

## The Spirit's Intercession

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, Nov. 15, 1857

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Rom. 8:26, 27

It is somewhat more than thirty years ago since I was first sent to school. I do not mean the public school at which my father placed me to learn Latin and Greek, because my education in nature was finished before my education in grace began. But I mean the school of Christ, where the instruction is heavenly, the rules spiritual, and the discipline divine. And one of the first lessons that I was taught in the school of Christ, was to learn the force and meaning of the words addressed by the Lord to the woman of Samaria, "God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." It is a crying time with most children when they first go to school, and so I found it; for it was amidst tears and sorrow in a season of deep mental trial and affliction that the Lord, in his sovereign mercy, was pleased first to pour out upon me the Spirit of grace and of supplications. As the Lord poured in I poured out, and passed much of my time in tears, prayers, and supplications: for, in fact, I could find relief in no other way. That Spirit of prayer thus and then first communicated, I hope I can say to the praise and glory of God, has never to this day been lost out of my heart. It has sometimes sunk, I freely confess, to a very low ebb; it has been at one time pent back by guilt and condemnation; it has been almost crushed at another out of

me by unbelief, or overwhelmed in me by the superincumbent masses of carnality and death. But like a spring gushing out of the hill side, or like a stream issuing from a mountain glacier, it still pours itself forth as the Lord is pleased to draw it out by his Spirit and grace, and I trust it never will be lost until it empties itself into the bosom of an ocean of eternal praise.

But besides this gracious work of inward intercession, many and various are the operations of the Holy Ghost upon God's saints as revealed in the Scripture and made known to them by personal experience. It is he who first quickens the dead into spiritual life; it is he who first convinces the awakened conscience of sin; it is he who, as the promised Comforter, takes of the things of Christ and reveals them to the soul; it is he who sheds the love of God abroad in the heart; it is he who consoles those who are cast down by trouble and sorrow; it is he who leads all the living family of God into the strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; it is he who bears witness with their spirit that they are the children of God; and, to add no more, it is he who enables them to cry "Abba, Father." All these are various branches of the work of the Holy Ghost upon the heart. But there is one spoken of in our text to which I shall, with God's blessing, more especially ask your attention this morning; namely, how the Spirit helps our infirmities; and how he intercedes in the heart with unutterable groanings. I shall also ask you to view with me how the great Searcher of hearts sees and recognizes his interceding breath; and how the whole is transacted according to the will of God, which is the supreme rule of right and wrong, and without which nothing is holy, nothing acceptable. With God's blessing, therefore, in opening up the words before us, I shall

I.—*First*, endeavour to show what these infirmities are and

how the Spirit *helps* them.

II.—*Secondly*, how the blessed Spirit *intercedes* himself in the heart with *groanings which cannot be uttered*.

III.—*Thirdly*, how the great *Searcher of hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit*.

IV.—*Fourthly*, how *agreeable* this is to the will of God, because it is added, "He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

I.—In order to understand the mind and meaning of the apostle in using the expression "*infirmities*," we must draw a distinction between infirmities and sins. Infirmities in us to a certain extent partake of the nature of sins; but that all infirmities are not in themselves necessarily sinful is evident from the instance of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Certain infirmities are incidental to human nature and therefore necessarily inseparable from it. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ hungered and thirsted, was weary and slept. Now these in his case were sinless infirmities, because though he took human nature in all its entirety, he did not take the corruption of human nature; for the nature which he assumed into union with his divine Person was perfectly holy, without any spot or speck of sin; yet as being actual flesh and blood, it necessarily possessed those sinless infirmities which are inseparable adjuncts of flesh and blood in its present condition. But those infirmities which in the Lord Jesus Christ were free from sin, are not in our case necessarily free from it. There is, for instance, no sin in a man sleeping at night; but there is sin in a man slumbering during a sermon, or falling asleep upon his knees. There is no sin in being weary after a hard day's work; but there is sin in being weary in the house of prayer. There is no sin in

eating in moderation to satisfy the cravings of hunger; but there is sin in gluttony. There was no sin in Timothy taking "a little wine for his stomach's sake;" but there would have been sin in taking a bottle or drinking himself drunk. Thus, though hunger and thirst are not sins, yet they are infirmities, and though eating and drinking are not sinful, yet gluttony and drunkenness are. So that though infirmities in themselves are not necessarily sinful, yet our sinful nature is so mingled with them as continually to make them servants of sin and instruments of evil. You will see in a moment the distinction by looking at our text. We could not say with any propriety of speech—nay, we should shrink from both the thought and the expression—that the Spirit helps our sins; but we may say, as God himself has said in the words before us, that the Spirit helps our infirmities. The true meaning of the word "infirmity" is want of strength, in other words weakness; and taking this as the best and readiest definition of the term, I shall now point out, with God's blessing, some of those infirmities that the Holy Spirit in a special manner helps.

