how many from the broken gentry expected to raise their fortunes on the other side? It is like the story of the Pope and the General Council. Though the Council was above him, the Pope prevailed. Why? Because the Pope had cardinalships and deaneries to bestow, while the Council had none. They had the advantage in that regard.

Furthermore, those who appeared on one side were discouraged extraordinarily, while those on the other side were encouraged to the utmost. On one side, how unfaithful have they been? On the other, they held firm to their principles because their principles suited the flesh. But there are many on this side who do not have gracious principles, even though they supported a public cause, which made them unfaithful. We have to rely on men who lack the principles to act by, while those on the other side acted according to their own. One part acts to gratify men's lusts, and the majority of the world loves it; they know that if one party prevails, they will have liberty and licentiousness. But if the other prevails, they will live under laws. Now, men desire their lusts, so when they see that one side will give them those desires, while the other side will curb them, they fight hard for their lusts.

At first, I wondered how men could be so vile as to fight to make themselves slaves. But when I considered that they would have slaves under them and satisfy their lusts, while the other side would curb them, I understood. Then I marvelled that God should tip the scales the other way, given that they had all the carnal advantages. But here is the truth: we have people who have prayed, and that has tipped the scale. Love prayer and praying people, and join with them, for God is with them and will not let them pray in vain. A praying Christian is a useful Christian in the world.

Again, make this use of all that has been done. Consider how hardened the adversaries would have been had they prevailed against the cause of God. Be even more resolute in God's cause. If they had prevailed, how they would have blasphemed! Thousands of atheists would have been made, more than before. What a mighty offense and stumbling block this would have been. Now, since God has turned it the other way, justify God and His cause. Settle your hearts in the love of God and His cause, and commit yourself even more to the reformation at hand.

Furthermore, let us give Him real praise so that we do not receive the grace of God in vain. By this grace, we hope He has preserved our estates, which we feared would have been taken from us. We continue to have our liberties and the Gospel. Let our hearts be engaged with God to give up our estates to Him this day. Let us renew our commitments to God in secret, between God and our souls. "Lord, You might have taken away my estate by the hands of the spoilers—it was close to happening. You have done this to others among my brethren, but my estate remains! That estate which would have been spent on their lusts, I now resolve to spend in Your service, for You have preserved it. I count it a great mercy that I have an estate to honour Your name. I feared I would not."

God expects that from now on you will make a more holy use of your estate than before. Examine your heart and ask, “What am I doing with my estate for God? What honour has God received from my estate more than before?” God expects more from you, or else He may justly say, “In vain have I preserved this wretch’s estate. There are many of My servants who, if I had preserved their estates, would have improved them in the towns and places they lived in. Yet here is a wretch whose estate I have preserved, and he is more greedy, scraping up for himself. His only thought is how to recover what he has lost through taxes, and other means.” The Lord may repent of what He has done, and the curse of God may follow such a man’s estate. Take heed, and know that you are now engaged to do more with your estate.

The same applies to the liberty of the Gospel. God expects that you will prize the Gospel more than ever. “Lord, we were afraid that the Gospel would have been taken from us if You had given us up into the hands of our enemies. We feared we would no longer see our teachers or hear the things that refresh our hearts. But now, shall we still have the Gospel and hope that our posterity will have it as well? We hope that we will never provoke You again, as we have done before, to take it away.” A man who has been in danger of losing his estate and then recovers it will be more careful afterward. Our neglect of the Gospel, because we took it for granted, might have caused God to take it from us. And now that God has restored it, let us take heed not to provoke Him again, but attend to His word more faithfully than we did before.

Lastly, does God say to us that we shall not seek Him in vain? Then let us not allow God to call us in vain. If when we seek God, our seeking is not in vain, then when God seeks us, let it not be in vain. There is every reason for this. If God is so gracious to poor, base

worms and sinful creatures, that even when we barely mutter our prayers, they are not in vain, is it not reasonable that when God calls, He should not call in vain? When God calls us through His word to perform certain duties, He is seeking us. Let us remember this text: "I have called upon God, and I have never called in vain. Now I go to hear His word, and through it, He calls me and seeks me. Let Him not seek in vain." Say, "Lord, what do You say to Your servant?" The Lord is always ready to hear your cry, so be ready to hear His. Go on with encouragement, for the Lord has encouraged us this day. Let all your prayers and efforts break through every difficulty, and the Lord's mercy will break through all opposition. For He has not said to the seed of Jacob, "Seek Me in vain."

Sermon 2

"But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight." - *Psalms 16:3*

In the beginning of this Psalm, David prays to God for preservation and deliverance from some great evil that was upon him, or that he was in danger of. The argument that he uses is first his trust in God: "In thee do I put my trust." And it was not an unfounded or unwarranted trust, but one that proceeded from his interest in God: "O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, thou art my Lord: thou art mine." But what if David should now perish in his distress? Would God be any worse off for it? David seems to acknowledge this—that even if he were not preserved, God would still be bound to preserve His own name and cause: "My goodness extendeth not to thee."

Though I should live, yet it is little that I could do for thee. "But to the saints that are in the earth,"—though my goodness does not extend to thee, I may yet be useful to thy people, to thy saints while I live. My goodness extends to them, and they are those with whom my soul is closely bound. O, I desire to live and be preserved so that I may be of use to them.

It is a great argument to prevail with God when you are in danger and seek preservation if your heart works like this towards God: that the desire you have to be preserved is that whatever you are and whatever you can do may extend to the saints—that you may live to be of use and service to God's people in the world. Many of you, when you perceive yourselves to be in danger, cry to God to be preserved. But for what end? Why would you be preserved? Why would you live? If we may judge of your motives by your practice, you would live to have more time to satisfy your lusts, to have more time to dishonour God, or to do mischief in the places where you live. There is such intent in the heart, and God sees it. God sees all that will follow in your lives; He sees beforehand what was in your heart when you cried out to be preserved. But now, one who is gracious desires preservation for this reason: O that I might live to be of use in the place where God has set me! If God should take me away now, my conscience tells me that I have done little service for Him. I have been of little use in the place where God has set me. O that I might be preserved for this reason, that whatever I am, or have, might extend to the saints on earth, even the excellent, in whom is all my delight.

This is the scope of the words and their context. In them, there are two main points:

1. The high esteem of the saints—they are the excellent of the earth.

2. The sweet delight that David's heart had in them—"in whom is all my delight."

For the first, the high esteem that David had for the saints, especially those on earth, the "excellent,"—the point is this:

The saints of God, those who are godly, are the excellent in the earth.

And secondly, from what he says, "in whom is all my delight," we observe this:

A gracious heart finds the most contentment in the saints of God; it is deeply delighted in them.

The first point serves mainly as preparation for the second, so I will pass over it briefly:

They are the excellent in the earth.

Let them be as they will in regard to their outward meanness, yet there is an excellency in them. Job scraping upon the dunghill, and Jeremiah stuck in the mire of the dungeon, yet they had more glory and beauty upon them than the great ones of the earth when they sat upon their thrones. Though they lie among the pots (as the Psalmist says), yet they are as doves, their wings are the wings of doves, whose feathers are of gold and silver; *Psalm 68:13*, beautiful and glorious.

