

NEGLECT OF FERVENT PRAYER COMPLAINED OF

A Sermon, Preached November, 21, 1754,

at a Monthly Exercise of Prayer, in the Reverend Mr. Steven's MeetingHouse near Devonshire-Square.

Isa 64:7 And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.

These words are an address of the church and people of God unto the Lord in a prayer, which begins in the latter part of the preceding chapter; in which they first expostulate with him, about his love, grace, and mercy, and the sounding of his bowels towards them, which they feared were restrained; and plead the relation he stood in to them as a father, of which they were assured, however others might be ignorant of it; and put him in mind of being their redeemer, whose name, as such, was from everlasting; they desire to be returned to God and his worship; complain of the violation of the sanctuary by their adversaries, and observe the difference between them and themselves, with respect to their relation to God: which is mentioned as an argument to engage his regard unto them: and in the beginning of this chapter, they most earnestly entreat that God would rend the heavens, and come down, and give some manifest tokens of his presence; they urge, that he had been used to do so in times past, when he did terrible things, and unexpected; they take notice of unseen and unheard of things, that God had prepared for those that wait for him, which the apostle Paul {1Co 2:9} applies to the doctrines of the gospel; and suggest that it had been his wonted manner to meet in a way of love, grace, and mercy, and indulge with communion with himself, at the throne of grace, and in his house and ordinances, such that rejoice, and work righteousness; that rejoice not in a carnal sinful, and hypocritical way, or in their own boastings, all such rejoicing being evil; but in the Lord, in the person of Christ, in his righteousness and salvation, in his grace, and in the hope of glory: and that work righteousness; not a justifying one, no man can work such a righteousness, nor ought any man to work righteousness with such a view; the best way of working righteousness is to lay hold by faith on the righteousness of Christ, and to do works of righteousness in faith, without which it is impossible to please God: or perhaps such persons are designed and described, who rejoice to work righteousness, who do it in a cheerful and joyful manner, from right principles, and with right views; and such the Lord usually takes notice of, and manifests himself unto; even such that remember

him in his ways; in his ways of providence, in his ways of love, grace, and mercy, and in his institutions, ordinances, and appointments; or in the ways of his word and worship; but as for them, the people of God now praying, they own indeed they had sinned, and were deserving of the divine displeasure; behold, thou art wroth, for we have sinned; and yet they despaired not of salvation; for they add, in these is continuance, and we shall be saved; either in these sins there is continuance, which are so displeasing to God; for the words may be rendered, in these we have been of old, or always; we have been old sinners, sinners in Adam, sinners from our first birth; and, more or less, have continued so ever since; and yet we hope for salvation from sin, through the promised Messiah: or in these works of righteousness there is continuance, and in a cheerful performance of them, under the influence of divine grace, saints persevere in faith and holiness, and so are saved: or rather, the meaning is, in these ways of love, grace and mercy of God, in which his people remember him, is continuance: God continues in his love; in that is permanency, perpetuity, and eternity, as the word used signifies: the love of God is from everlasting to everlasting, immutable and invariable, and therefore the sons of Jacob are not consumed, but saved with an everlasting salvation; for that the church did not expect salvation from her own works of righteousness, but only from the free grace and love of God, is clear from what follows; but we are all as an unclean thing or person; like the leper, that was legally polluted, as well as covered with a loathsome disease, and therefore separated from the society of men: by this the church and people of God confess the impurity of their nature; and it may be, have respect to a general corruption in doctrine and manners, which prevailed in those times among the professors of religion: and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; which is to be understood not of the righteousness of hypocrites, which lay in external rites and ceremonies; or of legal and self-righteous persons, consisting of the outward observances of the law; but of works of righteousness done by the best of men, and in the best manner: these are rags, imperfect, and so insufficient to cover their persons, and hide their sins from the sight of God; they are filthy, being attended with sin and imperfection, and need washing in the blood of Christ, and so cannot render men acceptable before God: and we all do fade as a leaf, or fall like leaves in autumn: which might be true of the generality of the professors of that age; but not of such who have the root of the matter in them, who are rooted in the love of God, and engrafted into Christ; therefore their leaf shall not wither, but be ever green; or at least shall not finally and totally fade and fall, though they may have their decays; but this is true only of such who are carnal professors, destitute of the grace of God, who fade away and drop their profession,

especially in a time of tribulation, just as trees drop their leaves in the fall of the year: hence it follows, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away; as a fading falling leaf is carried away by the wind, so formal professors are carried away by their sins into a total defection and apostasy; and this general declension the church goes on to acknowledge and lament in the words first read; and there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee; intimating, that there were but very few that prayed to the Lord, or were concerned about his continuance with them, or return unto them, In the words are acknowledged these two things:

I. That there were none, or but few praying souls among them.

II. That there were as few that observed this, and aroused and bestirred themselves to lay hold on and retain a departing God, or to solicit his return unto them.

