

# The GOSPEL TRUTH

## HOW TO PREVAIL WITH GOD

A Lecture

DELIVERED ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 22, 1850,

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AT THE TABERNACLE, MOORFIELDS.

[Second in a series of three "Lectures on the Conditions of Prevailing Prayer."]

**"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh, It shall be opened."--Matt. vii. 7, 8.**

**"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."--James iv. 3.**

THE subject to which I spoke last evening I shall continue this evening--The Conditions of Prevailing Prayer. I noticed last evening several of these conditions, and announced that this evening I should pursue the subject. I was speaking of Perseverance being made a condition of prevailing with God. Sometimes, however, the circumstances are of such a character that there is no time for perseverance, in any such sense as to protract; if the prayers must necessarily be repeated, the object cannot be attained at all. But often there are very good reasons why the supplicant should be left to wrestle and persevere. God is anxious, by this means, to develop a certain state of mind, sometimes for the petitioner's benefit, sometimes for the benefit of others, or both of these together. Some cases of this kind are recorded in Scripture, where God declined to answer at once, in order that he might develop a certain state of mind in the petitioner for the benefit of others. I shall instance some cases of this kind. I noticed last evening that of Jacob as an example of perseverance in struggling--persisting in supplication, until he prevailed. I noticed, also, the case of Moses, and was about to mention that of Elijah.

Elijah had the express promise of God that he would send rain upon the earth. When he had built an altar, slain the prophets of Baal, if you recollect, he gave himself to prayer, and sent his servant to see if there were any clouds arising. Elijah commenced praying. The servant

went, but saw nothing. Elijah said, "Go again." I suppose he meant to say, "Keep on going until you see the approach of rain, for I must not leave this place till the blessing come." He had a strong desire for rain for the benefit of the people, but there were other reasons. God expressly promised it should come; he was determined its delay in coming should be no stumbling-block. He continued to press his suit, until at length a little cloud about the size of a man's hand was discovered. He did not go and ask God, and then get up and go away, as is customary with many, who think that if God has promised anything, to be once reminded of his promise is sufficient. No, it was not so. The prophet had an urgent spirit--a spirit which would not let him leave the throne of grace. The servant went and came seven times, and the last time he said, "There is a little cloud rising, about the size of a man's hand." Observe the perseverance. Elijah refused to leave his position until rain came.

Again, take the case of Daniel. We have in Daniel (10th chapter) a very affecting instance of perseverance. I will read:--"In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled" (Daniel x. 2, 3). Then came the answer--I will not read the intervening verses, but pass on to the 12th,-- "Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words." Here it appears that a messenger had been sent to answer Daniel, but that he had been withstood by some agency; indeed, an infernal spirit, here called the Prince of Persia--for I think, if we read the connexion, it is manifest that it was an infernal agent--withstood the messenger sent to answer Daniel, until Michael, one of the chief princes, who was, some have supposed, the Messiah himself, came to help him. Daniel pressed his suit for the space of twenty-one days. There was no staying him till he had the answer.

The case of the Syrophenician woman is another striking and affecting instance. This is recorded in the 15th chapter of Matthew. You will recollect the circumstances. The woman was not a Jewess, but her daughter was tormented by an infernal spirit, and she came to Christ to have it cast out. She fell down and worshipped him, and said, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil." Now, the disciples were with the Saviour, who was crowded; she followed and made supplication, and wept along the road after them. They seeing that he took no notice, concluded that he was not going to answer her, and said, "Send her away, for she crieth after us." He replied, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now, as I have said, she was not a Jewess, but a Syro-phoenician; however she was not discouraged, but continued crying. He at length addressed her--"It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs." "Truth, Lord," says she; "I ask no such thing. I am willing to be compared to a dog. I do not resent this, nor do I ask the children's bread; but may not dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table?" What a spirit was this! Christ turned and said, "O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt!" He had developed her faith. The disciples saw the spirit of perseverance and faith, and what confidence she had. With less confidence she might have been at first confounded or discouraged, when he said he was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she was not to be discouraged by that. Notwithstanding this apparent discouragement, she would believe that she could get the blessing, therefore she pressed it still, only increasing in importunity, and would not be discouraged. Then he said, as if to try the temper of the woman--as every one can see what he said was calculated to do,--he said, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs", almost treating her contemptuously; but she never resented it. "If you are going to treat me in this way," she might have said, "I won't speak to you any more. I did not come to seek the children's bread, but might I not have the crumbs which fall from the

master's table?" Now, this is a beautiful instance, not only of perseverance, but of the power and prevalence of this perseverance.

