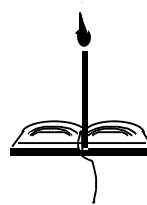


"Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord..." Isaiah 1:18

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Old Testament Study: Exodus 19



Mount Sinai, by C. H. Mackintosh (1820-1896)

¹In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai. ²For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount. ³And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; ⁴Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. ⁵Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: ⁶And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.' These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel."

⁷And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the LORD commanded him. ⁸And all the people answered together, and said, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do." And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD. ⁹And the LORD said unto Moses, "Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever." And Moses told the words of the people unto the Lord.

¹⁰And the LORD said unto Moses, "Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes, ¹¹And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai. ¹²And thou shalt set

bounds unto the people round about, saying, "Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death: ¹³There shall not an hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount."

¹⁴And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵And he said unto the people, "Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives."

¹⁶And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. ¹⁷And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. ¹⁸And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. ¹⁹And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. ²⁰And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. ²¹And the Lord said unto Moses, "Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. ²²And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them." ²³And Moses said unto the Lord, "The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.'" ²⁴And the Lord said unto him, "Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them." ²⁵So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them. (KJV)

We have now arrived at a most momentous point in Israel's history. We are called to behold them standing at the foot of

the mount that not might be touched (vs. 12), and that burned with fire (Ex. 9:15). The fair millennial scene which opened before us in the preceding chapter has passed away. It was but a brief moment of sunshine in which a very vivid picture of the kingdom was afforded; but the sunshine was speedily followed by the heavy clouds which gathered around that *palpable mount*, where Israel, in a spirit of dark and senseless legality, abandoned Jehovah's covenant of pure grace for man's covenant of works. Disastrous movement! A movement fraught with the most dismal results. Hitherto, as we have seen, no enemy could stand before Israel—no obstacle was suffered to interrupt their onward and victorious march. Pharaoh's hosts were overthrown—Amalek and his people were discomfited with the edge of the sword—all was victory, because God was acting on behalf of His people, in pursuance of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the opening verses of the chapter now before us, the Lord recapitulates His actings toward Israel in the following touching and beautiful language: **"Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation'"** (ver. 3-6). Observe, it is **"my voice"** and **"my covenant"**. What was the utterance of that **"voice"**? And what did that **"covenant"** involve? Had Jehovah's voice made itself heard for the purpose of laying down the rules and regulations of a severe and unbending law-giver? By no means. It had spoken to demand freedom for the captive—to provide a refuge from the sword of the destroyer—to make a way for the ransomed to pass over—to bring down bread from heaven, to draw forth water out of the flinty rock. Such had been the gracious and intelligible utterances of Jehovah's **"voice"**, up to the moment at which **"Israel camped before the mount."**

And as to His **"covenant,"** it was one of unmingled grace.

It proposed no condition—it made no demands—it put no yoke on the neck—no burden on the shoulder. When **“the God of glory appeared unto Abraham,”** in Ur of the Chaldees, He certainly did not address him in such words as, “thou shalt do this” and “thou shalt not do that.” Ah! no; such language was not according to the heart of God. It suits Him far better to place *a fair mitre* upon a sinner’s head, than to put a yoke upon his neck. His word to Abraham was, **“I will give”** (Gen. 12:7). The land of Canaan was not to be purchased by man’s doings, but to be given by God’s grace. Thus it stood; and, in the opening of the book of Exodus, we see God coming down in grace to make good His promise to Abraham’s seed. The condition in which He found that seed made no difference, inasmuch as the blood of the lamb furnished Him with a perfectly righteous ground on which to make good His promise. He evidently had not promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s seed on the ground of aught that He foresaw in them, for this would have totally destroyed the real nature of a promise. It would have made it a compact and not a promise; **“but God gave it to Abraham by promise,”** and not by compact. (see Gal. 3)

Hence, in the opening of this 19th chapter, the people are reminded of the grace in which Jehovah had hitherto dealt with them; and they are also assured of what they should yet be, provided they continued to hearken to mercy’s heavenly **“voice,”** and to abide in the **“covenant”** of free and absolute grace. **“Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people”** (vs. 5). How could they be this? Was it by stumbling up the ladder of self-righteousness and legalism? Would they be **“a peculiar treasure”** when blasted by the curses of a broken law—a law which they had broken before ever they received it? Surely not. How then were they to be this **“peculiar treasure”**? By standing in that position in which Jehovah surveyed them when He compelled the covetous prophet to exclaim, **“How goodly are thy tents, Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river’s side, as the**

trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn” (Num. 24:5-8).

However, Israel was not disposed to occupy this blessed position. Instead of rejoicing in God’s **“holy promise”**, they undertook to make the most presumptuous vow that mortal lips could utter. **“All the people answered together, and said, ‘All that the Lord hath spoken we will do’”** (vs. 8). This was bold language. They did not even say, “we hope to do” or “we will endeavor to do.” This would have expressed a measure of self-distrust. But no; they took the most absolute ground. **“We will do.”** Nor was this the language of a few vain, self-confident spirits who presumed to single themselves out from the whole congregation. No; **“all the people answered together.”** They were unanimous in their abandonment to the **“holy promise”**—the **“holy covenant.”**

And now, observe the result. The moment Israel uttered their *singular vow*, the moment they undertook to **“do,”** there was a total alteration in the aspect of things. **“And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud... And thou shalt set bounds unto the people, round about, saying, ‘Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount, shall be surely put to death’”** (vss. 9, 12). This was a very marked change; the One who had just said, **“I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself,”** now envelops Himself **“in a thick cloud,”** and says, **“set bounds unto the people round about.”** The sweet accents of grace and mercy are exchanged for the **“thunderings and lightnings”** of the fiery mount. Man had presumed to talk of his miserable doings in the presence of God’s magnificent grace. Israel had said, **“we will do,”** and they must be put at a distance in order that it may be fully seen what they are able to do. God takes the place of moral distance; and the people are but too well disposed to have it so, for they are filled with fear

and trembling; and no marvel, for the sight was **“terrible,”**—**“so terrible that Moses said, ‘I exceedingly fear and quake’”** (Heb. 12:21). Who could endure the sight of that **“devouring fire,”** which was the apt expression of divine holiness? **“The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints; from his right hand went a fiery law for them”** (Deut. 33:2). The term **“fiery,”** as applied to the law, is expressive of its holiness: **“Our God is a consuming fire”** (Deut. 4:24),—perfectly intolerant of evil, in thought, word, and deed.

Thus, then, Israel made a fatal mistake in saying, **“we will do.”** It was taking upon themselves a vow which they were not able, even were they willing, to pay; and we know who has said, **“better that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay”** (Eccl. 5:5). It is of the very essence of a vow that it assumes the competency to fulfill; and where is man’s competency? As well might a bankrupt draw a cheque on the bank, as a helpless sinner make a vow. A man who makes a vow, denies the truth, as to his nature and condition. He is ruined; what can he do? He is utterly without strength, and can neither will nor do anything good. Did Israel keep their vow? Did they do **“all that the Lord commanded”**? Witness the golden calf, the broken tables, the desecrated Sabbath, the despised and neglected ordinances, the stoned messengers, the rejected and crucified Christ, the resisted Spirit. Such are the overwhelming evidences of man’s dishonored vows. Thus must it ever be when fallen humanity undertakes to vow.