1. There is first the infirmity of *ignorance*; for we read in the text that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought." Ever since the fall, a veil of ignorance has been spread over the human mind which none but God can take away. Of this veil the apostle speaks where he says, "But even unto this day when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart." But clearly implying that none but the Lord can remove it, he adds, "Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away." Nor does he leave us in ignorance whose work it is of the three Persons in the blessed Trinity to perform that divine operation, for he adds, "Now the Lord is that Spirit." (2 Cor. 3:15-17.) The blessed Spirit, then, helps this infirmity of ignorance by removing it; and he removes it by illuminating the mind with divine light,

and giving us a spiritual insight into those things which before were hidden from our eyes. It is in grace as in nature. At night a veil of darkness is spread over the earth, which no exertion of the earth itself could remove. Thus we read of "darkness," that is, spiritual darkness, "covering the earth, and gross darkness the people." But how in nature is this darkness removed except by the rising of light? So it is in grace, according to the words, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." And again, "The Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee." (Isaiah 60:1, 2.) In almost similar terms speaks the apostle, "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord." (Eph. 5:8.) Whilst, then, this veil remains over the heart, we are ignorant even whom to pray unto; nor can we see the great Object of all true spiritual worship till the Spirit shine; what to pray for till the Spirit help; or how to frame our petitions aright till the Spirit give us right feelings and right words.

But this infirmity of ignorance and the necessity of the Spirit helping it we may see more clearly by looking at various instances in which this infirmity is seen and helped. Look, for instance, at the various *afflictions* in providence or in grace which the Lord lays upon us. How deep is our ignorance often here! How little we know why the Lord is pleased to lay upon us that particular affliction under which at present perhaps our soul groans being burdened. Here is an infirmity of ignorance. And how we need the Spirit in an especial manner to help this infirmity, that we may not needlessly and unbelievably pray for the removal of an affliction, which the Lord has sent to work in a gracious manner for our spiritual good. We may pray, and that by the Spirit's help, as the Lord himself did in the garden of Gethsemane, for submission to the cross; but as to praying for its removal, that may not be agreeable to the will of God; and we may be certain that the

Spirit will not help us to offer unacceptable petitions, because "he maketh intercession for the saints only according to the will of God." The apostle prayed that the thorn in the flesh "might depart" from him; but it was not the Lord's will to remove it, but to manifest therein the sufficiency of his grace, and to teach the groaning sufferer that his strength was made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9.) And as we are ignorant of the reason of *afflictions* until the Spirit helps this infirmity by showing us the needs be and giving us submission under them, so are we ignorant of the nature or even necessity of *spiritual blessings* until the Spirit help this infirmity by giving us divine light upon them. The apostle therefore says "we know not what to pray for as we ought"—the very *nature* of spiritual blessings being hidden from our eyes. How, then, can we pray for them, unless the Spirit is pleased to remove this ignorance and make us feel what we really stand in need of? And he shows us not only our need of spiritual blessings, but gives us clearly to see that they must come from God himself into our hearts by a divine application; for "every good gift and every perfect gift cometh from above." (James 1:16 ) How little, for instance, we once felt our personal need of mercy received from God's own hands; of pardon spoken from God's own lips; of love of God's own shedding abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost; of smiles vouchsafed from the light of his uplifted countenance; of promises from his word brought home with power; of applications of atoning blood experimentally sprinkled upon our conscience; of the revelation of Christ by the power of the Spirit to our soul:—how ignorant were we in our time of darkness not only of the *nature*, but even of the *necessity* of these vital matters as the very soul of a living and saving experience, till our hearts were illuminated by the Holy Ghost. But seeing light in God's light, through his illuminating grace, we not only see our need of these things, but are made to seek and sue for the things themselves as

suitable to our need, if we do not actually enjoy them. How blessedly, then, and how suitably does the Holy Spirit remove our ignorance of these vital realities by casting a flood of light into our souls. Thus may we not well say that he, and he alone, helps this infirmity? For without his helping light we should still continue to sit in darkness and the very shadow of death, contented with our ignorance, or, like the Pharisees of old, saying "we see," when the light which is in us is darkness, and so our sin remaineth.

2. But we want divine *life* as well as divine light—life to *feel* as well as light to *see*. We may and sometimes do see our need of these blessings, and that they are all stored up in the fulness of the Son of God. But is there always in us a heart to pray for them? Is there ever going up a spiritual breathing after them? Is there a continual earnestness in wrestling with the Lord to grant them unto us? Alas! no; for we are often buried in carnality and death. Thus we need the Spirit to help our infirmity of death and deadness as well as our infirmity of ignorance. And he helps this infirmity by communicating or graciously renewing that spirit of faith and feeling, that inward life and power, that earnestness of wrestling prayer whereby we are from time to time, enabled to come to the throne of grace with the movements of divine life springing up in our soul, ("Spring up, O well!") and to pray unto the Lord not merely as seeing at a distance our need of heavenly blessings and how suitable they are to us, but as feeling, deeply feeling, that need, and breathing forth our earnest desires into the bosom of God, that he would in the riches of his grace pour down these blessings upon us.

