

THE RETURN OF PRAYERS

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The Return of Prayers by Thomas Goodwin

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THOMAS GOODWIN

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I will hear what God the Lord will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints; but let them not turn again to folly.—PSALM LXXXI. 2.

THE CONNEXION OF THE WORDS*

THIS psalm was penned, in the name and for the comfort of the whole church of the Jews, both as a prophecy of and a prayer for their return from the Babylonish captivity, and the flowing in again of that ancient glory, peace, administration of justice, liberty of God's ordinances, plenty, and increase, which formerly they enjoyed, but had now suffered an ebb of seventy years' continuance. And first, he begins with prayer, from the first verse to this we have in hand,

putting the Lord in mind of and urging him with his gracious dealings in former times unto his church: this is not the first time (says he) that the church has been in captivity, and that thou hast restored it (as out of Egypt, &c.) and therefore we hope that thou wilt do so again: "Thou hast been favourable unto thy land." &c. His prayer being finished, and he having spoken, he now stands and listens, as you do when you expect an echo, what echo he should have, what answer would be returned from heaven, whether his prayer had already come; "I will hear what the Lord will speak;" or, as some read it. "I hear what the Lord doth speak;" for sometimes there is a present echo, a speedy answer returned to a man's heart, even before the prayer is half finished, as unto Daniel, Dan. ix. 20, 21. And, in brief: it is this, "The Lord will speak peace unto his people;" this answer he finds written at the bottom of the petition, but with this clause of admonition for

time to come, added, "but let them not return again to folly;" a good use to be made of so gracious an answer.

CHAPTER I.

God's people are diligently to observe the answers to their prayers: the reasons of it.

THESE words being especially spoken in relation to the answer of God returned to the Psalmist's prayer, therefore in that relation I mean principally to handle them.

The observation is this: that when a man has put up prayers to God, he is to rest assured, that God will in mercy answer his prayers; and to listen diligently, and observe how his prayers are answered. "I will hear what God will speak," that is, how he will accomplish them; and withal, he confidently expresses an assurance, that "God will speak peace." Thus does the church, "I will look to the Lord, I will

wait; my God will hear me." Mich. vii. 7, 8. She was sure of gracious audience with him, "my God will hear me;" and she will wait till he answers her, and observe how he does it, "I will look to the Lord;" and verse 9, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, till he plead my cause." So Habakkuk, having made a prayer against the tyranny of Nebuchadnezzar, in the first chapter, having ended it, he begins the second chapter thus, "I will stand upon my watch-tower, and see what he will answer me;" and in the end an answer comes, verse 2. And as he thus waited for a vision (for sometimes their prophecies were in answer to their prayers), so should we for an answer to ours.

I. Because otherwise you take an ordinance of God in your hearts, which is to take God's name (with whom in that ordinance you deal) in vain; for it is a sign you think your prayer not an effectual means to attain the end it is ordained for; and say

secretly in your hearts, as they, "What profit have we, if we pray to him?" Job, xxi. 15. For if we use any means, and expect not the end, it is a sign we think the means not adapted to accomplish that end; whereas, every faithful prayer is ordained of God to be a means to obtain what we desire and pray for, and is not put up in vain, but shall have answer: "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us," 1 John, v. 14, 15. It is true, God heareth an enemy; but to hear with favour, is the hearing there meant, and is so used in our ordinary speech; as we say of a favourite, that he has the king's ear; and if a man be obstinate to a man's counsel, we say, he would not hear, though he give the hearing; so here, to hear, is a word of gracious inclination to do the things required; and thus God's ears are said to be open to their prayers; and so it follows there, that "If he heareth us, whatsoever we ask, we

know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." As soon as we have prayed, we are said to have our petitions; that is, they are then granted, and we may be confident that they are assented unto by God, although, in regard of outward dispensation, the command for accomplishment is not yet come forth; even as a petitioner is said to have his suit, when the word of the king is gone forth that it shall be done, though it passes not the seal, or be not signed until a good while after. And like as when a wicked man sins, as soon as the act is committed, so soon sentence from God goes forth against the sinner, but the execution overtakes him not (it may be) until a good while after, according to Solomon, "Sentence against an evil doer is not presently executed," Eccl. vii. 11. It is presently sentenced, as the words imply, but not executed: so, in like manner, it falls out, when a godly man prays, that as soon as the prayer arrives in heaven, which

is in an instant, so soon is the petition granted (so Daniel, ix. "At the beginning of his prayer, the command came forth," verse 23; though the angel who brought the answer arrived not till towards the end in the evening, verse 21), but the real accomplishment of it may be deferred. So no prayer, in respect of an answer to it, is in vain; but where God has given a heart to speak, he has an ear to hear, and love to return an answer; which not to regard, is to take an ordinance in vain, which is God's name.

II. Not simply God's name, as in an ordinance made known, but also his name, that is, his attributes, are taken in vain; for it is a sign, you think of that God you pray to, that either his ear is heavy, that he cannot hear; or his hand shortened, that he cannot save; or his heart straitened, and his bowels restrained, that he will not. And thus you rob him, and despoil him of one of his most royal titles, whereby he styles