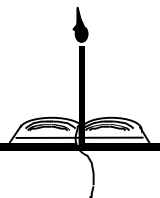
Christian reader, do you not rejoice in the fact that your eternal salvation rests not on your poor shadowy vows, and resolutions, but on **“the one offering of Jesus Christ once”** (Heb. 10:10)? Oh, yes, “this is our joy, which ne’er can fail,” Christ has taken all our vows upon Himself, and gloriously discharged them for ever. His resurrection-life flows through His members, and produces in them results which legal vows and legal claims never could effect. He is our life, and He is our righteousness. May His name be precious to our

hearts. May His cause ever command our energies. May it be our meat and our drink to spend and be spent in His dear service.

I cannot close this chapter without noticing, in connection, a passage in the book of Deuteronomy, which may present a difficulty to some minds. It has direct reference to the subject on which we have been dwelling. **“And the LORD heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the LORD said unto me, ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken’”** (Deut 5:28). From this passage it might seem as though the Lord approved of their making a vow; but if my reader will take the trouble of reading the entire context, from ver. 24-27, he will see at once that it has nothing whatever to say to the vow, but that it contains the expression of their terror at the consequences of their vow. They were not able to endure that which was commanded. **“If,”** said they, **“we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say; and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it and do it”** (Deut. 5:25-27). It was the confession of their own inability to encounter Jehovah in that awful aspect which their proud legality had led Him to assume. It is impossible that the Lord could ever commend an abandonment of free and changeless grace for a sandy foundation of **“works of law.”**

This article is taken from: Mackintosh, C. H. *Notes on the Book of Exodus*. London: George Morrish, 1858. A PDF file of this book can be downloaded, free of charge, at <http://www.ClassicChristianLibrary.com>

A Classic Study: Job 1:7-8 (part 1)



[Here we continue a reprint of a small portion of Joseph Caryl's study in Job. Mr. Caryl wrote twelve volumes on the book of Job. His study is a great example of how deep one can dig into the truths of the Bible.]

Job 1:7-8 (part 1) - God's Question to Satan, by Joseph Caryl (1666)

⁷And the Lord said unto Satan, "Whence comest thou?" Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." ⁸And the Lord said unto Satan, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?" (KJV)

In the former verse, we showed you that *great and glorious Session*, the Lord with His holy angels about Him, and Satan too, coming among them. In the verses following to the end of the 12th, we have the business or acts of the Session recorded. God interrogates, Satan answers; Satan moves, God grants. This is the sum of all the business that passed in this Session. God puts two questions to Satan, one concerning his travels or where he had been (vs. 7); the other concerning his observations or what he had done (vs. 8).

In the 7th verse, we have the first question. The Lord begins with Satan, **"And the Lord said unto Satan, 'Whence comest thou?'"** (vs. 7).

How the Lord speaks is a point almost unspeakable. There are many disputes about it, I will not stay upon them: only to open this, that you may take in all Scripture of the like kind wherein the Lord is said to speak. We must know that, as in Scripture, God is said to have a mouth and a voice, alluding to

man by that common figure; so likewise when the Lord speaks, we must understand it by the same figure; it is but an allusion to the manner of men. God is said to speak, as men are said to speak: but God does not speak as men speak, forming a voice by such organs or instruments of speech. But when the Lord speaks, it is either by forming and creating a voice in the air. So God is said to speak sometimes, as when Christ was baptized, there came a voice from Heaven saying, **"This is my beloved son,..."** etc. So John 12:28: **"There came a voice from Heaven saying, 'I have glorified thee,'"** which all the people heard sounding in the air.

Secondly, God is said to speak when He manifests and declares Himself either to the spirits of men, or unto Angels who are spirits. God does speak to the spirits of men, sometimes without any forming of a voice: So the phrase is usual in the Prophets, **"The word of the Lord came unto me..."**, which is to be understood that the Lord did secretly reveal Himself to the spirits of His Prophets, and not by any external audible voice; it was an inward, not an outward word.

So when the Lord speaks to Spirits or Angels, be they good or evil Angels, you must not understand it of a voice formed or fashioned into audible words and syllables, but it is a manifestation or a declaration of God's will and mind unto the Angel's mind, good or bad as God wills. For the will of God to declare Himself to an Angel, is the speech of God to an Angel. So much as God intends of His mind should be known to the devil, is a speaking to the devil. The intention of one spirit is as plain to another spirit, as the voice of one man is to another, there is the very same proportion. So here in this place, where it is said, **"The Lord said to Satan"**, this was only a manifestation of God's will, as He willed to Satan; God did manifest Himself thus far to Satan, that it was His pleasure to know of him whence he came; this will was His speech.

To pass from the manner of speaking, we will look upon the matter spoken: **"And the Lord said unto Satan, 'Whence comest thou?'"** (vs. 7). That's the first question.

This question is here put, not for information, as if the Lord did not know whence he came, as men usually question that they may be informed. But questions in Scripture (especially when the Lord puts them) are to be understood in some of these senses:

First, *to exact a confession from the mouth of the party.* He said to Satan, **“Whence comest thou?”** Not that He needed information, but that He might receive a confession from the mouth of Satan. So He questioned Adam, **“Where art thou?... Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee thou shouldest not eat?”** (Gen. 3:9,11). These questions were not to inform God, but only that Adam might give a confession out of his own mouth concerning those things. So He questioned Cain, **“Where is Abel, thy brother?”** (Gen. 4:9). It was a question only to draw a confession from Cain of what he had done. There is a like question of Elisha to his servant Gehazi, when he had run after Naaman and had got a reward from him. Elisha said to him, **“Whence comest thou?”** (2 Kings 5:25) or “Where hast thou been?” He asked him this only to draw a confession from him, for said he afterward, **“Went not my spirit with thee when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee?”** (2 Kings 5:26). He knew before where his servant had been. God had revealed the thing to him, he only questions him to make him acknowledge it. So here the Lord questions Satan, **“Whence comest thou?”**, that He might have a confession from himself. Note well, *Though the Lord knows all the actions, ways and thoughts of every creature, yet God at the last will question every man, that He may judge every man upon his own confession.*

Secondly, *this question may be understood as intimating a dislike of the thing or of the business that Satan had been about.* Questions are many times put, not out of ignorance of what has been done, but out of a dislike or abhorrence of the thing done. When the man or the thing is not approved, then God carries Himself toward him and his action as if He knew not what he had been doing, and He must have it out by confession. Thus Hiram, in I Kings 9:13, puts the question upon

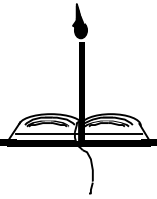
Solomon, **“What cities are these which thou hast given me my brother?”** He saw and knew before what cities they were, but thus he questioned, **“because they pleased him not”** (I Kings 9:12). In Hosea 4:8, God is said not to know that they set up kings: **“They have set up kings but not by me, they have made princes and I knew it not”**; that is, I did not like them; I took no notice of them by way of approbation. So God questions about things, as if He did not know them, when He does not like them; and we may conclude that this question holds out to us God’s dislike of the ways and works of Satan.

Thirdly, *questions and this question may be understood in a way of objurcation or chiding.* **“Satan, whence comest thou?”** You have been a tempting; you are come now from murders, and thefts, and adulteries, and blasphemies, from provoking men to all these wickedness. Like that question, Jonah 4:4 was a chiding of Jonah: **“Doest thou well to be angry?”** So, **“Whence comest thou?”** Like many times when you are angry with your children, you ask, *where have you been?* There is a reprehension in the question. So, God full of wrath toward Satan, says (in effect), *Whence comest thou? Thou hast been doing all the mischief thou canst abroad in the world, I am sure.*

Lastly, *for the better conceiving of the matter of this question proposed, “Whence comest thou?”* There is more to be understood than is expressed. For God does not only inquire here concerning the *places* where he had been, but concerning the *business* and the work which he had done, all is included in it. **“Whence comest thou?”** What has thou been doing in the world? What has thy business been abroad? Every man, every creature, every Angel good or bad, must give an account of themselves to God.