In the 11th chapter of Luke, we have the case of the unjust judge, who neither feared God nor regarded man. There are two parables in Luke which are specially designed by the Saviour to teach the necessity and the power of perseverance, and the prayer is very striking in both these parables. Take the case of the unjust judge. "There was in a certain city a judge, who feared not God, neither regarded man; and there was a widow in that city, and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while, but afterwards said within himself, though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her of her adversary." Now Christ did not intend here to compare God to the unjust judge, but he had to take a strong case, and therefore to give a strong illustration of the truth enforced. He says, perseverance in supplication overcame even the unjust judge. She so persevered that, to avoid her importunity--to avoid being continually troubled by the woman, he would avenge her of her adversary. Christ tells us here what the unjust judge says, who neither feared God nor regarded man; and shall not God, who is not unjust--for this is the idea--"shall not God avenge his own elect, who cry day and night unto him?" Here was a judge who took no interest in the case, who cared not for the woman or her adversary,--who "neither feared God nor regarded man", but who, to avoid her importunity, avenged her of her adversary. Now, if importunity could do this with such an individual, what shall it do with God? whose elect are dear to his heart, who cares for them and their cause, and when they importunately cry day and night unto him, shall he not avenge them? When the unjust judge was overcome by importunity, and with neither interest in the person or the cause, was moved by importunity, shall not God avenge his own elect? Yes, "he shall avenge them, and that speedily."

A curious circumstance occurred since I came to England; a party, whose name I have forgotten, but the circumstance was related to me while I was at Birmingham--A Christian man called to see me to relate a fact about himself. He had heard, from time to time, different things about prevailing prayer. He felt, he said, that it was his duty to state the fact to me, to show me how great was the faithfulness of God. It was of so extraordinary a character, involving such a principle, that I have thought of it almost ever since. "Some time back," said the gentleman, "a neighbour of mine lost his wife. When she was ill and nigh unto death, my wife went to nurse her, and staid with her till she breathed her last. After she returned home, I was satisfied that all was not right. Things kept showing themselves continually. Circumstances occurred to show me that all was not right between that man and my wife. I told her what I feared. She confessed her guilt, and not only so, but avowed her determination to quit me, and to live with him, whatever might come of it. 'What do you say?' exclaimed I. I could not say anything more to her; but I went to God, and cried day and night unto him--O God, wilt thou not avenge me of this mine adversary? For two weeks, I scarcely slept at all, but prayed and wept, sometimes in one position and sometimes in another. But for two weeks I gave God no rest, but prayed continually--O God, wilt thou not avenge me of this mine adversary? At the same time, I let my wife understand, that my arms and heart were open to receive her if she would return, and I would forgive her all the past. I kept myself in that position. I wept before God. I prayed, and I cried unto him to avenge me. At the end of the two weeks, she came back heart-broken, confessing her sin, humbling herself, and doing all that I could wish her to do; and she has since been all that I could wish her to be." What a striking case is this! Instead of at once turning her away, he went to God, and said, "O Lord, thou seest that this man hath torn away my very wife from my bosom! O God, avenge me of this mine adversary." If in any one case more than another, a man would feel a disinclination to make a matter the subject

of prayer, it would be in such a case as this; yet he did, and prevailed in the extraordinary manner I have described.

Let me now present an instance of importunity for others, which is recorded in the 11th chapter of Luke. The Syrophenician prayed for a blessing for herself. Christ gives a parable illustrative of the power of importunity in praying for others. It was a case where an individual went to the house of a friend in the night, and said, "Friend, lend me three loaves;" but he would not do it. He and his children were in bed, and he could not rise to give him what he wanted. The man, however, continued knocking and knocking, resolved to keep knocking all night; so he might as well get up first as last, or make up his mind to be awake all night. So much was he set on providing for the necessities of his friend who called upon him, that he would stand knocking like this; and though the individual would not get up because of his friend, yet because of the constant knocking, in that way, with such importunity, he got up and gave him as many as he pleased. Here, then, is an illustration of the great value of importunity when seeking blessings for our friends--those upon whose salvation we set our hearts. Here was an individual who wanted a blessing for his friend, and who would not suffer his other friend, from whom he could not get this blessing, to rest till he obtained it. The fact is, that cases oftentimes occur in which it appears as if God kept silence, and suffered individuals to importune with the greatest perseverance and solicitude, until a state of mind was developed, which is so striking as to be very edifying to all who see it, and particularly so to the petitioner himself.