3. But there is the infirmity of *unbelief*, which Paul speaks of as "the sin which doth so easily beset us." We may see our need of divine blessings; we may feel our need of these blessings to be communicated experimentally and feelingly to

our soul, yet have much unbelief as an infirmity, crippling and maiming us in our petitions for them at a throne of grace. Now the prayer of unbelief is not acceptable to God: it is the prayer of faith that he hears. But we cannot in the first instance raise up that faith or draw it forth afterwards into living exercise: it is God's gift and work to do both. We need, then, the Holy Spirit to help this infirmity, which seems of all infirmities that which most hinders the promised blessing, as we know it was the sin which kept the children of Israel out of the land of promise. "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." (Heb. 3:19.) But sometimes faith and unbelief seem struggling together in the heart, like Jacob and Esau in the womb of Rebekah; or, as in the case of the man in the gospel who cried out with tears, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." (Mark 9:24.) The Spirit, then, helps this infirmity by raising up and drawing forth a spirit of faith. And when helped by his grace, influenced by his operations, and drawn by his power, we can approach the throne of grace in faith, utter the prayer of faith, and have our eyes fixed upon the Son of God in faith, is not this infirmity blessedly helped?

4. But again, we are too often *slack* in our spiritual movements, *and faint and tire* under the length of the journey, the difficulties of the path, the weight of the cross, and the roughness of the road. We are like a man rowing against wind and tide: he may pull against them well for a time, but eventually he is beaten by the continual opposition he meets with; and then gradually his hands slacken and he is borne down by the strength of the stream. Thus what makes us faint and tire is not only the amazing strength of sin in our carnal mind, but that it never ceases to act as an opposing weight. We are like a man climbing up a steep and rugged mountain. It is not only the loose stones that make him slip and stumble, but the whole road is one continued ascent, which wearies his limbs, tires out his strength, and



exhausts his breath. To persevere, then, in the ways of godliness, to hold out and to hold on, to endure to the end, and not drop off by the way—this is the great difficulty, and one which none overcome but those who are helped by the special power of God; for he, and he only, "who endures to the end shall be saved." Perseverance in well doing is a blessed gift and grace. As the apostle urges, "Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not." (Gal. 6:9.) But it is especially in the grace of prayer that the blessed Spirit helps the infirmity of growing slack and weary by communicating strength to persevere. This grace of perseverance the Lord has blessedly opened up and enforced in those two striking parables—that of the importunate widow, who would give the unjust judge no rest, night or day, until he had avenged her cause; and of the man who goes to his friend at midnight, when he is in bed, for three loaves, and though denied them at first obtains them at last by sheer importunity. By those two parables the Lord would encourage us to persevere in asking, to be importunate at the throne of grace. But this we cannot do except as the Spirit helps the infirmity of drooping hands and feeble knees. He must lift up for us the hands which hang down, as Aaron and Hur held up the hands of Moses. Without persevering prayer Israel could not overcome his foe, so that when Moses drooped his hands Amalek prevailed, and when Moses held up his hands then Israel prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy and were therefore held up for him. Aaron and Hur thus helped his infirmity. So we need the Holy Spirit to help us at a throne of grace by holding up our praying hands—not suffering them to droop and flag, for it is with us as with Israel: when we droop our hands in prayer and supplication, then sin prevails, and when the blessed Spirit holds them up, then grace prevails.

5. But as an almost necessary attendant on this infirmity of

weariness in well doing, there is the infirmity of *coldness* in the things of God. How often do we feel cold, lifeless, stupid, chilled as it were with wintry frost; and how at such wintry seasons we need some reviving warmth to warm our cold, our frozen hearts, and thaw and melt them down into a flow of faith and love. This infirmity, then, of coldness and icy chilliness the Spirit helps by taking of the beams of the Sun of righteousness, and warming by them the winter of the soul into spring. Under the genial operation and divine influence of these dissolving rays, the soul, melted down into life and feeling, pours forth a flood of warm desires, a holy stream of affectionate petitions, which gush forth as a flowing brook. This is turning the dry grounds into watersprings (Ps. 107:35) and the flint into a fountain of waters (Ps. 114:8), opening rivers in high places and fountains in the midst of valleys. (Isa. 41:18.) It is by these warm and earnest petitions that the soul gains the ear of God, for he loves that the heart should be engaged in his service.