This article is taken from: Caryl, Joseph. *An Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job.* London: G. Miller, 1644. A PDF file of this book can be downloaded, free of charge, at <http://www.ClassicChristianLibrary.com>

New Testament Study: Matthew 26:47-68



Matthew 26:47-56 - Jesus' Arrest

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

⁵⁰Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁵²"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

⁵⁵In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Jesus had just come back to the Apostles from praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He roused Peter, John, and James from their sleep, saying: **"Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is**

delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (vss. 45-46). So Jesus, it appears, was praying right up until the time of His arrest, which occurs in this section: **"While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people"** (vs. 47). At first glance, it would seem that **"a large crowd armed with swords and clubs"** to arrest a man of peace is a bit of overkill. Yet, on the other hand, no matter how large the crowd, it would not be enough to arrest Jesus, with His almighty power, if He did not voluntarily choose to be arrested.

The **"large crowd"** most likely consisted of some Roman soldiers (the ones with **"swords"**, for they were authorized to carry **"swords"**), members of the temple police (security for the Sanhedrin), as well as members of the Sanhedrin (the temple ruling council, consisting of chief priests and elders of the Jerusalem temple) [*Illus. Bible Backgrounds*]. As such, they did have human authority to arrest Jesus.

"Judas" also was among them, leading the arresting crowd to Jesus. Matthew points out that Judas was **"one of the Twelve"**, emphasizing Judas's treachery, in that Judas was a trusted follower of Jesus. "The sad fall of Judas should be a warning to everyone not to indulge a vain reliance in the mere external fellowship of Christ" [Lisco, in Lange, 489].

"Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest Him.' Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed Him" (vss. 48-49). The crowd was there to arrest specifically Jesus, and no one else, so Judas **"arranged a signal"** with them so that they would know who to arrest, given it was night time in a dark garden. By choosing to betray Jesus with a kiss, Judas has forever tainted the pure and beautiful act of the kiss of friendship and made it a symbol of hypocritical betrayal. "All the better instincts of human nature revolt at the treacherous disciple's kiss" [Broadus, 540]. "Ah, lewd losel! Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss? Givest thou thy Lord such

rank poison in such a golden cup? Consignest thou thy treachery with so sweet a symbol of peace and love?" [Trapp, v. V, 272]. "What foul hypocrisy here! Kissing in order to kill! Saluting in order to slay!" [Thomas, 506].

Judas saluted Jesus with **"Greetings, Rabbi!"** (translated "Hail, Master" in the KJV), and then **"kissed him"**. The Greek word for **"kissed"** used here is "to kiss fervently," indicating that "the act of the traitor was almost certainly more demonstrative than the simple kiss of salutation" (Vine's). It's not entirely clear why Judas kissed in that manner. It's as if Judas was purposely emphasizing his own hypocrisy, by calling Jesus Master, and then kissing Him fervently. His act was a subtle mocking of Jesus, thus Judas himself begins the mocking and mistreatment that Jesus will undergo in the day to come. Sadly, the spirit of Judas continues, and will always be present. "There are many that betray Christ with a kiss, and *Hail Master*, who, under pretense of doing Him honor, betray and undermine the interest of His kingdom" [Henry, 230].

"Jesus replied, 'Do what you came for, friend.' Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested Him" (vs. 50). By calling him **"friend"**, Jesus emphasizes Judas's hypocrisy, while also providing us an example of peaceful, non-resistance, and love for one's enemies. "He calls him **'friend'**. If he had called him villain and traitor, Raca, and fool, and child of the devil, He would not have miscalled him; but He teaches us under the greatest provocation to forbear bitterness and evil speaking, and to shew all meekness" [Henry, v. IV, 230]. "In this address to Judas there is no indication of anger or excitement of any kind, but a mere dignified recognition. There is a majesty of calmness about it which must have gone to the heart of the betrayer" [Thomas, 508]. "Christ [calls] the traitor [**'friend'**], as might make him compare his pretense of friendship to his Master, with his intention of bringing soldiers on Him... To compare our profession with our practices, and our pretenses with our intentions, is a means to give us a right sight of ourselves" [Dickson, 318].

"With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (vs. 51). It was Peter who drew the sword (see John 18:10). He was backing up his **"I will die with you"** statement, back when Jesus told the disciples that they would **"all fall away"** (see Matt. 26:31-35). On an impulse, in the heat of battle, Peter was brave, and indeed would have died with Christ, in the heat of a battle with the mob who came to arrest Jesus. But such a battle was not sanctioned by the will of God. Peter needed the bravery at that time to live for Christ in the near future, as he was to help found the Christian Church and spread the gospel of Christ to the world. Peter would eventually die for Christ, but not then, and not there. "Peter had talked much, and more what he would do for his Master, he would lay down his life for Him, yea, that he would; and now he would be as good as his word, and venture his life to rescue his Master; and thus far was commendable, that he had a great zeal for Christ, and His honor and safety; but it was not according to knowledge, or guided by discretion" [Henry, v. IV, 231]. "[Peter] is magnificent and pathetic-magnificent because he rushes in to defend Jesus with characteristic courage and impetuosity, pathetic because his courage evaporates when Jesus undoes Peter's damage, forbids violence, and faces the Passion without resisting" [Carson].

Jesus Himself, the arrestee, diffused the situation, and returned peace to it: **"Put your sword back in its place,' Jesus said to him, 'for all who draw the sword will die by the sword'"** (vs. 52). Jesus de-escalated the situation. This, and His healing of the man who was injured (see Luke 22:51), most likely saved Peter from being arrested, or worse, at that time. "A wonderful work of God it was surely, that hereupon [Peter] was not hewn in an hundred pieces by the barbarous soldiers" [Trapp, 265]. "Peter had really forfeited his life to the sword; but the Lord rectified his wounded position by the correcting word which He spoke, by the miraculous healing of the ear, and by the voluntary surrender of Himself to the authorities" [Lange, 486].

Jesus' command to Peter, **“Put your sword back in its place”**, is also Jesus' marching orders for all Christians. It was Peter's impulsive idea to begin the Kingdom as a conquering warrior, but this was not the way Christ wanted to advance His kingdom. Violence in defense of Jesus, or the Christian religion, is not in keeping with the teachings of humility and peace of Jesus, and contrary to faith that Jesus has the power to subdue anyone, if He chooses. Later, when the Apostles were freed from jail, it was not through an armed resistance of other Apostles, but through the power of God. To draw a sword is never a *modus operandi* for the advancement of the Christian Church. Crusades to force people into the Christian religion are never sanctioned by God. Yes, we can defend ourselves from attackers, as part of our human defense mechanism. But we are never to go on the offensive in a physical battle, in the name of Christ. Instead, we are to **“overcome evil with good”** (Rom. 12:21). The Crusades were not sanctioned by God as a way to advance the Christian religion, nor was the Inquisition, and certainly not the Holocaust. All these were contrary to the precepts of Christ, and they all did nothing but harm the Christian religion.