You know the judgment that the Holy Ghost passed upon the saints of old, who were outwardly lowly enough. There was as much meanness upon them as the malice of the world could inflict: the text says, "they had trials of mockings, scourgings, bonds, and imprisonments; they were sawn asunder, tempted, and they wandered in sheepskins and goatskins: destitute, afflicted,

tormented." What kind of creatures were these? Surely, they must have been some wretched men and women, hunted up and down, wandering in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and tormented? No such thing—they were such of whom the world was not worthy. That is the judgment of the Holy Ghost upon such people; the world was not worthy of them.

The men of the world would have thought, and did think, that these were such as were not worthy to live in the world. But the judgment of the Holy Ghost was that the world was not worthy of them. I remember Chrysostom gives this interpretation of the phrase: "They are worth more than all the world, more than many thousands of the world; one of them is worth more than all the men of the world combined." And it is a truth indeed—one saint of God, no matter how humble or poor, one servant or child who is truly gracious, is worth more than all the men of the world who are not. All the monarchs and princes on earth do not possess the same excellency as one poor child or servant who is gracious.

But the common interpretation is this: they are such as have such excellency that the world is not worthy to enjoy them. The world is not worthy of their presence, that they should so much as live among them; they are better suited to be set as stars in heaven, to be before the Lord in His glory. The world is not worthy of them.

But what is there in the saints that makes them the excellent of the earth? The saints are the excellent. The word in the original signifies "the magnificent ones," those who have magnificent spirits and are exceedingly glorious.

There is this in them (to pass over this point briefly):

They have the image of God upon them, and therefore they must needs be the excellent ones on earth. The image of God makes them resemble God in that which the creature is able to conceive of, which is the height of God's excellency. Though it is true that whatsoever is in God is God Himself, yet, as we conceive of God in our limited way, there is something about God that appears most excellent and glorious. And it must indeed be in regard to that expression, because grace is called the image of God.

Now, when we draw the image of something, we strive to depict that which is its most proper excellency. If I were to draw the image of a man, I would not simply draw the likeness of a piece of flesh (for a beast has that as well as a man), nor would I draw just feet or legs or the back parts of a man. But when the image of a man is drawn, it is his face that is depicted—that is the most excellent part. In the face, we endeavour to express his life and spirit as much as possible. Though the spirit cannot be drawn—there is no picture of it—yet, because it shows itself most clearly in the face, that is as close as we can get to representing it.

So the image of God is that in which the creature resembles God in the height of excellency and glory. Not every resemblance of God is His image: there are some things that reveal certain aspects of God's glory, and they are only called God's "footsteps" or His "backparts." All the resemblances of God in His creatures, and the expressions of His power and wisdom, the invisible things of God that we see in the creation, are but His "footsteps" and "backparts;" they are not His image. Why? Because they do not resemble God in what He has set out to us as the height of His glory. What is that? It is the holiness of God—that is the pinnacle of His excellency. Therefore it is said of God, "Holy and reverend is His name." God's name is revered because of His holiness; without His holiness, even with all His other

attributes (if it were possible to separate them), His name would not be reverend. Hence, when the saints in heaven glorify God for His highest excellency, they cry, "Holy, holy, holy." We do not find in Scripture any of God's attributes repeated three times—neither "Wise, wise, wise" nor "Almighty, almighty, almighty," but rather "Holy, holy, holy," for God's chief excellency lies in His holiness.

Now, where grace is in the creature, resembling this holiness of God, there is the principle by which the creature is able to act as God acts. For that is holiness—the working of God towards His own end in all things, according to His nature. So, when the creature works towards God as its last end, and in some measure is suitable to God, there is the image of God.

Therefore, the Scripture expresses grace by these four things:

- The image of God,
- The life of God,
- The glory of God, and
- The Divine nature.

These are the four expressions of the work of grace.

The image of God resembles God's excellency. The life of God refers to acting like God Himself (as in Ephesians 4: "alienated from the life of God"). It is also the glory of God Himself, and the divine nature (Romans 3:23, 2 Peter 1:3). Thus, there must indeed be excellency in the saints, who possess grace of such a nature.

Certainly, there is more of God in the humblest saint, in the lowliest gracious man or woman, than in all the world combined—more even than in heaven and earth. Consider all the creatures, all the glory of God in the heavens, in the sun, moon, and stars, and combine them

all. Consider all the glory of God in the seas, those vast oceans, and combine that too. Take all the glory of God that appears in the earth—its riches, its arts and sciences—and put all of this together. The humblest youth or servant who possesses the least degree of grace holds more of the glory of God than all these combined. There is more of the shining of God's presence in the smallest degree of grace in the poorest Christian in the world than there is in all these creatures. Even if there were a quintessence of all excellency and glory, extracted and concentrated into one, it would not contain as much of God—God could not see as much of Himself in that creature with all excellency combined—as He sees in the humblest saint who possesses the work of grace. Surely then, they are the excellent ones of the earth if there is so much of God in them.

The work of grace is that which has the most of God in it; and wherever it is found, it is the proper work of God's eternal love—it is a beam of that love. Therefore, it contains a great deal of excellency. Take all other creatures, and it is possible to enjoy all the good that is in all the creatures in heaven and on earth (excepting only the grace of God) through the bounty and pleasure of God. There is nothing that any creature has that cannot be communicated as a fruit of God's general bounty, except spiritual blessings in Christ. But wherever grace is found, though it may be in the smallest degree, it is of such a nature that it can only come from God's eternal election. It is the principle of eternal life, and wherever it is found, it will grow up to eternal glory.

All common gifts will never grow into glory, though they may rise to great heights, but the grace of God—true grace—is of the same nature as eternal glory. Therefore, in its essence, it is the greatest good that God has ever given, or ever will give, to any creature for all eternity. Wherever God has communicated even a single measure of grace, it

is the greatest good He has ever bestowed or will bestow for all eternity upon any of His creatures, and so it is exceedingly excellent.

Excepting only the work of God in the hypostatic union of the two natures—where He joined the human and divine nature together in one person—other than that, the work of grace in any soul is the greatest work that God has ever done or ever will do, from all eternity.

Now, because this work of grace contains so much of God, comes from His eternal election and love, and is the greatest work He has ever done or ever will do, and the greatest good He has ever or will ever communicate to any creature, it must necessarily be the greatest excellency. For God made the world with the purpose of communicating His excellency and glory to the creature. Now, since the work of grace is the greatest thing that God has intended from all eternity for the communication of His glory, it must indeed make the creature excellent. This is the first reason they are the excellent ones on earth—because of the image of God upon them, the work of grace.