"Formal service is his loathing;  
He requires pure desires;  
All the heart, or nothing."

He who is a Spirit and seeks and requires spiritual worshippers, turns his face away from formal, cold petitions; but the cry of hunger and thirst after righteousness; the warm, loving, importunate petition of a believing heart ever enters the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. In this way the Spirit—and how condescending it is in him so to do! as an inward Intercessor helps our infirmities; and well it is for us, since but for his helping grace, our infirmities would so overpower us that the very breath of prayer would cease in and die out of the soul. As sleep weighs a man down until he can no longer resist its overwhelming influence; as weariness

overcomes muscle and sinew until the foot falters, the hand drops, and the whole body loses its power of exertion and motion; so our infirmities, but for the helping power of the Blessed Spirit, would gain such ascendancy over the inward life of God, that the very breath of prayer would drop out of the soul as a weary man drops asleep in his chair, or a fainting woman if unsupported falls on the floor. But as a provision of the everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure, the Blessed Spirit helps our infirmities, sustains our weary souls, and by his inward breath keeps alive the holy fire which he himself first kindled in the heart.

II.—But he does something more still. To come to our second point, he intercedes himself for us, and that "*with groanings which cannot be uttered.*"

1. His mode of teaching us how to pray I may perhaps compare to that of a schoolmaster teaching a boy to write. He sets before him a copy and puts the pen into his hand; but the boy is scarcely able to hold the pen properly, much more to make a right stroke. Then the master takes the boy's fingers into his own and makes two or three strokes for him: still the pupil's hand trembles and his fingers cannot properly clutch the pen; the stroke, however, is attempted to be made, but it has not the right proportions. It is crooked where it should be straight; perpendicular where it should be aslant; and the turn at the bottom of the line is a rude angle instead of a neat curve. Then the master with his own hand makes two or three letters in the copybook for him, which stand permanently in his book, but are so beautifully executed that the pupil despairs of ever imitating them. So it is with this gracious Spirit as our blessed writing-master, the inward inditer of all spiritual prayer. He first sets before us what true prayer is—the inward breathing of the heart after God. We try so to pray, but cannot. All our attempts fall short

of the copy that he has set. Then he takes, so to speak, hold of our fingers, and helps our infirmities by clasping our trembling hand in his, and thus guides us in making strokes of prayer, such as in some measure may resemble that holy copy which the Lord set in the garden of Gethsemane. Still, our infirmities prevail: the fingers are clumsy, stiff, and awkward, and cannot make the stroke in the proper direction, or in the right proportion. Then this gracious Teacher makes some letters of his own for us, intercedes himself with us, and if I may make use of the expression, mingles his own breath with ours. He is not satisfied with helping us to frame thoughts, conceive ideas, and utter expressions—to feel our wants and misery, and beg for relief; but he himself with his own pure, holy breath, making our bodies his temple, intercedes for us before the throne of grace with groanings which cannot be uttered. As the promised Comforter, the heavenly Paraclete, the inward Advocate, one with the Father and the Son in essence and power, love and mercy, grace and glory, the Holy Spirit is ever mindful of our soul's good,—is ever desirous that our petitions should be heard, knowing that all blessings are given in answer to prayer. But seeing how weak and feeble we are in this seeking and suing for them, that we may not utterly fail before the throne of grace, he himself mingles his praying breath with ours, and thus intercedes himself for us and in us, that our prayers may reach the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, and bring gracious answers down into our breast. But you cannot, you say, always discover when the Spirit is interceding within you; and this often makes you doubt and fear whether he really is your Intercessor. There are, I believe, times and seasons when the spirit of prayer is so strong, and we are so lifted up above ourselves by it, that we can hardly doubt his interceding grace. But, as I have already explained, he usually so mingles his breath with ours, that sometimes we can scarcely tell whether it is he

that prays or we. Yet have we not experienced at certain seasons a strange incoming of divine life and feeling, as if a new and unwonted power were given to us at the throne of grace to plead with the Lord? I have felt so at times, I believe, especially when praying in public, or with two or three believers alone. Such new, and yet gracious thoughts have been given, such warm, and yet soft and humble feelings raised up, such earnest desires experienced, and such suitable words communicated to express them, that, to speak with all humility, I have been astonished at myself, that such power should have been given to lead the utterance of the church of Christ. When we are thus favoured at the throne of grace, then we may well believe, or hope that the Spirit himself is interceding for us. It is his breath, not ours, which is then poured forth; his thoughts, not our ideas; his words, not our expressions. Thus the Lord said to his disciples in reference to another work of the Blessed Spirit, "Whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye; for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost." (Mark 13:11.)