“Christ's errand into the world was to make peace. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual; and Christ's ministers, though they are His soldiers, yet do not war after the flesh, (see 2 Cor. 10:3-4). Not that the law of Christ overthrows either the law of nature, or the laws of nations, as far as those warrant subjects to stand up in defense of their civil rights and liberties, and their religion, when it is incorporated with them; but it provides for the preservation of public peace and order, by forbidding private persons to resist the powers that be; nay, we have a general precept, that we resist not evil (see Matt. 5:39); nor will Christ have His ministers propagate His religion by force and arms. ‘*Religio cogi non potest & defendenda non occidendo sed moriendo*’ (‘Religion cannot be secured and defended by killing, but by dying’ – Lactantius). As Christ forbade His disciples the sword of justice (Matt. 20:25-26), so here the sword of war” [Henry, v. IV, 231].

“Christians [must] not use the sword for the defense or for the propagation of the gospel. Sometimes mistaken zeal, sometimes more unholy motives, have led to persecutions and to so-called religious wars. The Lord distinctly condemns the use of force; He Himself refrained from the exercise of His power, He was King of kings and Lord of lords; He could have subjugated all the kingdoms of the world at once, by one act of omnipotence; He might have had around Him now, not eleven disciples, but more than twelve legions of angels. But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled? The salvation of man was to be brought about, not by force, not by a display of power, but by holy teaching, by holy example, by suffering, by self-sacrifice, by the cross. The forces to be employed were not physical, but moral and spiritual. Christ would not terrify men into obedience. What He seeks is not the forced service of slaves, but the willing obedience of love. And love cannot be forced; it can be gained only by love. It is the love of Christ manifested in His incarnation, in His holy life, in His precious death, which constrains His faithful followers to live no longer unto themselves, but unto him who died for them, and rose again” [*Pulpit Comm.*, 546].

“Old Testament martyrdom had in it some affinity with the self-sacrifice of a hero in battle: they hoped for the speedy triumph of the theocracy. The New Testament martyr must, in the patience of the saints (Rev. 13:10; 14:12), tarry for the manifestation of victory until the last day. For this the disciples were not ripe: they had not the joyful testimony of victory within their own spirits. This New Testament martyrdom could flourish only after the blood of Christ was shed” [Lange, 488].

Jesus speaks of His control of the situation: **“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”** (vss. 53-54). If Jesus had called for the legions of angels, one for each of the Apostles and one for Himself, they would have come. Jesus was not being

forced into sacrificing Himself. He, in His great love, chose to be. At any point, He could have aborted His mission, but thank God He didn't. Jesus ever continued to do the will of the Father, thus **“the Scriptures [were] fulfilled.”**

“In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, ‘Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples deserted him and fled” (vss. 55-56). “The implication is that there is no need to arrest Him secretly and violently, except for reasons in their own minds that reveal more about them than about Him” [Carson]. By arresting Jesus in secret, rather than when He was teaching in the temple courts, the Sanhedrin was purposely avoiding the defense of Jesus by a sympathetic crowd. They acted furtively at night, so they could try Jesus furtively, without the sympathetic hearers of Jesus’ teachings there to witness the trial. The goal of the Sanhedrin was to arrest Jesus in such a way that He would be alone, and they achieved this. Realizing that Jesus would be led away, the courage of the Apostles flagged, and they fled, as prophesied by both Zechariah hundreds of years before (see Zech. 13:7), and Jesus earlier in the evening (see Matt. 26:31). Jesus was to suffer alone.

“It would have been to the eternal honor of any one of the disciples to have kept close to Christ right up to the last; but neither the loving John nor the boastful Peter stood the test of that solemn time” [Spurgeon, 469]. “This was their sin; and it was a great sin for them who had left all to follow Him, now to leave Him for they know not what. There was unkindness in it, considering the relation they stand in to Him, the favors they had received from Him, and the melancholy circumstances He was now in. There was unfaithfulness in it, for they had solemnly promised to stick to Him, and never to forsake Him... What folly was this, for fear of death, to flee from Him, whom they themselves knew, and had acknowl-

edged, to be the fountain of life? (see John 6:67-68)” [Henry, v. IV, 232].

Matthew 26:57-68 - Jesus Before the Sanhedrin

⁵⁷Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. ⁵⁸But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

⁵⁹The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Finally two came forward ⁶¹and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”

⁶²Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶³But Jesus remained silent.

The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

⁶⁴“You have said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶What do you think?”

“He is worthy of death,” they answered.

⁶⁷Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸and said, “Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?”

There were three different jurisdictions under which Jesus' case fell: the Sanhedrin's (the governing body for the Jews, consisting of the chief priests and other Jewish leaders), Pilate's (representing the Roman government), and King Herod's (the Jewish leader over Galilee, Jesus' home town, who was sanctioned by Rome to lead that district). Jesus faced hearings and trials before all of these. The hearing before Herod is not recounted in the book of Matthew (it is recounted in Luke 23:6-12). The result of that hearing was just that Jesus was returned to Pilate (see Luke 23:11).

The first hearing was before Annas, a well-respected, former high priest. This also is not recounted in the book of Matthew, but can be found in John 18:12-24. Matthew's accounts of Jesus' hearings and trials begins with the hearing before Caiaphas, and other members of the Sanhedrin, the night Jesus was arrested: **"Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled"** (vs. 57). Though it was late in the evening, they **"had assembled"**, waiting for Jesus to be brought before them. This is how anxious they were to see Jesus die.

Though all the Apostles initially fled during the arrest of Jesus, Peter stayed close enough to witness the event of that night: **"But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome"** (vs. 58). "Peter followed Jesus **'at a distance,'** midway between courage (v. 51) and cowardice (v. 70)" [Bengel, in Carson]. "He followed Him, but it was afar off: Some sparks of love and concern for his Master there were in his breast, and therefore he followed Him; but fear and concern for his own safety prevailed, and therefore he followed afar off. Note, it looks ill, and bodes worse, when those that are willing to be Christ's disciples, yet are not willing to be known to be so. Here began Peter's denying Him; for to follow Him afar off is by little and little to go back from Him... He should have gone up to the court, and attended on his Master, and appeared for Him; but he

went in where there was a good fire, and sat with the servants, not to silence their reproaches, but to screen himself" [Henry, v. IV, 233].

The hearing before the Sanhedrin was not an honest, unbiased search for true justice; rather, it was a mock-trial where the desired outcome (death for Jesus) was predetermined: **"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put Him to death"** (vs. 59). This mock-trial violated the spirit and the letter of the law of God, as laid out in the Holy Scriptures that the Sanhedrin claimed to venerate (see Ex. 23:7; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:18-20; et. al.).

As stated, the desired result was **"to put [Jesus] to death"**. However, the Sanhedrin did not have the governmental authority to put people to death for capital crimes. Only the Roman court could do that (see John 18:31). But the Romans would not put Jesus to death for blasphemy under the Jewish religion. That was not a crime against Rome. They would put Jesus to death if sedition against Rome was involved (such as Jesus trying to set Himself up as King), but Jesus never did that. So, this was the **"false evidence"** that the Sanhedrin was looking for: false evidence that Jesus was trying to undermine the Roman authority. Note that earlier, the Pharisees tried to get Jesus to say incriminating things against the Roman authority in the famous **"render unto Caesar"** passage (see Matt. 22:15-22).

In getting such **"false evidence"**, the Sanhedrin was not very successful: **"But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.' Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent"** (vss. 60-63). From witnesses, a threat to **"destroy the temple of God"** was the best the Sanhedrin could come up with.