Secondly, they are the excellent ones of the earth because of their separation for God. They are those whom God has set His thoughts upon from all eternity, so that they might enjoy Him. The great counsels that God has worked from all eternity have been focused primarily on this—to set certain creatures apart for Himself from the rest of the world. Now, when God sets His thoughts and counsels on such a task from all eternity, to separate a few creatures for Himself, if we can know who these are, we cannot help but see them as the excellent ones on earth. Wherever we see the work of grace in someone, we may know by that sign that these individuals have been set apart by God for Himself. God has employed His infinite wisdom from all eternity in this work of separating such people for Himself.

As the Psalmist says in Psalm 4:3, "The Lord has set apart the godly for Himself." These are those who are dedicated and consecrated to God, and so there is a wonderful excellency bestowed upon them.

As you know, anything that is dedicated and consecrated to God, no matter how lowly it may be in itself, gains great excellency through this consecration. For instance, under the law, if a piece of wood in the Tabernacle, or even a badger's skin, or brass, or goat's hair, was consecrated to God, though it might be insignificant in itself, it was considered to have great excellency once made holy for God. Now, I reason this way: if a piece of wood, a bit of hair, or leather consecrated to God gained such excellency, how much more excellency must there be in an immortal soul adorned with the graces of the Spirit, as pearls in a crown, when that soul is consecrated and set apart for God's glory and praise for all eternity. Surely, this must be an even greater excellency.

When a thing is consecrated, we no longer consider it according to its original quality but according to its consecration. I remember reading about some people in India who, if they lose an ape's tooth that had been consecrated to their god, would give an unspeakable sum of money to redeem it, because it had been consecrated to their god. Likewise, I read of another man who, though raised from a humble birth, sought to elevate his status by an unusual means: he took a golden basin, which he had used to wash his feet, made an idol out of it, and consecrated it. After it was consecrated, everyone bowed down and worshipped it. He reasoned, "If this basin, which was of lowly use before, is now honoured because it has been set apart for this sacred purpose, then I, though of humble birth, should also be honoured, having been set apart to govern."

If superstition and the will of man can, through consecration, attribute so much excellence to an object, how much more should we consider the consecration performed by God himself? The Holy Spirit, whose special office it is to consecrate souls to God and set them apart for his use, bestows a far greater excellence upon those He consecrates. Thus, they are indeed the excellent ones of the earth.

That is the second point.

Thirdly, consider the relationship that the saints have with God. It is the closest relationship imaginable. They are His children, as children are to a parent. They are the bride of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. In this regard, they are more closely united to God than the angels themselves, being the spouse of the Son of God and even members of His body. In this respect, they have a closer relationship to the divine nature, to the second person of the Trinity, than the angels do. Therefore, they are the excellent ones of the earth.

Fourthly, if we consider the great privileges that the saints enjoy, we will clearly see that they are the excellent ones of the earth. Without speaking of their deliverance from sin and guilt, or the immunities they have from the world, we see this privilege: that God, in all His attributes and works, is continually working for their good. This is an excellent prerogative of the saints—there is no attribute of God that is not continually working for the good of every saint. There is no act of God's providence that does not work continually for their benefit.

Imagine the honour it would bestow upon a person if an assembly as prestigious as Parliament were to take special thought for them—if all their purposes, plans, and deliberations were directed towards the good of this one individual. How much more, then, does the God of the universe work His wisdom, power, mercy, faithfulness, and all-

sufficiency for the good of every individual saint? God takes special notice of them and sets all His attributes continually to work for their good.

The heavens themselves work continually for them. The saints have this privilege: that the entire world is made for them. God has given them the world, for they are the heirs of the world. As it is said of Abraham in Romans 4:13, “He was heir of the world.” Abraham himself owned little, yet the world was his inheritance. The children of Abraham inherit their father's estate, and if the world was Abraham's inheritance, then it is the inheritance of every child of Abraham. Thus, the heirs of Abraham are heirs of the world. The Apostle confirms this in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23: “All things are yours; and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.” So, both God and the world are theirs—what a mighty privilege!

Additionally, they possess the privileges found in the Covenant of Grace. Every good thing contained within the Covenant of Grace, all the rich promises of the Covenant, belong to the godly. The privileges promised in Scripture are truly extraordinary, and to have a share in them all is an unimaginable blessing.

Besides, not only do the promises belong to the saints, but also the immunities that come from the Covenant of Grace. One such immunity is that they are not required to stand or fall for their eternal estate based on anything they can do themselves. They are freed from this burden; their eternal estate does not depend on their own actions. In contrast, those who are not saints, and who are not part of the Covenant of Grace, find that their eternal estate depends on their own efforts and actions, as God deals with them according to the Covenant of Works. This is their condition, even though they may later become saints—if God has elected them, He may in love view

them with favour, anticipating His future intentions toward them. But for the present, they do not know that their eternal estate might depend on their own actions.

To be delivered from such a condition, to have the assurance that one's eternal estate rests on a sure foundation—upon what Christ has already done—this is an infinite privilege. Those who are outside the Covenant of Grace cannot claim this privilege. No matter how hard they try, their efforts are not accepted. But it pleases God to accept the will for the deed, which is one of the privileges that comes by the Covenant of Grace. This privilege does not extend to others who are outside the covenant. I could name many other privileges, but that would take us too far afield.

Another glorious privilege is the access to the throne of grace. The saints can come to God in prayer, for He gives them the key to all His treasures. They can come and open them and take what they will. This is a glorious privilege that belongs to the saints in any condition. God gives them a gracious, praying heart, and that is the key to all the treasures of God, to all His excellencies. They have the liberty to come and take out whatever they will, as it is written: “Be it unto thee as thou wilt.” These are the excellent ones of the earth, who have such privileges.

Moreover, they are the excellent of the earth because of what flows from them. As the work of grace in their hearts is exceedingly excellent, so too is every gracious action that comes from a gracious heart. Each gracious action contains more excellence than all of heaven and earth combined. Not only grace itself, but any action that springs from grace, carries more of God's glory in it and brings more delight to Him than anything else in heaven or earth.

Martin Luther, though a great advocate of faith, was also a strong proponent of holiness. He said, "Precious are the works of a godly man or woman; they are more precious than heaven and earth." He went on to say, "I would rather be able to perform a single gracious act—whether by the poorest woman, maid, or Christian—than to do all that Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar ever accomplished." The least act that springs from faith, from a sanctified heart, Luther would prefer over all the victories and triumphs of Julius Caesar or Alexander. All their trophies are as nothing compared to the smallest breath of grace from the godly. That which comes from the saints is exceedingly excellent. Thus, they must indeed be excellent themselves, for such excellent things flow from them.

This should encourage us to abound in holy duties. Though our actions, tainted by our own corruption, may seem despicable to us, we must remember that God views them as the most glorious things in the world when they flow from a gracious heart. This is why He does not despise the broken heart or the sighing of a contrite spirit (Psalm 51). God may despise the monarchs and princes of the world, but He cannot despise a broken heart or the breathings of a contrite spirit. Even if you despise your own actions, viewing them as unworthy, God does not despise them. He sees the excellency within them, despite the corruption. If there is even a trace of grace in an act, God considers it a glorious thing in His sight.