2. But he is said to intercede for us "*with groanings which cannot be uttered.*" I think we may explain these striking words in two different senses. First, look at the expression in this point of view. There are thoughts and feelings in the heart which cannot be put into words. All language is to a certain extent defective, and never so defective as when it attempts to express deep and powerful feelings. What words can adequately express a widow's grief as she lies awake at night thinking upon her departed husband? Sobs and sighs and a whole flood of impassioned tears—even these but feebly express the grief which seem to be tearing the very strings of her heart. Thus even in nature, when feelings are very strong, words are utterly insufficient to express them; much more so then in grace where the feelings are so much

more deeply seated, and which human language, as framed to express natural conceptions, cannot adequately utter. When the awakened sinner is pressed down almost to despair with a heavy burden of guilt upon his conscience; when he has very deep and striking views of the awful realities of eternity, and fears lest his portion be to be cast into the lake of fire; when the wrath of God and the curse of the law are burning like a fire in his bones and drying up his strength like a potsherd, what mere words can express his feelings or his fears? He groans being burdened; yet his sighs and groans themselves but feebly and imperfectly express the feelings of his soul. The Holy Ghost, therefore, as helping the infirmities of utterance, which cannot find expression in words, intercedes in the heart with groanings which cannot be uttered; there being no other way of giving utterance to the feelings under which it labours. Have you not had some experience of this? When you have been lying under a heavy burden of sin; smarting under pangs of guilt and alarm; been distressed by the hiding of God's face; been shaken to the very centre with a whole host of doubts and fears whether you have not been deceived altogether; stood, as it were, on the very brink of eternity, with scarcely a hope in your soul: what words could give expression to feelings like these? The soul, then, under such and similar exercises, must have recourse to groanings; but even these cannot be uttered as spoken language, because they express feelings which cannot be put into so many words, any more than you can explain to a person the pain of a sharp attack of tic, of the cutting off a leg, or even of a violent toothache. This, then, is one meaning of the expression, "groanings which cannot be uttered."

But there is another meaning of the words, which is, that these groanings or sighings of the Spirit are not so much unutterable as unuttered, for thus the word may be

rendered. As there are mute prayers, so there are silent groans. Thus Hannah prayed in the depth of her soul, yet not a single breath issued from her lips. So deep were her feelings that her hands trembled, her limbs shook, her very face was convulsed as of a person staggering through strong drink, as is evident from Eli's rebuke; but as we read, she "spake in her heart: only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard." (1 Sam.1:13.) So Moses at the Red Sea speaks confidently to the children of Israel. "Fear ye not," he says, "stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord." But his own heart all the while was full of secret cries; for though we hear of no word uttered; or groan poured forth, yet the Lord said to him, "Wherefore criest thou unto me?" (Exod. 14:15.) So Nehemiah, when he stood in the presence of the king, was secretly lifting up his prayers to God, yet no word escaped his lips, no sigh reached the king's ear; but inwardly he prayed to the God of heaven. (Nehem. 2:4.) In all these instances the Holy Spirit, as their prevailing Intercessor, offered up his holy breath; for he was interceding in them with groanings not uttered. Their inward groans and sighs expressed their wants; but inaudibly to human ears, for they were suppressed, kept down, not suffered to get vent. The same blessed Intercessor often intercedes in the same way in the hearts of the saints now; in fact, there is often more depth, power, and prevalence in the inward sigh and cry of a broken heart and a contrite spirit, than in the vocal expression of the lips, or even in the uttered groan. It is the deep river that makes the least noise: the babbling brook it is that runs noisily over the stones. The voice of the Holy Spirit is not to be heard by mortal ear, or if it be so powerful as not to be suppressed, privacy will be sought. Under the pressure of eternal realities, the child of grace will go into some secret corner, where none can hear his voice, and there call upon the name of the Lord. When the Lord was first pleased to give me the Spirit of grace and of

supplications, I was living near the sea-side in a mountainous country, and was usually in the habit of riding every day for exercise on horseback. There, sometimes amongst the lonely valleys, and sometimes by the silent sea-shore, where there was no eye to see or ear to hear, I used to pray and cry unto the Lord. I was not for allowing the feelings of my heart to men. I had God to deal with, and to him in secret I used to pour out the desires of my soul. So to this day would I ever continue. Let my religion, let yours, be in the depths of our heart. Let us not make a noisy profession before men, like the ancient hypocrites whom the Lord condemns, who loved to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they might have glory of men. (Matt. 6:5.) Let men rather see, by our life and conduct and conversation, by our Christian spirit and consistent deportment, that we are followers of Christ; for this is all they can see. If it be the work of God, it lies deep; too deep for human ken, for it is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen. But what a mercy it is for the saints of God, that however inwardly concealed their religion be from the eyes of men; however buried often in confusion, and thus hidden even from themselves, it all lies naked and open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do. There are those amongst the living family of God, who have at present no evidence of a work of grace being begun in their hearts except some secret feelings of sorrow, guilt, and trouble which they can scarcely explain; or the sighs, cries, prayers, and groans that they at times utter, because in no other way can they find relief for their burdened consciences. But what an unspeakable mercy it is that there is an eye above that marks all; that he who sees the sparrow's flight, counts the hairs upon the head, and without whom not a blade of grass can grow, or a leaf expand—that he, the great Searcher of hearts, knows every thought and every feeling that lie hidden from every other eye in the inward depths of the bosom.