Oftentimes, also, a condition of prevailing seems to be a great degree of solicitude, amounting almost to unutterable agony of mind. Blessings very great, which are sought, do not come, until we are so strongly excited in mind, as to be thrown into great agony--to travail in soul before God. Many professors of religion do not understand what this "travail of soul" is. It is spoken of repeatedly in the Bible as a state of mind to which great blessings are promised. The Apostle speaks of "travailing in birth for those to whom he preached at Galatia." He says, "My little children have backslidden." To reclaim them gave him such agony of mind. When the Prophet speaks of seeing a man in a vision, he says, "Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child. Wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?" Have you examined your Bible with marginal references, or a concordance, to see what that book really says on the subject? What is promised to that state of mind which amounts to agony and travail of soul? This is a delicate subject, yet it is so often dwelt upon in the Bible that persons should search not only what the Scriptures say, but be willing just to sympathize with God so deeply, that their souls travail in birth until other souls are born to God. I do not say now, or suppose that in all instances, this spirit is indispensable to prevail. But it often is. On the first establishment of Christianity, it was so common, that the Apostle speaks of it as a thing well known to Christians. He says, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself also maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans viii. 26).

My hearers, do you know what this is? In the great revivals that prevailed in America some years since, some striking instances of the prevalence of prayer occurred, as also in the days of President Edwards, as well as in Scotland. In various parts of Great Britain, too, where revivals prevailed, there was a remarkable spirit of prayer. I have witnessed much of this myself. An aged minister, well known by name to many of you, mentioned this fact to me. He had not at that time been in those revivals much, but two of his daughters had grown up in impenitence. He told me the great exercise of mind he had had previous to their conversion, and when I told him that it was a thing perfectly common to revivals, he felt

surprised that he should have so long overlooked what the Bible says on this subject. The man was so exercised that he could not sleep. So great was the weight upon him that he struggled until he said he told the Lord that "he must die or his daughters must be converted." He felt that his soul was loaded with such an unutterable agony, that he really must die unless that petition was granted. He was literally in travail of soul for them. Often when I have seen Christians in this state--in expressing the state of their minds to me, they have used the very language of Scripture. They have said again and again, "My soul travaileth day and night, I cannot live unless I see the salvation of God." Such persons, when in such a state of mind, are generally not disposed to see company, or to go anywhere, more than they can help. They want to be with God as much as possible. They have deep seasons of sighing unawares--seeking to be alone with God; and could you but hear and see how they wrestle with God, you might, perhaps, feel astonished at the holy boldness and confidence such a soul would manifest in its intercourse with God. You would hear such expressions, and see such a mighty wrestling as you would probably never forget. I have known such things, that where I am a stranger I have been afraid to tell them, lest the people should think them untrue. I have often witnessed things in revivals of religion, of a character so extraordinary--I have often seen answers to prayer bordering so closely upon the miraculous, that I feel afraid to tell them where I am unknown. The fact is, that the answers to prayer which have come under my notice, have been most wonderful, both in America and in this country, to the great astonishment of those who have not understood them.

But, let me say again: that all the hindrances of prevailing prayer, may be summed up in one, which is one of the greatest, if not the greatest of the difficulties--I refer to a want of sympathy with God. How can people hope to prevail with God, unless they sympathise with him? When men really sympathise with him in such a manner as not to stickle at self-denial--when they are imbued with the spirit that led Christ to make the atonement--that led Christ to deny himself, and to do all that he did--to have such a state of mind is a great difficulty. Christ needs his Church to sympathise with him, and while they do not sympathise with him, and are not in a state of mind to deny themselves of even trifling gratifications, for the sake of doing good to the worldly-minded, how can they expect to prevail with God?

This leads me to say again, a state of mind which will not grieve the Spirit of God, but will watch against everything which does grieve the Spirit of God, is indispensable to the true spirit of prayer. No man can prevail with God who does not bridle his tongue. In these days, people talk a great deal too much to pray well. They grieve the Holy Ghost by their much talking, and their bad talking. People speak harshly of their brethren. Now, such a state of mind is not congenial to prayer, and if you wish to prevail with God, you must take care and keep yourselves in the love of God, by praying in the Holy Ghost. In order to prevail with God, Christians must have the spirit of love, and walk therein; they must have a spirit tender for the reputation of Christ, and live in such a state towards sinners, as to be willing to make any sacrifices for them. My dear friends, I should last night have done what I now intend to do,--ask, as I go along, do you fulfill these conditions? Are you living in such a sympathy with God and Christ that you are willing to deny yourselves, and to walk before God in such a manner as to give yourselves up to the great work of saving souls? I don't mean by this, that you should forsake your necessary employments, and go about to do nothing else but talk and pray; but are you in such a state of mind, as not to stickle at self-denial? Are you willing to live, and be used up, body, property, and everything, for the promotion of the glory of God, and the salvation of the world? Or, would you stickle at some trifling gratification? Can a man offer prevailing prayer, who is unwilling to make sacrifices for the