Lastly, (to name no more) the excellency of the saints appears in this: the great use they are of in the world. This is especially evident in that they fulfil God's great aim and purpose in creating the whole world. Were it not for a few gracious men and women, what glory would God have in all the world? It is they who uphold the glory of God in the world, by whom God receives active glory— for this is what God aims at. It is true that God can force glory in spite of men's

hearts, and He will be glorified despite the efforts of devils. However, God receives no active glory from them. In the inferior world, it is only the godly who actively glorify God. Without them, in some sense, it could be said that God had made the world for nothing.

Those who are employed in such a great work and are of such great use in the world, bringing to God the very purpose for which He made the heavens and the earth, must surely be regarded as principal in God's esteem and as excellent. God can say, "I have achieved My purpose in these." Take any town where there are but two or three godly people—what glory does God have except through them? So too with other places: God has glory only because of a few seemingly insignificant people. It is through them that God is glorified in high and great services. They are the lights of the world, the salt of the earth; they are the blessings of the world wherever they are. They are the reason the world continues as it does. There is a notable expression in Isaiah: "In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt, and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land" (Isaiah 19:24). Wherever they are—in a kingdom, a family, or a town—they are a blessing in that place. Israel shall be a blessing in the midst of the land. These are the ones who are the excellent of the earth.

I would now gladly move on to the next point, but I must make a word or two of application.

Firstly, consider the vast difference between those who are godly and those who are wicked. The Scriptures express many things about the wicked, even when they are in all their glory. Let all the glory of the world be put upon them, yet the Scriptures speak exceedingly contemptuously of them. I will not spend time on all these expressions, but I will mention one from Daniel. It speaks of a vile

person arising in that day (Daniel 11:21). This is spoken of (as most interpreters believe) Antiochus Epiphanes, yet he is called a "vile person," as the Psalmist says: "In whose eyes a vile person is contemned" (Psalm 15:4).

Three things are noted about Antiochus, yet he is called a vile person. Firstly, he was a great enemy to many sins. Secondly, when the Jews wrote to him—because they feared his wrath, as he was a persecutor of the Jews—some Samaritans wrote to him, seeking his favour. They were not Jews themselves but Samaritans, and Josephus says they addressed him as "Antiochus the mighty God." They gave him this title of honour. He was considered a great man on earth where he lived—among the Samaritans, he was considered a mighty god—yet Scripture calls him a vile person. His name, Epiphanes, means "illustrious" or "glorious," and he was given the title of almighty God, illustrious and glorious, yet he was still a vile person. This is how God regards those in whom He does not see the work of grace.

The consideration of this gives us hope that there will be a time when God will act on behalf of His saints. It is unlikely that God will allow His jewels to be trodden underfoot in the world forever. God will not always see those who are excellent on earth so abused and despised. Surely, this will not continue indefinitely. There will come a time when God will make it clear to the world that these are the excellent of the earth. Though they are now like jewels trampled in the dirt, despised and contemned, there is a promise that they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon the land (Zechariah 9:16). As the stones of a crown, God will lift them up and make them honourable.

There is another very significant text which everyone should take notice of, showing God's intention to make these excellent ones

famous on earth. It says: "The governors of Judah shall say in their heart, 'The inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be my strength in the Lord of hosts, their God'" (Zechariah 12:5). There was a time when the governors of Judah despised those who were gracious and godly, but God has promised that the governors of Judah will be convinced of their error and will say in their hearts, "The inhabitants of Jerusalem are my strength in the Lord of hosts, their God."

Though now, through the calumnies of the world and the reproaches cast upon the saints of God, it often happens that even the governors of Judah despise and condemn them. They say that they are seduced people, that they are factious and turbulent, and their hearts are set against them. They hate and abhor them, looking upon them with an evil eye, calling them "puritans." Yet there is a time promised when the governors of Judah will say in their hearts, "The inhabitants of Jerusalem are my strength in the Lord of hosts." O, you inhabitants of Jerusalem—God's Church and people, His sanctified ones (for Jerusalem typifies the estate of God's people under the Gospel)—shall be those of whom the governors of Judah will say, "My strength is in them." They will see that they are their best subjects, that their kingdom is upheld in peace because of them, and that God's blessing rests upon them. "They shall be my strength in the Lord of hosts, their God." Now, the governors will acknowledge, "I see God is their God. He hears their prayers and has done much for them, and we are convinced of it." O, this will be a blessed time when it comes to pass that the governors of Judah say such things. Blessed be God that they say this in any measure now, that the governors of Judah recognise, even in part, that the godly are their strength—that they are indeed the excellent of the earth.

It would be a sorrowful spectacle, and would draw tears of blood, to see the excellent ones treated as they have been. But now, to see

those excellent ones recognised publicly, especially in courts of justice, is glorious. When the governors of Judah shall do this, it is something we should pray for to happen more and more.

And, to say no more, let us learn to honour those whom God has honoured. Since they are the excellent ones, and God has put excellency upon them, so should we. Regard them as God esteems them. It is noted that in the time of the law, God did not require Lions or Eagles—those brave creatures—to be offered in sacrifice, but Lambs and Doves, humble creatures. God does not regard the proud spirits of the world who boast, but if there are any who are gracious and godly, though they be poor and humble, like Lambs and Doves, God honours and respects them. They are a sacrifice to Him; the broken heart is a sacrifice to God. Therefore, when God wishes to lift Himself up in glory, He says, "He who dwells in the high and lofty place... What of him?" He looks to those who are humble and contrite in heart. It is as though there is no other object in the world worth looking at—He looks only at them. Just as someone fixes their eyes on something they prize, so God fixes His gaze on them, as if they were the only thing worth looking at. Therefore, let them be regarded by us with reverence in our hearts. It is fitting that we honour those whom God honours.

This is observed in the message of the King of Babylon to Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32:31. When Hezekiah was sick and God gave him a sign of his recovery—when the sun went backward—it was a wondrous honour that God put on him. The ambassadors of the King of Babylon came to congratulate Hezekiah after his recovery, but what was the main reason for their visit? Not only to congratulate him but to inquire about the great miracle. The text says the ambassadors of the Prince of Babylon were sent to inquire about the wonder that was done in the land. Why did they inquire about this

particular wonder? Many wonders were done, but they did not inquire about those. They did so because they worshipped the sun as their god, and they perceived that their god had honoured Hezekiah by altering the sun's course, causing it to go backward. After learning that this was done for Hezekiah, they honoured him too. Though Hezekiah was the king of the Jews and Babylon and Jerusalem were enemies, they respected him because their god had honoured him.

This should teach us that, if the heathens honoured those whom their god honoured, we should do the same when we see or hear that God has honoured gracious and godly men and women. Prize them, and hold them in high esteem. You have heard today what honour God places upon His saints, so learn to honour them. Much could be said to encourage the hearts of all people to love the people of God. There is also something for the people of God: to walk as the excellent ones and not to defile one another.