III.—But this brings us to our third point, the knowledge which God has of this inward intercession, *"He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit."* Deception and hypocrisy may prevail with man: they may last for a time, though for the most part the plating is very thin, and the corners soon show the base metal underneath. The world and sin soon rub off the mere outside wash, for with all its glitter, it is not the gold of Ophir or the plates of Uphaz. Or if for a time they glitter and shine before men, hypocrisy and deception can never avail in the courts of heaven. We may deceive ourselves and we may deceive one another; but there is one whom we cannot deceive—a heart-searching God. Now this truth the Lord himself writes with his finger upon every regenerate heart. Two lessons he teaches every soul in whom his powerful hand works: first, that he cannot be deceived; secondly, that he must not be mocked. This teaching from above makes a man sincere before him; and if not sincere, what is he, what is any man in a profession of religion? Nothing. Nothing, did I say? He is worse than nothing; because to be insincere before God is to add hypocrisy to our other sins; is to insult the Majesty of heaven: is to tie, if it were possible, a double millstone round our neck to sink us in the depths of hell. *"He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit."*

Remember this in your approaches to the footstool. God, the all-seeing, the omniscient Jehovah, searcheth the hearts, and he searches them for good as well as for evil, for both lie equally naked before his penetrating eye. There is not an evil thought, a licentious desire, a covetous wish, or an ungodly imagination framed in our mind that does not lie open before the eyes of a heart-searching God. Like the ostrich, you may bury your head in the sand, and think yourself unseen, but your whole body stands exposed to the bow of the unerring archer. He sees, then, all the evil which is in us; and well

may that thought cover us with shame and confusion of face. You could not tell to your nearest, dearest friend what daily and hourly takes place in the depths of your carnal mind; but all is open before God. And this should make you watchful and prayerful, as living under the eye of an omniscient Being who reads every thought, hears every word, and spies out every action. It may well make you fearful to offend, and desirous to please the Majesty of heaven.

But he that searches the heart searches not only for evil, but also for good. He is full of compassion, mercy, love, and truth. He is not to his children a rigorous Judge, or a hard Master, reaping where he has not sown, and gathering where he has not strewed. But he is a kind, affectionate Father, and Friend; and as a parent looks with very tender eye upon the unavoidable infirmities of his children, and deals with them accordingly, so does the great Searcher of hearts in the case of his spiritual family. "For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." If you had a crippled child, would you rudely push him down, because he could not walk with a firm and vigorous step? Or if he were afflicted, as children are sometimes, with any bodily or mental infirmity—would not that very affliction commend him all the more to your tenderest affection, and anxious care? How you would shield him to the utmost of your power from the rudeness and unkind treatment of others, and could scarcely bear him out of your sight, lest he meet with any injury. So their heavenly Father looks down with pity and compassion upon the infirmities of his children. He regards their woes with eyes of holy pity. And he can do what we cannot: he can separate the good from the evil. When we pray, sin is so mingled with all our prayers that we can scarcely believe they are acceptable to him who is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and who cannot look upon iniquity. But he reads his own work upon the heart; he deciphers his own writing.

What is obscure to us is not obscure to him; for he can distinguish between the breath of the Spirit, and the breath of the flesh. In a crowd of strange voices, you who are a mother could distinguish the cry of your own child. So in the crowd of voices that often distract and confuse the mind when we pray, God can, and does distinguish the cry of his own Spirit. We therefore read, "He that searcheth the hearts *knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit.*" "The mind of the Spirit" means what the Spirit thinks, desires, breathes after, and seeks; and to that the Lord has especial regard. Why? Because that, and that only, is unattended with sin. Nothing unholy can ever enter God's presence; no sinful prayer can ever reach God's ears. There must be purity and holiness in it to make it acceptable to the pure and holy Majesty of Heaven. The Spirit's breath is pure; the Spirit's mind is holy; the Spirit's intercession is according to the will of God; for as the Holy Ghost is one with the Father and the Son in essence, being, and power, so is he one in mind, will, and grace. The mind of the Spirit must be the same as the mind of Christ, and as such he will ever seek the glory of God, and the good of the soul; for in these two preeminently shone the mind of Christ when here below. This holy and blessed Spirit will never then sanction the indulgence of anything carnal, sensual, or sinful. If we indulge ourselves in such things, ours is the sin, and ours be the shame. The Holy Ghost, though he helps our infirmities, will never help our sins; and though he bears with weakness, will never countenance iniquity. "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth the mind of the Spirit," and pays regard thereto; but he will never regard the mind of the flesh. There may be many petitions for earthly good which you might put up; but these may be, and probably are, contrary to the mind of the Spirit. We see this eminently in the case of Solomon. The Lord gave him his choice what to ask. Solomon made a right choice. He chose wisdom. He did not choose riches, nor honor, nor length of days, nor the life