Jesus did say something like this. After Jesus cleared the temple courts of marketeers and money changers (John 2:14), some Jews responded to this by asking Jesus: **“What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this”** (John 2:18). Jesus answered: **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”** (John 2:19). Jesus was speaking metaphorically, and with deep theological teaching. John tells us that Jesus was speaking of the **“temple”** of His own body—the ultimate meeting place between God and man. And so, raising the **“temple”** in three days refers to Jesus’ resurrection. But the Sanhedrin understood none of this, and tried to use these words against Jesus, saying they were a blasphemous threat to the Jewish religion. **“In Christ, His greatest enemies could find no fault, but were forced to make that a fault which was none, to wit, His foretelling of His own death and resurrection, which was the matter of His glory and our comfort”** [Dickson, 321].

Jesus Himself did not dignify them with an answer; He **“remained silent.”** What can one say to a kangaroo court, determined to find guilt where there was none? Then also, Jesus **“remained silent”** because He was bearing the guilt of our sins. He allowed the mock-trial to continue, because He was on trial for our sins, and determined to pay the price for all the sins of mankind. **“Our Lord could have answered for Himself, but because He stood in our [stead], He answered nothing, and was content to be condemned for our faults, though He was free of all sin in Himself”** [Dickson, 321].

“The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God’” (vs. 63). Since most of the Jews at that time equated the Messiah with a militant, political leader, who would overthrow the secular government rulers, the high priest’s question was designed to elicit a response from Jesus that would be treasonous to the Romans.

Jesus responds this time, being charged **“under oath”** to respond: **“‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied, ‘But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man**

sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (vs. 64). Jesus’ response, I think, is subtly non-offensive to the Romans, yet at the same time, offensive to the Sanhedrin. Jesus speaks of Himself as a leader in the Heavenly Kingdom, and makes no direct threat against any earthly kingdom. Jesus speaks of Himself being **“at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven”**. These words, for the non-believing Sanhedrin, are blasphemous. They respond: **“Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’ ‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered”** (vss. 65-66). They do not consider, for even one moment, that Jesus might, indeed, be the Christ, the Son of God. They do not think back to the signs and wonders He performed, to the inspired heavenly teaching that He gave, to the marvelous good works He performed for the sick, down-trodden and lame. Instead, with blood-lust, they **“tore their clothes”**, and pronounced Jesus **“worthy of death.”**

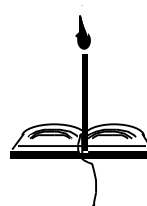
Moreover, after their condemnation of Jesus to death, the spirit of the Evil One inhabits them completely, leading them to perform heinous acts of malevolence and wickedness: **“Then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?’”** (vs. 67). They accuse Jesus of blasphemy, yet here, they perform hideous acts of blasphemy against the true Son of God. But let us all remember, as we read of Christ’s suffering, the part we played in it: it is for our sins that Jesus here is being buffeted, spat upon and mocked. **“Christ was content to be spit upon, to cleanse our faces from the filth of sin, to be buffeted with fists, and beaten with staves, to free us from that mighty hand of God”** [Trapp, 267].

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All of these books, except Carson, Morris, and Wilkins can be downloaded free of charge from:
<http://www.ClassicChristianLibrary.com>



A Topical Study: Prayer

[Matthew Henry is greatly known for his magnificent commentary on the whole Bible. He also wrote a book proposing A Method for Prayer, in between writing volumes of that commentary. This overview of prayer is taken from the preface of that book.]

Prayer: An Overview, by Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

Pray without ceasing (I Thess. 5:17).

Religion is so much the business of our lives, and the worship of God so much the business of our religion, that what has a sincere intention, and probable tendency, to promote and assist the acts of religious worship, I think cannot be unacceptable to any that heartily wish well to the interest of God's kingdom among men. For if we have spiritual senses exercised, true devotion, that aspiring flame of pious affection to God, as far as in a judgment of charity we discern it in others (though in different shapes and dresses, which may seem uncouth to one another) cannot but appear beautiful and amiable, and, as far as we feel it in our own breasts, cannot but be found very pleasant and comfortable.

Prayer is a principle branch of religious worship, which we are moved to by the very light of nature, and obliged to by some of its fundamental laws. Pythagoras's golden verses begin with this precept: *Whatever men made a god of, they prayed to. "Deliver me, for thou art my God,"* (Isa. 44:17). Nay, *Deos qui rogat ille facit* — whatever men prayed to, they made a god of. It is a piece of respect and homage so exactly consonant to the natural ideas which all men have of God, that it is certain, those that live without prayer, live without God in the world.

Prayer is *the solemn and religious offering up of devout acknowledg-*

ments and desires to God, or a sincere representation of holy affections, with a design to give unto God the glory due unto His Name thereby, and to obtain from Him promised favors, and both through the Mediator. Our English word *prayer* is too strait, for that properly signifies *petition* or *request*; whereas humble adorations of God, and thanksgivings to Him, are as necessary in prayer as any other part of it. The Greek word *prosenuche*, from *euche*, is a vow directed to God. The Latin word *votum* is used for prayer. Jonah's mariners, with their sacrifices, made vows, for prayer is to move or oblige ourselves, not to move or oblige God. Clemens Alexandrinus (in *Strom.* 7. p. 722. *Edit. Colon*) calls prayer (with an excuse for the boldness of the expression) *Homilia pros ton Theon*—it is conversing with God; and it is the scope of a long discourse of his there to show that his Believer lives a life of communion with God, and so is praying always. He studies by his prayers continually to converse with God. Some, saith he, had their stated hours of prayer, but he prays all his life long. The scripture describes prayer to be our drawing near to God, lifting up our souls to Him, pouring out our hearts before Him.

This is the life and soul of prayer; but this soul, in the present state, must have a body; and that body must be such as becomes the soul, and is suited and adapted to it. Some words there must be, of the mind at least, in which, as in the smoke, this incense must ascend; not that God may understand us, for our thoughts afar off are known to him, but that we may the better understand ourselves.

A golden thread of heart prayer must run through the web of the whole Christian life; we must be frequently addressing ourselves to God in short and sudden ejaculations, by which we must keep up our communion with Him in providences and common actions, as well as in ordinances and religious services. Thus prayer must be *sparsim* (a sprinkling of it) in every duty, and our eyes must be ever towards the Lord.

In mental prayer, thoughts are words, and they are the first-born of the soul, which are to be consecrated to God.

But if, when we pray alone, we see cause, for the better fixing of our minds and exciting of our devotions, to clothe our conceptions with words—if the conceptions be the genuine products of the new nature,—one would think words should not be far to seek, provided that words can be found. Nay, if the groanings be such as cannot be uttered, **“He that searcheth the heart, knows them to be the mind of the Spirit, and will accept of them,”** (Rom. 8:26-27), **“and answer the voice of our breathing,”** (Lam. 3:56). Yet through the infirmity of the flesh, and the aptness of our hearts to wander and trifle, it is often necessary that words should go first, and be kept in mind for the directing and exciting of devout actions.

When we join with others in prayer, who are our mouths to God, our minds must attend them, by an intelligent believing concurrence with that which is the sense and scope, and substance, of what they say, and affections working in us suitable thereunto: and toward this, the scripture directs us to signify, by saying **“Amen”**, mentally, if not vocally, at their giving of thanks (see 1 Cor. 14:16). And as far as our joining with them will permit, we may intermix pious ejaculations of our own with their addresses, provided they be pertinent, in order that not the least fragment of praying time may be lost.