For others, if they wish to be considered excellent and glorious in the world, it is not outward things—such as clothes or riches—that make them excellent in the eyes of God. Rather, it is grace and godliness. "By faith, the fathers obtained a good report." Some think there is no way to gain esteem but through outward displays of bravery, wealth, fine clothes, and the like. They believe that to be the way to be counted as more eminent than others. There are even many ministers who think they will gain esteem if they are honoured by the great ones and if they dress in finery. But you know by experience that a faithful and godly minister, who walks faithfully and conscientiously, gains more esteem in the hearts and consciences—not only of the godly but also of those who have enlightened consciences—than a hundred of those who chase after outward appearances. Those who seek esteem in this way are deceived. They look for excellence where it is not. True excellence is not in such

things but in the work of grace, which prevails with the consciences of men.

When Boniface the martyr was asked if he would drink the sacrament from a wooden chalice, he responded, "There was a time when there were wooden cups and golden priests, but now there are golden cups and wooden priests." In the primitive times, they were content with wooden vessels, but the men were golden in regard to their grace and godliness, and so they were highly esteemed. Now, there are golden cups—a great deal of external splendour and glory—but wooden priests, without true excellence. "The heart of the wicked is of little worth." His estate, his houses, and his lands may be worth something, but what is his heart worth? He has nothing within himself to commend himself. But the excellence of God's people lies in their souls and hearts.

It would be an uncomfortable thing for any of you, if you had a servant with you wherever you went, and all the respect you received was for your servant's sake. If anyone entertained you in their house, it would not be out of respect for you, but out of respect for your servant. They love your servant, and for his sake, they welcome you. This would deject your heart if you knew that you received no respect for anything good in yourself, but only for your servant's sake.

Similarly, men of the world receive respect, but for what reason? It is for their riches, honour, fine clothes, and money—all of which are their 'servants.' They receive no respect for anything within themselves; they have no spiritual excellence. Especially when they must deal with God and the consciences of men, they have no real respect. But godly men do not have so many 'servants' to gain respect from outward things. Instead, the respect they receive from God's

saints, and even from the consciences of others, comes from an internal excellence. But we will let this point go for now.

The second point follows: **The excellent of the earth.**

In whom is all my delight.

Though it was the point I intended to emphasise most, I see that only a little can be said. What has been mentioned already should abundantly make its way into the heart—that if they are indeed the excellent of the earth, there is good reason we should delight in them. The point is this:

A gracious heart takes great delight in the saints on earth.

This delight can be in their persons, or in their society and communion. To put it another way, the gracious heart finds delight in them both individually and collectively.

If they look at any one saint of God, they find delight in him. But they find even greater delight in looking at the saints all together, jointly. So they can say their souls delight in them—a sweet sense of satisfaction when taken together. And that is what I shall speak to now: the delight to be found in the saints when considered together as a whole. There is delight in the saints because of the sweetness of their society and communion. David's delight is to be understood in this broad sense—not only in one particular person, because of the good he saw in them individually, but in all the good he saw in them collectively, and in joining with them. All the good that came from them, taken together, was his delight.

There is a great deal of delight and contentment to be had in the saints of God, especially when they are together.

If you look at just one saint (even in a humble condition), there is still great delight to be found. For example, Dr. Taylor, the martyr, as we read in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, said that meeting with John Bradford, whom he called "an angel of God," outweighed all his troubles in prison. And another person once professed that he would rather be with Cato (a heathen) in prison for his moral excellence than with Caesar in the Senate surrounded by pomp and luxury. To be shut up with one godly man can bring great delight and contentment. How much greater, then, is the delight when saints are together, and in that setting where their virtues are most evident? Such is the delight found in them collectively.

First, because the most comfortable communion possible can be enjoyed with them, and in them:

First, is it not a most delightful thing to see a company of godly people together, to behold the resplendent beauty and glory of the graces of God's Spirit? If nothing else, what a delightful thing it is, says the heart. The very sight of good men is pleasing and delightful to those who look upon their faces; wisdom makes their faces shine. The sight of the resplendent grace of God in them is truly delightful. What is the delight of God, but seeing the shining of His glory in His works? Especially when God sees the shining of His highest glory—His own grace and holiness—that is what God delights in most. Likewise, when a gracious heart sees the image of God and the grace He has wrought in oneself resplendently reflected in others, it is a delightful object.

Again, there is comfortable communion with them regarding the fragrance of grace. The beauty of grace is delightful, but the fragrance—the breathings of grace—is sweet to the heart. The sight of it is delightful to the eye, but the workings of their grace are

exceedingly sweet and comforting to the heart. Therefore, says the Church, "Let my beloved go down into the gardens, among the beds of spices" (Song of Solomon 6:2). All the Churches of God in the world are as the garden of Christ, and every particular Church in that garden is like a bed of spices. Every particular saint is like a part of that bed, especially when the fragrant aroma of grace is present, which is very sweet. It is said of Alexander that his very body was of such a constitution that wherever he went, there was a sweet fragrance emanating from him. Certainly, where there is one of God's children, there is a sweetness about them; but where there is a company of them together, a wonderful and unspeakable sweetness arises, which is exceedingly comforting to a gracious heart.

Further, their communion is comfortable and delightful, especially jointly, due to the closeness between them. There is no communion under heaven where there is such nearness one to another as there is among the saints. Consider this: the more spiritual something is, the more united it becomes; the more physical or material, the less union there is. A heap of stones is not united like the several beams of the sun—a thousand beams united in one point—because the sun's rays are of a spiritual nature. So it is with the spirits of men: the more carnal men or societies are, the less unity they have. That is why, when divisions arise among God's people, it is because they are being carnal. As the Apostle says, "Are ye not carnal?" when there were divisions among them. If they were spiritual, they would be more united with one another.

It is with spiritual society and spiritual union as it is with wickedness. There is bodily, fleshly wickedness, and there is spiritual wickedness. Those who join together in gross, bodily wickedness are not as closely united as those who join in spiritual wickedness. A group of drunkards or whoremongers may take delight in one

another and join in wickedness, but it is a physical bond, so they soon fall out and turn on each other. But those who join in spiritual wickedness—such as cunning, ambitious men who plot mischief in a spiritual way—remain closely united. You cannot easily break their bond of union; they will endure much before betraying one another because their bond is one of spiritual wickedness. Likewise, when people are united in the spirit of holiness, they are mightily united. There is no greater union under heaven.

In Exodus 26, we read of the curtains of the Tabernacle. Some were made of purple, scarlet, and fine linen, and their clasps that held them together were pure gold. Others were made of goats' hair, and their buckles were brass. This can serve as a symbol of the different conditions of people in the Church. Some in the Church are truly gracious and godly, excelling in grace, and they are united by golden clasps—their union is mighty, strong, and glorious in their hearts. Others in the Church are outward professors, but carnal, represented by the goats' hair—their union is held together by brass. The foundation of their union is mean and lacking; it is not like the golden union of the hearts of God's people. No people under heaven are so united as they.

It is true that, through their corruption, there is often a great deal of dissension (for there is corruption even in the best), but this occurs only insofar as they are carnal. The more spiritual they become, the nearer their union with one another, and the more complete their love. "My beloved is one," says Christ to His Church, and the daughters saw her and blessed her. There is a unity and completeness in the hearts of the saints, and this makes them blessed by those who behold them, making their communion very delightful. This is the first particular—communion with the saints is the most

delightful of all communions. This is why David says, "All my delight is in them," taking them together as a group.