of his enemies; but he chose spiritual wisdom, and an understanding heart to discern between good and evil. That prayer was acceptable. The Lord gave him a wise and understanding heart, and added to it what he did not ask—both riches and honour. (1 Kings 3:11, 12.) Solomon imitated God's example. For he gave the Queen of Sheba not only whatsoever she asked, but added much more of his royal bounty. And so will he deal with us. He will give us all that is good for us, so as to fill our hearts even to overflowing with love and joy. But it must be prayed for after the mind of the Spirit. You may have afflictions, and you may pray for their removal, because you feel them a burden too heavy for you to bear. This removal may not be, and probably is not the mind of the Spirit. Pray, rather for submission to them, that they may work in your soul some profit—that they may redound to the glory and praise of God. That may be the mind of the Spirit, instead of his interceding for their removal. Or deeply exercised with a body of sin and death, painfully feeling the struggles of sin in your carnal mind for the mastery, you may be praying, as some have prayed, to be made perfectly holy, so as not only never to feel the guilt and power of sin again, but to be freed even from its very presence and being. But that is a prayer not according to the mind of the Spirit. It is God's will that whilst we are in the flesh, we should have the body of sin and death to struggle against. We are bidden to fight the good fight of faith. But if we had no enemies to contend with, were we wholly freed from the attacks of the world, the flesh, or the devil, where would be faith's fight or faith's victory? Instead of asking for such present impossibilities as freedom from trouble, and removal of crosses, let us rather seek for submission to the will of God under them; and instead of fighting against sin in our own strength, or sinking down hopelessly under its attacks, let us rather beg of the Lord to keep us from evil that it may not grieve us, and remind him

of his promise that sin shall not have dominion over us. In all our prayers, in all our approaches to the throne, our mercy and wisdom will be to seek to possess the mind of the Spirit; to desire to know the will of God, and to do it; to look up more believingly and continually to the Lord Jesus, that he himself would teach and guide us; that he would by his Spirit and grace conform us more inwardly and outwardly to his suffering image; that he would grant unto us to know him more, and serve him better; that our prayers may day by day be more and more fervent, earnest and sincere, more spiritual, more in accordance with the will of God: that thus they may be more and more manifested as the interceding breath of the Spirit of God in our hearts, and as such may bring more clear and evident answers down. Pray for the manifestation of Christ to your soul, for a revelation of the Person, blood, righteousness, and love of Jesus; seek to have your signs and evidences of divine life more cleared up; your Ebenezers and tokens for good more brightly shone upon; your doubts and fears more plainly dispelled, and a fuller and sweeter assurance of personal interest given in the finished work of Christ. Desire also to have the promises applied to your heart, the word of God brought with divine power into your conscience, and a living faith raised up and drawn forth to mix with the truth which you read or hear. Above all things, seek to know the will of God, and do it. Beg, as the Lord may enable, for submission, patience, resignation, brokenness, contrition, humility, godly sorrow for sin, heavenly affections, and that sweet spirituality of mind which is life and peace. Such and similar prayers are much more agreeable to the mind of the Spirit, because in stricter accordance with the revealed truth of God and the experience of the saints, than any bold claim on the one hand as if God were our debtor in grace, or any self-righteous confidence on the other, as if he were our debtor in nature. Seek then to be delivered, not only from Antinomian

presumption, but from Pharisaic self-righteousness, from formality and superstition; seek to be set free from mere vocal prayer, from a dead and dry repetition of phrases in which the heart is not, where there is no life, nor feeling, nor power, and therefore no prevalence with God. Above all, seek an inward assurance that your prayers are heard and accepted, and then watch for the answer. This will give you the surest and best of all evidences that the blessed Spirit is himself interceding for you with groanings which cannot be uttered.