But he that is the mouth of others in prayer, whether in public or private, and therein uses that freedom of speech, that holy liberty of prayer which is allowed us (and which we are sure many good Christians have found by experience to be very comfortable and advantageous in this duty), ought not only to consult the workings of his own heart (though them principally, as putting most life and spirit into the performance), but the edification also of those that join with him: and both in matter and words should have an eye to that.

It is desirable that our prayers should be copious and full; our burdens, cares, and wants are many; so are our sins and mercies. The promises are numerous and very rich. Our God gives liberally, and has bid us open our mouths wide, and He will fill them, will satisfy them with good things. We are not straitened in Him, why then should we be stinted and strait-

ened in our own bosoms? Christ had taught His disciples the Lord's prayer, and yet tells them in John 16:24 that hitherto they had asked nothing, i.e., nothing in comparison with what they should ask when the Spirit should be poured out to abide with the church forever. Then **“ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full”** (John 16:24). We are encouraged to be particular in prayer, and in everything to make our requests known to God, as we ought also to be particular in the adoration of the divine perfections, in the confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgments of God's mercies.

But since, at the same time, we cannot go over the tenth part of the particulars which are fit to be the matter of prayer without making the duty burdensome to the flesh, which is weak, even where the spirit is willing (an extreme which ought carefully to be avoided), and without danger of entrenching upon other religious exercises, it will be requisite that what is but briefly touched upon at one time, should be enlarged upon at another time. And herein this store-house of materials for prayer may be of use to put us in remembrance of our several errands at the throne of grace, that none may be quite forgotten.

And it is requisite, to the decent performance of the duty, that some proper method be observed. That which is said should not only be good, but said in its proper place and time, that we offer nothing to the glorious Majesty of heaven and earth which is confused, impertinent, and indigested. Care must be taken, then more than ever, that we be not rash with our mouth, nor hasty to utter anything before God; that we say not what comes uppermost, nor use such repetitions as evidence of not the fervency, but of the barrenness and slightness of our spirits; but that the matters we are dealing with God about, being of such vast importance, we observe a decorum in our words, that they be well chosen, well weighed, and well placed.

And as it is good to be methodical in prayer, so it is to be meaningful. The Lord's prayer is remarkably so; and David's

Psalms, and many of St. Paul's prayers, which we have in his epistles. We must consider, that the greatest part of those that join with us in prayer will be in danger of losing or mistaking the sense, if the periods be long, and the parenthesis many; and in this, as in other things, they that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak: Jacob must lead as the children and flock can follow.

Although the examples of prayer given in the Bible are great examples to follow, yet I am far from thinking we should always tie ourselves to them. Our prayers may be varied, as well as the expression. Thanksgiving may very aptly be put sometimes before confession or petitions, or our intercessions for others before our petitions for ourselves, as in the Lord's prayer. Sometimes one of these parts of prayer may be enlarged upon much more than another; or they may be decently interwoven in some other method.

There are those, I doubt not, who, at some times, have their hearts so wonderfully elevated and enlarged in prayer: such a fixedness and fullness of thought; such a fervor of pious and devout affections, the product of which is such a fluency and variety of pertinent and moving expressions. If the heart be full of its good matter, it may make the tongue as the pen of a ready writer. But this is a case that rarely happens, and ordinarily there is need of proposing to ourselves a certain method to go by in prayer, that the service may be performed decently and in order; in which yet one would avoid that which looks too formal. At these times, it is wise to follow the patterns given in the Bible for prayer.

But, regardless of the form of prayer, the intention and close application of the mind, the lively exercises of Faith and Love, and the outgoings of holy desire towards God, are so essentially necessary to Prayer, that without these in sincerity, the best and most proper language is but a lifeless image. If we had the tongue of men and angels, and have not the heart of humble serious Christians in Prayer, we are but as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. It is only the effectual fervent prayer, the inwrought inlaid prayer that avails much. Thus

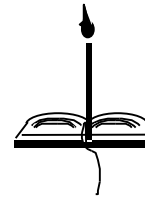
therefore we ought to approve ourselves to God in the integrity of our hearts, whether we pray by, or without a pre-composed form.

This article is taken from: Henry, Matthew. *A Method for Prayer*. Glasgow: D. Mackenzie, 1834. (Originally published in 1710). A PDF file of this book can be downloaded, free of charge, at: <http://www.ClassicChristianLibrary.com>

Prayer from the Heart

“God looks not at the elegance of your prayers, to see how neat they are; nor yet at the geometry of your prayers, to see how long they are; nor yet at the arithmetic of your prayers, to see how many they are; nor yet at the music of your prayers, nor yet at the sweetness of your voice, nor yet at the logic of your prayers; but at the sincerity of your prayers, how hearty they are. There is no prayer acknowledged, approved, accepted, recorded, or rewarded by God, but that wherein the heart is sincerely and wholly.”

-- Thomas Brooks (1608-1680)



A Study in Wisdom: Psalm 73

Psalm 73:1-14 - A Stumbling Point

A psalm of Asaph.

- ¹Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
- ²But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
- ³For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- ⁴They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
- ⁵They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.
- ⁶Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
- ⁷From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
their evil imaginations have no limits.
- ⁸They scoff, and speak with malice;
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
- ⁹Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
- ¹⁰Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.
- ¹¹They say, “How would God know?
Does the Most High know anything?”
- ¹²This is what the wicked are like —
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

**¹³Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
and have washed my hands in innocence.**

**¹⁴All day long I have been afflicted,
and every morning brings new punishments.**

This psalm deals with a crisis of faith. The Psalmist puzzles as to why he struggles to live a godly life, while the wicked seem to live prosperous and trouble-free lives. This is a not uncommon complaint, made by the godly and ungodly alike. “This is a Psalm that instructs us against that great offence and stumbling-block concerning which all the prophets have complained: namely, that the wicked flourish in the world, enjoy prosperity, and increase in abundance, while the godly suffer cold and hunger, and are afflicted, and spit upon, and despised, and condemned; and that God seems to be against His friends and to neglect them, and to regard, support and give success to His enemies. This offence has existed, and has exercised and vexed the godly from the very beginning of the church” [Luther, in Plumer, 709].

The psalm is **“A psalm of Asaph”**. Asaph was a Levite (1 Chr. 6:39-43), who was appointed by David to be the chief musician, in charge of leading in the worship of God (1 Chr. 16:5-11). This psalm, and the next ten psalms, are attributed to Asaph, as well as Psalm 50.

The Psalmist begins with a statement of faith, in which he always believed: **“Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”** (vs. 1). He follows this statement of faith with the thoughts that almost made him stumble: **“But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked”** (vss. 2-3). So the Psalmist sees and understands the goodness of God to His people, including God’s goodness to the Psalmist himself. The Psalmist errs, I believe, in focusing on God’s dealings with *others*, and finding fault with God’s patience with the wicked. It seemed to the Psalmist that God was treating the wicked better than the godly, and this sparked **“envy”**: **“For I envied the ar-**

rogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (vs. 3). Yes, so the Psalmist said, **“God is good to Israel”**, but that was not enough. The Psalmist wanted God to be wrathful against the wicked.

It is a common problem, and a common stumbling block, for believers to be overly concerned with God’s dealings with others. We need to be eminently concerned with how God deals with us ourselves; but we should let God be God, and deal with others as God sees fit. By faulting God’s dealings with others, we are, in effect, saying that we ourselves would be better at being God, than God Himself. Perish the thought!