Secondly, a gracious heart must necessarily delight in the saints, especially when they are together, because it is in their assembly that God is worshipped. The most solemn worship that God receives is from the saints gathered together. As I mentioned before, the glory that God receives in the world comes from them collectively, but the solemnity of God's worship is especially evident when they are gathered. Therefore, the great delight of a gracious heart is to be with the saints when they gather because it is there that the name of God is honoured, and He is worshipped in a solemn manner. God is glorified among them.

Christ Himself takes great delight in the saints when they gather for the duties of holy worship. Consider two Scriptures that both stir us to love the saints and delight in their joint communion. Compare Psalm 22:22 with Hebrews 2:12. The Psalm is a prophecy of Christ, and most interpreters agree that it refers to Him. The text says, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee." This is Christ's promise to declare the name of His Father to His Church and to praise God in the midst of the congregation. Notice in Hebrews 2:12, the Apostle applies this to the saints gathered together, saying, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the Church will I sing praise unto thee." This was after Christ had come in the flesh, yet the Apostle applies it to the Church, "in the midst of the Church will I sing praise unto thee." From this, we gather that Christ delights in being with His people when they are gathered together because the solemn worship of God is offered by them, and He joins with them in it as a delightful act. As they praise God together, Christ is also praising Him; as they worship, Christ is worshipping. Now, every saint of God has the

Spirit of Christ within them, and so they too delight in the fellowship of the saints, particularly because God is being worshipped and praised among them. If there is a place in the world where God is worshipped solemnly, it grieves a gracious heart if they cannot be there. Their heart longs to be there because their delight is in the saints, especially when they gather for worship.

An interpreter, whom I have read, offers a note on Isaiah 6, where the angels cry, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Hosts," and the Prophet Isaiah responds, "Woe unto me, for I am undone." The interpreter suggests that Isaiah cried out because he could not join with those blessed creatures to magnify, praise, and worship God. His own sinfulness prevented him from joining them, and so he cried, "Woe is me, I am undone." Likewise, when any gracious heart hears that there is a people on earth, the precious ones, the excellent of the earth, joining in the worship of God and enjoying communion with Him, they too cry, "Woe to me," if they cannot join with them. Their heart is with them; their delight is in the saints when they gather together, because God's solemn worship is there.

Thirdly, a gracious heart delights in the saints, especially when they are gathered, because of the wonderful delight that God Himself takes in them. A gracious heart must take delight in them because God delights so much in them, particularly when they are gathered together. There are special expressions in Scripture of God's delight in the saints when they assemble. In Zephaniah 3:17, it says, "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing." What remarkable expressions of God's delight in His people! "The Lord thy God will rejoice; He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love and joy over thee with singing." In Isaiah, we find the Church referred to as Hephzibah, which means

"My delight is in her." This reflects the wondrous delight God has in His saints.

There are wonderful expressions in Scripture that manifest God's delight in His people, expressed in ways we could not invent or imagine. For example, He calls His people His portion, His pleasant portion (Deut. 32:9). God calls them His inheritance, the lot of His inheritance (Jer. 12:7). He calls them the dearly beloved of His soul (Exod. 19:5). He calls them His peculiar treasure. God has treasures in the world; the creatures are called the "good treasures of the Lord" (Deut. 28), but His people are called His peculiar treasure. There is a unique kind of excellence in the people of God's delight compared to all other creatures. All other creatures are part of His general treasure, but His people are His peculiar treasure. God also calls them His glory: the house of His glory (Isa. 46:13), the crown of His glory (Isa. 60:7), and the throne of His glory (Isa. 62:3). In various places, God calls His people the house of His glory, the crown of His glory, and the throne of His glory. He also refers to them as the royal diadem, His ornament, and an ornament set in majesty and glory. These are just some of the many expressions that illustrate God's delight in His people. If God finds such delight and satisfaction in them, how much more should we!

Christ speaks of His Church, saying, "O my sister, my spouse, my heart is ravished with thee." It is a remarkable expression for Christ Himself to be ravished with His people. We might expect such language from the Church towards Christ, but for Christ to say it of the Church is extraordinary. Again, Christ refers to His Church as "my love, my dove, my undefiled one" (Song of Solomon 2:14), even when the Church was in a state of security and complacency. Yet Christ calls her His love, His dove, His undefiled, to express His

abundant delight in His people. If God takes such delight in them, how much more should the saints!

Furthermore, consider the presence of God among His people. This is another reason why the saints of God should take such delight in one another, especially when they are gathered together, for God is present there. "The Lord is here" is the name of all their assemblies. The Lord dwells and has His tabernacle in Zion. It is remarkable that God makes His people His habitation. Just as the people of God call God their habitation, so God calls His Church His habitation. God dwells in Zion (Ps. 90). Wouldn't you delight to live in a house with God? Where God's people are, God makes His dwelling, and we should long to consider it our own house and not merely visit as strangers. A man may visit a home as a guest, take a meal, and be refreshed, but it is not his house. However, when God's people come together with other saints, they see God there, and that house becomes their home. It is called the house of His glory, the house God loves to dwell in. In Psalm 132, there are many great and profound expressions: "For the Lord has chosen Zion, He has desired it for His habitation" (Ps. 132:13-14). God desires Zion, which represents His saints and people gathered together. Zion was a type of the Church, and now, all the saints of God together are Zion. God has a desire for this habitation.

Though God dwells in the high and holy place—the highest heavens being His dwelling—He is not content with that alone. He desires another house: Zion, the place where His honour dwells. You know, a prince may have several houses, some of lesser regard, where he lodges when travelling or hunting. But his palace, where he displays his majesty and honour, is more glorious. Similarly, the people of God, the Church, are called the house of God's honour. It is not a common dwelling, but a house of honour.

Moreover, it is the house where God intends to dwell forever because He loves it so much. "This is my house, I will dwell in it forever. I am so pleased with it, I will rest in it forever." Surely, if God finds rest in His people, we have reason to rest our hearts in them too.

Some of you may occasionally spend time with the people of God and at first find delight in them, but, being carnal, your hearts soon grow weary of them. This is not the case with God. He delights in His people and rests with them, and rests there forever.

But you may ask, how is God more present with His saints than in other places? Why is it said that God dwells among His people, His saints?

I answer, God is said to dwell among His people in a special manner for two reasons.

First, because He makes Himself known to His people more than to anyone else in the world. No one knows the counsel and mind of God as His saints do. "God is known in Judah" (Psalm 76:1). There, God opens Himself. In His temple, "everyone speaks of His glory" (Psalm 29:9).

Secondly, because God communicates Himself most among His people. God is said to dwell in heaven. Why? Because there He manifests His glory more than in other places. Therefore, heaven is His habitation. If His habitation is where He manifests Himself more, then His people are also His habitation, because He reveals Himself most among them.