sake of doing more good? Who that has looked at this subject as it is, has not been agonized often, to see the want of sympathy with God? What was the secret of Paul's usefulness? He says, "I speak the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost. That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ--for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." He meant to say, he could forego anything personally--he could make any personal sacrifice, if by so doing he could save his kindred according to the flesh. I know that there has been much speculation upon this passage. I have wondered at this. Paul's language is strong, but I have mentioned the purport of his intentions. He would make any sacrifice so far as his own happiness was concerned. He could give up anything they could name. No doubt he did not intend to say that he was willing to go to hell, but that there was no personal sacrifice he would not make. He was willing to hang on the cross, or to suffer anything, so that the world might be saved. Now, I myself know a man who said this, and finally went so far in his sympathy with Christ, as to say, "O Lord Jesus, not only am I willing to hang upon the cross, but till the end of time, if necessary." Now, this is saying much, but it is only expressing the vehement, the agonising feeling of a man ready to suffer any conceivable thing, if, by so doing, Christ could be honoured, and souls could be saved. Such is the spirit to prevail with God--a spirit willing to enter into his sympathies, a spirit which will not hesitate to make any necessary and personal sacrifice, in order to save the souls of men.

But, let me say again: Prevailing prayer is, after all, rather a state of mind than a particular exercise. By this I mean, that a man to prevail, must live in a prescribed state of mind. Prayer is not the mere going aside and praying, but a perpetual yearning of the mind, an habitual presenting of the mind in a spirit of importunity. This is the true idea of prevailing prayer. You see sometimes in this world's matters, that men have a great burden on their minds about their business. Men get into such a state of mind as this,--they are intensely anxious--they fear bankruptcy. The changes which they expect to come over them, cause such anxiety, that it becomes the burden of their life. They are quite borne down by the continuance of this struggle in their minds. Sometimes men get into such a state of mind as this about religion. They see the Churches are not prospering--that the hand of the Lord is not revealed--that the Church does not understand its whereabouts--that the professors are worldly minded, and not aware of it--that professors of religion are getting into a spirit rather of justifying themselves, than of confessing their sins. They see the difficulty, and betake themselves to God, literally besieging his throne, as Daniel did; even in their dreams they pray; all their waking hours they pray, until they are really borne down. Such is the state of mind in which Christians begin to mourn over the condition of Sion, to take pleasure in her stones, and to favour the dust thereof. You hear them confessing their sins and those of the people, with much weeping--then may you understand that the spirit of grace and supplication is poured out--that this spirit of grace and supplication will prevail, and is always indispensable to prevailing prayer.

Again, clean hands is another necessary condition. The Psalmist. says, "I will wash my hands in innocency; so will I compass thine altar, O Lord!" Now, if this is not the case, you cannot prevail with God; and if a man has wronged his neighbour, whether in character, property, or person, if he has spoken against him in a manner injurious to his character, if he has wronged him in any way, he can expect no good to arise till this be set right. "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come offer thy gift" (Matthew v. 23, 24). Don't offer it, and then say, "Lord, remember I have spoken against such a one. Pray give me a heart to repent of it." No--repent first; before you can prevail, your hands must be clean. You must be reconciled to your brother.

Have you in any way unnecessarily, in any unjustifiable manner injured the feelings, or injured in any respect any of your brothers or neighbours? Go and be reconciled to the brother. Make peace with him, and then come and offer the gifts. When this is not the case, you can never expect to prevail.

But this leads me to say again: the spirit of forgiveness is another condition of prevailing prayer--the spirit of forgiveness, where you have been wronged. Christ says in Matthew vi.,--Except "ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." My dear friends, are you sure your hands are so clean, that when you come to God, you can say, "Lord, thou knowest that I have taken no man's money, goods, or property, without an equivalent. Lord, thou knowest that I have wronged no man--that I have injured no man in character, in property, or in anything whatever." Or if you have done so, can you say, "Thou knowest, O Lord, that I have made restitution--I have not suffered this iniquity to cleave to my hands, and that, O Lord, thou knowest." How is this? Many of you, perhaps, have offered many prayers, but you are not conscious of having prevailed. Perhaps you have prayed a multitude of times without ever really calling up the question whether you are answered or not!