Nonetheless, have we not all stumbled in this way? Have we not all found ourselves envying the goods and prosperity of an ungodly man? To do so is to get all twisted up about what actually is good in this life. “To envy the wicked because they prosper is to make more account of the good things of this life than of God’s favour—to prefer physical good to moral” [*Pulpit Comm.*, 70]. “If we consider with ourselves how unlikely a thing it is to grow big with riches, and withal to enter through the eye of a needle; how unusual a thing it is to be emparadised in this life and yet enthroned in that to come; it will afford us a matter of comfort if we are piously improsperous, as well as of terror if we are prosperously impious” [William Crouch, in Spurgeon, v. III, 257].

By the way, an evidence of the veracity of the Bible is that it shows us not only the strengths of its heroes, but also their weaknesses. We see Noah the drunkard, David the murderer, Solomon the glutton and idolater, etc. Here, we have Asaph, the worship leader of God’s people, chosen by David himself, having a crisis of faith. “Even good men, though gifted and inspired, are in danger of sad lapses into sin and sinful errors” [Plumer, 716]. “The faith of even strong believers may sometimes be sorely shaken, and ready to fail them. There are storms that will try the firmest anchors. Those that shall never be quite undone, are sometimes very near it” [Henry].

The Psalmist goes on to enumerate the advantages of the wicked, as he sees it: **“They have no struggles; their bodies**

are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills” (vss. 4-5). I think here that the Psalmist is overstating the case. To say that the prosperous wicked **“have no struggles... [and] are free from common human burdens... [and] not plagued by human wills”** is to paint with rose-colored glasses the situation of the wicked on this earth. Perhaps the envy of the Psalmist was blinding him, so that he was not seeing the troubles that the wicked face in their sinful prosperity. We see a nice car, parked in front of a shining mansion, and we assume all is well within the mansion. We choose not to see the spiritual darkness, the drunkenness, the drug abuse, the profligacy of offspring, and all the other problems that are rife in the lives of the prosperous wicked. “Sanctified affliction is a blessing; unsanctified prosperity, a curse.” [Plumer 717].

The lack of trouble experienced by the wicked in verses 4 and 5 leads to the proud displaying of their evil in the next verses: **“Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth”** (vss. 6-9).

And then, the proud displaying of the evil in verses 6 through 9, draws others into the sphere of arrogant wickedness, and open defiance of God: **“Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, ‘How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?’”** (vss. 10-11). God’s patience and forbearance with the sins of man often has opposite the intended effect. God delays punishing sin to give men an opportunity to repent and turn to Him. But instead of repenting, the wicked use God’s forbearance as proof that God does not see their evil, as here: **“They say, ‘How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?’”** (vs. 11). Paul alludes to this behavior: **“Or do you show contempt for the riches**

of [God’s] kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). “So far were they from desiring the knowledge of God, who gave them all the good things they had, and would have taught them to use them well, that they were not willing to believe God had any knowledge of them, that He took any notice of their wickedness, or would ever call them to an account.” [Henry].

The Psalmist sums it all up: **“This is what the wicked are like – always free of care, they go on amassing wealth”** (vs. 12). And this leads to doubt as to how the Psalmist is living his life: **“Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence”** (vs. 13). Apparently, adding to the aggravation of the Psalmist is that he is going through times of trouble himself: **“All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments”** (vs. 14). “The state of the Psalmist’s mind was this: If these foolish, wicked, ungodly men are allowed to enjoy such quiet and prosperity under the government of God for a long time, what am I to think of the laws of providence? As yet, my own abhorrence of wickedness and freedom from iniquity appear to produce no advantage, but, on the contrary, unhappy results” [Plumer, 712].

Psalm 73:15-28 - A Turning Point

- ¹⁵If I had spoken out like that,
I would have betrayed your children.
- ¹⁶When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
- ¹⁷till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.
- ¹⁸Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.

¹⁹How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!

²⁰They are like a dream when one awakes;
when you arise, Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies.

²¹When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,

²²I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.

²³Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.

²⁴You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.

²⁷Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

²⁸But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

To his credit, the Psalmist did not openly proclaim the frustrations and doubts he had concerning God's dealings with the wicked: **"If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children"** (vs. 15). The Psalmist did not draw others into the same stumbling path that he was walking. "Here a voice within urges him to shrink from openly recommending ungodliness. It is sad to indulge in such hard thoughts of God's goodness and justice at all; but to *preach* or *recount them publicly* (as the Hebrew for *speak* means) would be utter treachery to the people and the cause of God" [JFB]. "Note, we must think twice before we speak once; both because some

things may be thought, which yet may not be spoken, and because the second thoughts may correct the mistakes of the first" [Henry].

And also to the Psalmist's credit, he worked hard to understand the reasons and the ways of God's dealing with the righteous and the wicked: **"When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply"** (vss. 16). The Psalmist, rather than letting first impressions rule his attitude, sought out the solution to his dilemma. He deeply desired **"to understand"** God's workings in the world, yet found he was still **"troubled deeply"**. We don't naturally have all the answers. God's workings in this world will at time puzzle us, even **"trouble"** us. When they do, we must continue to seek **"to understand all this"**. It is a teachable moment. "In all conditions in life there is much in nature and in providence above our comprehension" [Plumer, 717].

The turning point in the attitude of the Psalmist came when he stopped trying to solve the issue through mere human understanding, but sought out illumination from God in the matter: **"It troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny"** (vs. 16-17). "Whoever, in applying himself to the examination of God's judgments, expects to become acquainted with them by his natural understanding, will be disappointed, and will find that he is engaged in a task at once painful and profitless; and, therefore, it is indispensably necessary to rise higher, and to seek illumination from heaven." [Calvin, in Plumer, 713]. "When but half a story is told, or half a drama enacted, it is very unfair to pronounce on the character of the whole." [Plumer, 716]. "There are many great things, and things needful to be known, which will not be known otherwise than by going into the sanctuary of God, by the word and prayer. The sanctuary therefore must be the resort of a tempted soul" [Henry].

For the Israelites, the **"sanctuary"** was "the appointed place of meeting between God and His people: then God manifested His glory and goodness to His people" [JFB]. In the **"sanctuary"**, the Psalmist surely met with others who

themselves were seeking God and the wisdom of God. He read the word of God, allowing the Spirit of God speak to Him through the word of God. He sought out God's enlightenment through His Spirit in prayer, and through the hearing of sermons, or the discussions with other godly people who were in the "sanctuary".

Through any and all of these things, the Psalmist's problem was solved when he "**understood their final destiny**" (vs. 17). This settled the matter. "The Bible brings this life and the next, time and eternity, human conduct and the last judgment, the sinner's career and the sinner's end into view at once. This makes a vast difference. Indeed it affords a perfect clearing up of doubt, and quite removes perplexity on this hard point of providence. In God's house he learned that the lot of the wicked was not desirable" [Plumer, 713].

Through this realization, the Psalmist, when looking again at the lot of the wicked, saw things in a completely different light: "**Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies**" (vss. 18-20). "The prosperity of the wicked is short and uncertain; the high places in which Providence sets them, are slippery places" [Henry]. "Whatsoever may seem to the wicked themselves, or to the world, or to the godly who look upon the wicked, how little appearance soever there be of their fall; yet it is decreed it shall be" [Dickson, 159].