In four ways, God communicates Himself to His people in a special manner:

1. He communicates more choice mercies.
2. He communicates mercies more fully.
3. He communicates mercies more powerfully.
4. He communicates more universally than to others.
5. God communicates goodness to His people and saints in the most special way, granting them His choice mercies. There is a remarkable passage in the Psalms: "The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you out of Zion" (Psalm 134:3). He does not say, "The Lord bless you out of heaven or earth," but "out of Zion," to signify that the choice mercies God has to give come out of Zion, among His people who are joined together in worship. If you desire the chief mercies that God has to offer, look to God as the One who blesses out of Zion. In Zion, God communicates His choicest mercies. Therefore, it is vital to be in Zion, so that you may receive God's blessings from there, for the sweetest of God's mercies flow in Zion.
6. God communicates His mercies more fully among His people than in any other way. "How excellent is your loving-kindness, O God! Therefore the children of men take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from your river of delights" (Psalm 36:7-8). They are abundantly satisfied, not by the creatures, but by the abundance of your house. Not only through His communication with them individually, but even more so when they are gathered with the saints. God has plenty of mercies for His saints individually, but when they are together, they are abundantly satisfied with the fatness of His house, and He makes them drink from His rivers of pleasure. When alone in

quiet places, they may receive many sweet drops of pleasure from God, but when they are joined with the saints, rivers of pleasure and delight flow into their hearts. Thus, there is great delight in the fellowship of God's saints when they are gathered together.

Thirdly, He communicates His mercies more powerfully. Consider Psalm 133:3: "As the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion, for there the Lord commanded a blessing, even life forevermore." There was a blessing, and the Lord commanded it. There went a powerful work of God's grace upon the hearts of the people there, when they were joined together in Zion; there, God commanded the blessing. If you desire God to speak powerfully and command a blessing upon your soul, you must be among His people, and you must join in holy fellowship with them; there, God commands it.

Lastly, God communicates His goodness more universally among His people. This is why the Church is called "the perfection of beauty" (Psalm 50). Some translate it as "the universality of excellency and beauty." There is a universality of all blessings within the Church and among the people of God. In another place, the Psalmist says, "All my springs are in thee" (Psalm 87), speaking of joining with God's people. This means all springs of truth revealed to me, all springs of comfort communicated to my soul, and all springs of grace that quicken me—they are all found in the joint society and communion with God's people. In their fellowship, I find everything. Thus, we see the presence of God among His people, especially in the way He communicates Himself to them, which gives great cause for joy and delight in the saints, particularly when they are gathered together.

Further, there is much reason to delight in the saints when they are gathered together because of their remarkable privileges in this fellowship. They possess privileges individually, but when gathered together, they are entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:2) and all the ordinances through which God reveals Himself. The seal of the covenant is committed to them; you cannot receive the seal of the covenant in isolation but only when joined with God's people, in fellowship with them. To them is entrusted the very power of Jesus Christ: the Apostle says, "When you are gathered together with the power of Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:4)—a glorious privilege indeed. Moreover, they are heirs to all the promises God made to the Church since the beginning of the world. No society of saints in Christian fellowship is excluded from this. See the remarkable passage in Isaiah 54:17: "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord." This promise, made to the Churches of old, is their heritage now.

Consider this profound truth: all the promises of God's delight in His people and Zion were types foreshadowing the excellent condition of God's Church in the Gospel era. Most of these expressions relate to God's delight among His people under the Law, but know that these were mere types, and the antitype far exceeds them. Therefore, the saints of God, gathered under the Gospel, experience far greater glory, the presence of God, and privileges than Zion or Jerusalem could ever have, for those places were only shadows of the blessed condition under the Gospel.

There is an observable passage in Hebrews 10:1, where it is said concerning the state of the Church: "The law had but a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things." It was not even as much as an image. A shadow is not as much as an image, and

an image is not as much as the thing itself. The Law was only a shadow, not even the image. Consider an artist who begins by drawing a shadow with coal; there is a great difference in beauty between the shadow and the image. So too, there is a vast difference between the glory of God in the Church during the time of the Law and the glory now revealed among His people in the Gospel age. We may safely say that the difference between God's manifestation of Himself to His people then and now is like the difference between a dark shadow drawn with coal and a finished image. But remember, even what we have now is but an image. As a shadow is inferior to an image, so the image is inferior to the thing itself. The presence of God, the goodness He reveals, and His glory among His people now is but an image of what is to come. There will be another presence of God, another communication, and another revelation of God in the future, far beyond what we experience now. All that we possess in the present time is but an image of what is to come, and all that existed under the Law was but a shadow of that image. Therefore, we should have great delight in the saints.

Much more could be said for delighting in the saints now, for they are those we shall live with forever in heaven. Consider the saints, especially when gathered together—they are the ones we will be united with eternally in heaven, singing hallelujahs before Him who sits on the throne and the Lamb. Look upon any saint, no matter how lacking in gifts or abilities, and remember that you and they will forever rejoice in the presence of God in glory.

Indeed, to be among God's people is heaven itself. They are not just those with whom we will be in heaven—they are heaven. The Lord says, "Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). The state of the Church is called heaven. For what is there in heaven that is not here? I could show how the life of heaven is mirrored in

the Church on earth. If heaven is a place to be delighted in, then so are the saints.

Therefore, have a high esteem for the saints, draw near to them, and strive for as close a communion with them as possible. If they are so excellent and worthy of delight, especially when they are joined together, labour to come in and join with the saints in the closest union possible—in that fellowship where you can enjoy communion with them, especially those who bear clear evidence of godliness.

The mixture of our communion with the ungodly hinders our delight. Cast dirt into the fire, and it will dampen the flames; in the same way, the presence of ungodly people, with their spots and blemishes, hinders the delight of God's people in one another. But when you are among those whose hearts you can truly trust—those whose lives bear the image of God—what a close connection there is, and what admirable good can be enjoyed in their communion and society! Therefore, know that one of the greatest blessings you can experience in this world is to have the closest communion with the saints, second only to your immediate communion with God Himself. This is something you should esteem highly and earnestly seek after.

Consider Psalm 36, which speaks of the joy of joining with God's people: "How excellent is your loving-kindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of your wings. They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of your house, and you shall make them drink of the river of your pleasures" (Psalm 36:7-8). It is a sign of God's excellent loving-kindness to be part of His house and to partake of its abundance. Possessing material wealth, friends, and estates is indeed a sign of God's kindness, but to join with God's people in worship and enjoy the closest union with them is a sign of His excellent loving-kindness, which is beyond expression. The

Psalmist is overwhelmed by the wonder of this kindness, unable to fully articulate its excellency.

In Scripture, this communion is portrayed as the inheritance of God's elect. To enjoy fellowship with God's people is a privilege and a blessing, far above the vanities of the world. God speaks through Isaiah: "Vanity shall take them away, but he who trusts in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain" (Isaiah 57:13). The mountain of God symbolises the Church under the Gospel, which God intends as a special blessing for His people. Those who pursue vain things may have their estates, houses, and trades, but they will miss out on the privilege of fellowship with God's people. In contrast, those who belong to God will inherit His holy mountain—the Church—and this is a special inheritance reserved for the saints.