I was conversing in one of the great cities of America, some years since, with a brother, in the presence of a lady richly dressed, with many artificial and other ornaments common to ladies of her class. I sat talking with the brother on the subject of prayer. I talked for some considerable time. At length, the lady began to pay attention to my conversation. I said I believed the Christians of that day did not really expect to be answered when they prayed. I observed she was running it over and over. At length she became so uneasy, that she finally broke out, "She did not believe persons were so bad." "I do, then," said I. I tried to reply to her as mildly as I could. I asked her, "Do you obtain the things you ask for?" "Yes, she did; if she did not, she would not pray." I went on--"Are you a married woman?" "Yes." "Is your husband a Christian?" "No, sir." "Are you the mother of children?" "I am." "Are they converted?" "No, sir." "Is there a revival in the church where you belong?" "No, sir." "Have you had any since your connexion with it?" "We have not." "Then what can you have been praying for? You say you have received what you prayed for. Now, as you have a husband unconverted, children unconverted, no revival in your church, and have not had any since your connexion with it, what can you have been praying for that you have received? Have you prayed for these golden chains and other ornaments? These are among the things that you really have, and perhaps they are what you have been praying for;" and so on. Before we left the room, she burst into deep grief, confessing that she didn't think in reality she ever had prayed! She said she had often gone over certain forms of prayer, but now she felt confident that she had never been heard. In fact, she had prayed without ever asking if she had been heard. She had prayed rather as a task, or a duty. No man ever does his duty by praying in such a manner. It should be done in faith, with a full expectation of receiving what is prayed for, and not as a mere duty. Are you, and am I,--have we, in this sense, clean hands, that we can compass God's altar, and that he can receive us honourably to himself? Have we actually forgiven our enemies? Why, I have known individuals to keep up the forms of religion in the same church, while in such a state of mind, that they would not speak to each other. Abomination! abomination! Why, such persons deserve to be excommunicated, I had almost said, for ever praying, under such circumstances! They pray that God would forgive their trespasses, as they forgive those that trespass against them, and in so doing they tempt God. Persons praying in such a state of mind, that they can really rise above the injuries they have received, and pray to God, heartily, to forgive them, and exercise a forgiving spirit, are in a proper state of mind to pray; if they are not in such a state of mind; how can they expect to prevail? With feelings of ill-will, and a spirit that

cannot speak peacefully of certain individuals--if you feel so towards any one, even wicked men, you are not in a proper state of mind to offer prayer. Angels--the great Archangel Michael,--would not bring a railing accusation even against the devil,--and angels have no right to exercise any other than benevolent feelings, even towards the wickedest of beings. It is impossible to restore individuals to our confidence while they remain wicked. We are not expected to do this, but we are expected to be in such a state of mind, as to have no disposition to retaliate. We are expected to be in such a state of mind as not to wish them evil, but to wish them all good, and pray for them honestly and earnestly--to pray God that he would bless them. We are to do this with all our hearts, as opposed to the spirit that would pray God to curse them. Unless we have this spirit, we have no sympathy with Christ, who, when we were his enemies, so great was his compassion that he hesitated not to die for us. Some of you are harbouring an improper state of mind towards your brethren. Can you go home to-night, and pray God literally to forgive you your trespasses as you have forgiven those that trespassed against you? You have no right to expect God to hear you or to answer you, unless you can honestly say this-- "O Lord, forgive me, as I have forgiven them." No matter how much they have injured you. That is not the question. Persons have not done much who have only treated well those who have treated them well; but no man can prevail with God in such a spirit as that. He must be willing to pour out his heart in honest, earnest supplications for his very enemies. Without this, he does not sympathise with Christ. "Love your enemies," says Christ. "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven, for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth his rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?" To prevail with God, you must "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." Unless you are in this state of mind, you need not expect to prevail with God. Oh! that we could see this spirit prevail--that Christians would really do this-- bless them that curse them, and pray for those that persecute them, and humble themselves before God! The prayer of the man who prays for his enemy, has a mighty power with God. Job's friends greatly abused him, misunderstood, and reviled him--accused him of being a hypocrite. Job prayed for them. God turned his captivity and blessed him with a double portion. While Job prayed that they might be forgiven, God was pleased, and smiled upon them and upon him too.

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