IV.—And this consideration brings me to my last point, that the Spirit "*maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.*" The will of God is two-fold, revealed and secret. According to which will does the blessed Spirit intercede? Clearly not according to the secret will of God, which as being secret is necessarily hidden from our eyes; and therefore cannot form the subject or the guide of our petitions. It is therefore according to his revealed will that the Blessed Spirit makes intercession. But where is that revealed will contained and made known? In the Scriptures of truth. How then are we to know what that will is? By searching the Scriptures. Is that enough? Many search the Scriptures who never know the will of God, for we read of those who are ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (2 Tim. 3:7); and the apostle tells us of the Jews in his day that when Moses was read, which he daily was in the synagogues, the veil was upon their heart. (2 Cor. 3:15.) Thousands read the Scriptures to whom it is a sealed book. We must beg then of the Lord to illuminate the sacred page, to cast a divine light upon the Scriptures of truth, and thence into our heart, for "the entrance of his word giveth light;" and then we shall understand the Scriptures by the same inspiration under which that holy word was written. This is being a disciple indeed, and to such the promise is, "Ye shall know

the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31, 32.) "Open thou mine eyes," cried David, "that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law;" and again, "Give me understanding, and I shall live." (Psalm 119:18, 144.) When then we are favoured in any measure with the light of God in our understanding, and the life of God in our soul, then the Scriptures become to us a new book; we read them with new eyes, handle them, as it were, with new hands, hear them, as read in the house of prayer, with new ears, and feel them, which is a grand point, with new hearts. This indeed is not always the case. You take up the Scriptures at times, and not a word is there for you. Your very understanding of it seems gone; you read it without faith, and without feeling. Darkness covers the sacred page: darkness is spread thickly over your heart. You lay the book down self-condemned at your miserable hardness, darkness, and carnality; but you cannot give yourself light or life. But you take it up again on another occasion: power comes from on high to read with faith and feeling; you believe what is thus commended to your conscience, as the word of inspiration; the finger of God touches your heart; eternal realities press with weight upon your spirit; hope anchors in the truth revealed to your soul, and love flows out to embrace them. Almost every page seems illuminated with sacred light; every verse is filled with beauty and blessedness, dropping its rich contents into your heart like honey and the honey-comb; and you wonder how you can have read over and over again the same words, and never seen their meaning in the same light, nor felt their influence with the same power. Led under this Spirit to the throne of grace, and seeking the Lord's face with these feelings warm in your breast, then you pray according to the will of God, for his will as revealed in the Scriptures and thence to your heart has now become your will. He has made you willing in the day of his power, and his will and your will are one. This is true prayer for the heart and lips now move

together in sweet and harmonious concert. In this way is wrought submission to his will. Hard and rugged may be the path which you are now treading; grievous afflictions may be your painful lot; powerful temptations may beset your stumbling steps; and you may think, in much self-pity, that none is so hardly dealt with as you. But cannot you pray for submission to those crosses, which God does not seem willing to remove? Seek then for submission; to see the hand of God in and under the affliction; look if there be no silver lining to the dark cloud that seems spread over the face of the sky; examine the edge, or view the centre, to watch for some beam of heavenly light breaking through to show you that the Sun of righteousness will soon arise upon your soul with healing in his wings. This will give submission; and as this is granted, and you begin to find what benefit you have already received by the trial and affliction which you have been called upon to pass through, a sense of gratitude springs up, and you are able to praise and bless the Lord for bringing that trial upon you. You have now an evidence that the Spirit has been interceding for and within you according to the will of God; been moving in harmony with this will as revealed in the Scripture. Bear in mind, then, that God's will must ever stand: and that it is as unchanging and as unchangeable as God himself. Our wills are ever fluctuating: God's will fluctuates not. And as that will must ever live and rule, it will be our highest wisdom and richest mercy to submit to, and be conformed unto it. Now the will of God to you who desire to fear his name is not your destruction, but your salvation; your profit now, your happiness hereafter; your present grace, and eternal glory. And the Spirit is making intercession for you according to this will of God; for is it not your earnest desire and prayer that your soul should be saved and blessed, that you should serve God and live to his glory, and when you die be with him for ever? Lie, then, at his feet. Be the clay, and let him be your heavenly Potter.



Think not of saving yourself, or of putting your own hand to God's gracious work. Be content to be nothing. Sink even lower than that: be willing to be less than nothing, that Christ may be all in all. Covet above all things the Spirit's interceding breath; for in possessing that you will have a sure pledge that he will guide you in life, support you in death, and land you in glory. With his guidance we can never err; with his supporting arms, we can never fall; taught by him we shall see the path of life plainly; upheld by his strength, we shall walk in it without fear. Without his light we are dark; without his life we are dead; without his teaching we are but a mass of ignorance and folly. We cannot find the way except he guide; but if he do guide, we cannot but find it. The more we confide to his teaching and guidance the better it will be for us; and the more under this teaching we can lie submissively at the Lord's feet, looking up to him for his will to be made known in us and perfected in us, the more it will be for our present peace, and the more it will redound to his eternal praise.