This was the wisdom of the merchant in the parable who, upon finding the pearl of great price, sold all that he had and bought the field (Matthew 13:45-46). He was not content just with the pearl; he also bought the field. The field represents the communion of the saints—the Church of God. Saints do not content themselves merely with knowing Christ and hoping they have a part in Him. No, they buy the field, seeking to enjoy Christ in the fellowship of His people. It is not enough to drift from place to place, hearing sermons here and there; doing so dishonours God and shows a lack of thankfulness for His grace. Instead, strive to join the saints in the closest communion possible, so that you may not only partake of the gifts of individual men but also recognise them as officers set by Christ to watch over your souls.

This is the purpose of Christ's ascension: "He gave gifts to men, some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). Christ's gifts to His Church display His

magnificence, appointing ordinances to build up the body, so that there might be a relationship between the people and their pastors. Thus, you are bound not just to hear the word occasionally but to join with the saints in the ordinances, in the closest communion possible, where the worship of God is set in a solemn way according to His ordinances. This way, you may look upon men as pastors set over you by Christ to watch over your souls, and through this, the body of Christ will be built up.

The exercise of gifts in various ways, though they may be useful in doing good, is not the special ordinance; the chief benefit you have is to receive good from men appointed by Christ as officers, even if they possess fewer gifts than expected. You may still be built up through them. Therefore, let it be your care to come to the people of God in the nearest relation possible. Calvin, commenting on the text "Seek my face" (Psalm 27), interprets seeking God's face as seeking Him among His people and in His ordinances. He says, "Though there were no other way for me to earn my living but by scratching the ground with my nails, I would still choose that over not being where the face of God is. I would be among the people of God, in the way of worship, in the way of His ordinances."

Therefore, do not plead that it is difficult or hard. You must be willing to suffer for this, just as the people of God were willing to suffer in the past. Consider those godly people among the Jews when the ten tribes were divided from the rest. Many of the godly, whose hearts the Lord stirred, would not be content to remain in Samaria or where Jeroboam had set up false worship with the golden calves. They insisted on going to Jerusalem to worship, even though they suffered much on the way.

In Hosea, we read of traps set for those who tried to go to Jerusalem: "Hear this, O priests! Pay attention, O house of Israel! Listen, O royal house! Judgment is against you because you have been a snare at Mizpah, a net spread upon Tabor" (Hosea 5:1). Mizpah and Tabor were places on the way from Samaria to Jerusalem, where worshippers were watched and punished. Yet many still chose to go, despite the risks to their lives. As the story tells, they passed through the valley of tears, the valley of Baca, with great difficulty, yet they were willing to endure it all to reach Zion.

There were many obstacles in the way and many objections, but those whose hearts the Lord touches will not rest until they find the closest union with the saints. They will not be quiet until they reach it. And God will make the way clear for those with upright hearts, removing stumbling blocks from their path. Even when there are stumbling blocks, God will be there to clear the way. Psalm 84 declares, "Blessed is the one in whose heart are your ways." Even if someone has not yet reached the nearest communion with God's people, if the way to Zion is in their heart, they are blessed.

There is also a promise of strength for those who face difficulties. God will grant His strength, as Moses said, that God in His strength would lead them to His holy habitation (Exodus 15:13). It indeed requires God's strength to lead people to His holy dwelling, for many troubles lie in the way.

There is a prophecy that men and women will be brought to Zion in chariots and litters. Litters are vehicles used to carry those who are weak, so there is no excuse for the old or frail. What shall we do? Where God stirs the heart, even if they must be carried in litters, they will find a way through. When we truly delight in something, we are never satisfied until we have it. And each of God's people can say,

"The excellent ones in the earth are all my delight." If we find joy when we meet one or two of them, how much more delight we would have if there were many!

To conclude, if there is so much delight in the saints in this world, what will there be in the saints in heaven! If it is worth the greatest labour and effort to join with them here, what will it be worth to have everlasting communion with them! For then we shall not only have communion with a few, but with all the Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, and all the worthies of God. If there is delight in one, what will there be when there shall be all, and we shall delight in all, when they shall be spotless!

Now, our joy is dampened by the weaknesses we see in the saints who are sincere; we see many froward passions in them, many passionate fits that make their communion uncomfortable at times. But then there shall be no more sullenness, no more passion, no more indiscretion or weakness as there is now. Today, when we join with others, even if they have a little grace to sanctify them, there is still an abundance of weakness. But then we shall come to have communion with saints who are all filled with God; there shall be nothing but God in them.

Men now have excellent gifts, but their corruptions darken the communion so much that it is not always delightful. But then, all shall be in holiness, and there will be nothing but God in them. They shall always be engaged in praising God. It is comforting to be with the saints in civil affairs, in eating and drinking, but it is even more delightful to pray, to take the Sacrament, and to confer graciously with them. But hereafter, we shall be in heaven with them and shall never do anything but worship and praise God night and day together.

What is one day with God's people worth? When it is graciously spent in holy exercises, how delightful it is—if it were not for the weariness of the flesh. But then we shall never depart, nor ever grow weary. Now, when we come to God's people, spending an hour or a day or two with them is delightful, but this does not last long. Yet we shall be with them then, never to part—how delightful will that be?

And all of this will be in our Father's house, in the presence of God, where there shall be no enemy to harm us. Children and friends find delight in one another even in a strange place, but in their Father's house, in the presence of their Father, they have even more delight. We shall then all come before God, our Father.

Even to be the children of God in a dungeon, as the saints and martyrs were, they found it delightful. But then, we shall be forever in the palace of our Father, before the King, even in His Majesty and glory. It would be worth our labour to gain heaven if it were only for this: to be with Paul, that gracious spirit, or to be with one or two of the worthies of God. But then we shall come to heaven to be with all the saints.

Cicero, speaking of death, said, “O famous day! I shall be delivered from this world to Cato, and to such wise men; my soul shall go to them, and shall converse no more with these people in the world.” A heathen had so much in his moral virtues. But now, the children of God—how comforting it is for them to die, how famous a day it will be for them! Here, through God's mercy, I had much sweetness in the saints of God. I delighted in them in the world; now I go to change my place but not my company. It was the dying speech of Doctor Preston: “I go where I shall converse with those that I lived with here.” He meant especially God and Christ. We change our place and our individual company for a while, but we go to a place where

we shall meet with them again. As it is a commendation of the Church: “We are come to an innumerable company of angels, and to the souls of the saints made perfect.” This shall be fulfilled in heaven, where we are to go to an innumerable company of angels and to all the souls of the excellent ones on earth, who are made perfect.

Therefore, as ever you would have communion with them hereafter, delight yourselves in their communion here. The more comfortable delight you have in them here, the more assuredly you shall have communion with them hereafter.

FINIS.

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ePub, .mobi & .pdf Editions October 2024. Requests for information should be addressed to: Monergism Books, PO Box 491, West Linn Or 97068