The prosperity and comfort of the wicked are as tenuous as any prosperity and comfort found in a "**dream**". A "**dream**" is short-lived, and the dreamer is soon faced with reality. "What their prosperity now is, it is but an image, a vain show, a fashion of the world that passes away; it is not real, but imaginary, and it is only a corrupt imagination that makes it a happiness; it is not substance, but a mere shadow; it is not what it seems to be, nor will it prove what we promise ourselves from it; it is as a dream, which may please us a little while we are asleep, yet even then it

disturbs our repose; but how pleasing soever it is, it is all but a cheat, all false. When we awake, we find it so" [Henry].

The Psalmist looks back at himself as he was before he was enlightened, and regrets his folly: "**When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you**" (vss. 21-22). It's amazing how a little spiritual insight will bring a total change of attitude. Here the Psalmist thinks himself a "**senseless**" and "**ignorant**" brute for his previous, somewhat reasonable, doubts. The Psalmist was tested and tried by his temptation to doubt God, and through it, he learned about himself, and the weaknesses of his own intellect when without help from the Spirit of God.

He emerged from this trial more strongly dependent upon God: "**Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever**" (vss. 23-26). "He who, but a little while ago, seemed to question the providence of God over the affairs of men, now exults in happy confidence of the divine mercy and favour towards himself, nothing doubting but that grace would ever continue to guide him upon earth till glory should crown him in heaven. Such are the blessed effects of '**going into the sanctuary,**' and consulting the '**lively oracles**' in all our doubts, difficulties, and temptations" [Horne, 259]. Know this, dear reader, God will reward honest, and diligent fact-finding about His ways.

The Psalmist is once again confident in God's righteous justice: "**Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds**" (vss. 27-28).

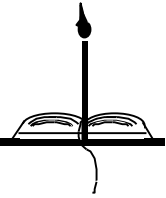
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A Meditation: The Spiritual Chemist



Upon the Bucket and the Wheel, by William Spurstowe (1666)

The saying of Democritus, which he spoke concerning *Philosophical* truth, that it did hide itself, and rake up its abode in a dark and deep well, may much more be affirmed of *Theological* truth inasmuch as: the whole doctrine of the Gospel is called the *Mystery of Christ*, and *the great Mystery of Godliness*; that there should be three *distinct persons* in one Essence, and two distinct Natures in one Person; that *Virginity* should conceive, *Eternity* be born; *Immortality* die, and *Mortality* rise from death to life. Are not these, and many more of the like intricacy, unparalleled mysteries? May we not then justly say, as the Samaritan woman did to our Savior when He asked water of her, the well is deep, and who can descend into it, or fathom it? And yet such is the pride and arrogance of many men, as that, not contenting themselves with the *simplicity* of believing, many make *reason* the sole standard whereby to measure both the *Principles* and *Conclusions* of Faith, for which it is unapt as the weak eye of a bat to behold the sun when it shines in its full strength; or the bill of a small bird to receive into it the ocean.

These high mysteries are not to be *scanned*, but to be *believed*; the knowledge and certainty of which does not arise from the *evidence* of reason, but from the *revelation* made of them in holy Scriptures: the mouth of God, who is truth itself, and cannot lie, has spoken them, and therefore it cannot be otherwise. But must then *reason* be wholly shut out as a useless thing in the Christian Religion, or must it be confined to the agenda matters of duty and morality, in which it cannot

be denied to be both of necessary and constant use? Surely even the *Credenda*, also the *Doctrines* and points which are properly of *Faith*, do not refuse the sober use of *Reason*, so long as it be employed as a *Handmaid*, and not as a *Mistress*.

I have therefore thought that *Faith* is as the *Bucket*, which can best descend this deep well of mystery, and that *Reason* is as the *Wheel*, which stands over the mouth of it, and keeps always its certain and fixed distance, but yet by its motion is instrumental both to let down the *Bucket*, and also to draw it up again. Faith discovers the deep things of God, and then reason teaches us to submit ourselves and it to the obedience of Faith, that so it is. But it never becomes more foolish and dangerous than when it busies itself in inquiries, and makes Nicodemus ask his question, *How can these things be?* (John 3:9) for then it turns giddy, and loses itself in distracted rounds and motions.

Alas! How unlike would the ways and counsels of God be to Himself, if they were no other but such as the wisest of men could trace out? How little glory would Faith also give to God, if it did not put forth its strength in asserting His power to effect greater things than can fall within the compass of natural disquisition? Yea, how should the Gospel, in its Institutions, Doctrines, and Worship, be acquitted of the Jews stumbling at it as dishonorable to their Law; and the Gentiles deriding of it, as absurd in their *Philosophy*, if that Reason must be the measure of its Mysteries? Nature is so far from finding out what the Gospel discovers, as that it cannot yield to it, when it is revealed, without a spirit of Faith to assist it.

Be wise therefore, O Christians, and set bounds to your Reason, beyond which it may not pass (as Moses did to the Israelites), while Faith descends into the deeps of Gospel Mysteries, which Angels with stretched out necks have more desire to pry into, than ability perfectly to understand.

Now the boundary of Reason is, *confer* and *infer*: to *confer* one Scripture with another; and to *infer* Conclusions, and to

deduce Instructions thence, by a clear logical discourse. But if it go further to gaze, it may justly fear to be smitten of God: and like a bold miner, who digs in too far for his rich vein of ore, meet with a damp which chokes him.

My prayer, therefore, shall be that of the Apostles to Christ: *Lord, increase our faith* (Luke 17:5). For if my faith do not exceed my reason, though advanced to as high a pitch as ever Solomon had, yet might I well be numbered among those to whom St. Peter says *are blind, and cannot see afar off* (2 Pet. 1:9).

This article is taken from: Spurstowe, William. *The Spiritual Chymist: or, Six Decads of Divine Meditations on Several Subjects*. London: Philip Chetwind, 1666. A PDF file of this book can be downloaded, free of charge, at <http://www.ClassicChristianLibrary.com>

The Mystery of God's Creation

“A full comprehension of [the mystery of God] no creature can in this world arise unto. Only, in the contemplation of faith, we may arrive unto such an understanding admiration of it as shall enable us to give glory unto God, and to make use of all the parts of it in practice as we have occasion... There is an harmony, a suitableness of one thing unto another, in all the works of creation. Yet we see that it is not perfectly nor absolutely discoverable unto the wisest and most diligent of men. How far are they from an agreement about the order and motions of the heavenly bodies, of the sympathies and qualities of sundry things here below, in the relation of causality and efficiency between one thing and another! The new discoveries made concerning any of them, do only evidence how far men are from a just and perfect comprehension of them. Yet such a universal harmony there is in all the parts of nature and its operations, that nothing in its proper station and operation is destructively contradictory either to the whole or any part of it, but everything contributes unto the preservation and use of the universe. But although this harmony be not absolutely comprehensible by any, yet do all living creatures, who follow the conduct or instinct of nature, make use of it, and live upon it; and without it neither their being could be preserved, nor their operations continued.”

-- John Owen (1616-1683)

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**The Light of the Spirit
Required to Understand
the Things of God**

“Although there be much light in the Scriptures to guide men's way to God's glory and their own happiness, yet it will all be to small purpose if the eyes of our understanding be darkened and blinded. If you shall surround a man with day-light, except he open his eyes, he cannot see. The Scriptures are a clear sun of life and righteousness; but the blind soul encompassed with that light is nothing the wiser, but thinks the lamp of the Word shines not, because it sees not. It hath its own dungeon within it. Therefore the Spirit of God must open the eyes of the blind, and enlighten the eyes of the understanding, that the soul may see wonderful things in God's law.”

-- *Hugh Binning* (1627-1653)

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