1. That there were none, or but few praying souls among God's professing people, in the times referred to: not that there were none at all, not one individual praying person; for this complaint itself is made in prayer to God; so that there were some praying persons, though their number were but few, the instances scarce and rare; as when David says, Help, Lord, for the godly man ceaseth, for the faithful fail from among the children of men: {[Ps 12:1](#)} his meaning is, not that there was not a godly or faithful man living, but that there were but few of this character: likewise, when the apostle Paul observes, that all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's; {[Php 2:21](#)} his sense is, not that there were none that sought the things of Christ, for he himself was one that did, and Timothy was another, of whom he is speaking, and whom he is commending; but that they were but very few that sought the things of Christ, in comparison of others that sought their own things; and in like manner are we to understand the expressions here, not simply and absolutely, but comparatively: and when we consider what an incumbent duty on professors calling on the name of the Lord is; or rather, what a privilege it is to be allowed to do it, the neglect of it here complained of must be a very aggravated sin, as will appear by opening the nature of this duty or privilege; in order to which, it may be proper to consider the object to be called upon, the name of the Lord; what he is to be called upon for, and when; the manner of calling upon him; and the arguments in brief exciting and encouraging thereunto.

1st, The object of invocation or prayer, the name of the Lord; which includes the nature, being, and perfections of God, as well as his titles and character; also the divine persons in the Godhead; and particularly points at the special name in which God is to be called upon.

1. It takes in the nature, being, and perfections of God; the name of the Lord is the Lord himself: as when it is said, the name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe; {[Pr 18:10](#)} that is, the Lord himself is a strong tower of safety to the righteous, that betake themselves to him; and again, {[Ps 20:1](#)} the name of the God of Jacob defend thee; that is, the God of Jacob himself, or he who is so named, protect and defend thee from all evils and enemies. Once more; {[Ps 8:1](#)} O Lord our God, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! that is, what a glorious display is there of thy divine perfections, in the works of creation and providence, throughout the whole world, and especially in those of grace and redemption! and there is something in the name of God, in his nature, and in all his attributes and perfections, which is engaging and encouraging to saints to call upon him: he, whose name is to be called upon, has proclaimed his name, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; {[Ex 34:6](#)} which is very inviting and engaging to souls to make their application to him for grace and mercy. Benhadad's servants having heard that the kings of Israel were merciful kings, proposed to make their addresses in an humble manner to the king of Israel, in favour of the life of their prince; and a very similar argument Joel makes use of, to encourage the Jews in his time to humble themselves before the Lord, and turn to him, since he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; for who knows, says he, if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him. {[Joe 2:13-14](#)} The Lord, whose name is to be called upon, is the Lord God omnipotent; he is able to fulfill all the requests, answer all the expectations, and supply all the wants of his people: the heathens pray to a God that cannot save; {[Isa 45:20](#)} but we pray to one whose hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; {[Isa 59:1](#)} and who indeed is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. {[Eph 3:21](#)} The Lord, on whose name we should call, is the Lord God omniscient; he with whom we have to do in prayer, to whom our speech is directed, {[Heb 4:13](#)} and our addresses made, has all things naked and open to his eyes; he knows our persons, our cases, our wants, and all the desires and breathings of our souls; he knows the meaning of our sighs and groans, even those that are unutterable; whether we pray in public or private, in the house of God, or in our own houses, or in our closets, our Father seeth in secret, and will reward us openly. {[Mt 6:6](#)} The

God we are called upon to pray unto, is the Lord God omnipresent, who is every where, and fills heaven and earth with his presence; he is at hand to hear the petitions of his people, to assist, protect, and defend them; he is a present help in all their times of trouble; this is their great privilege, and in which they excel all other people, that they have God so nigh unto them, as the Lord their God is, in all things that they call upon him for. {[De 4:7](#)} He is also El-shaddai, God all-sufficient, the God of all grace, the author and giver of it; who is able to cause all grace to abound, and whose grace is sufficient at all times, and in all cases. And to these perfections and attributes of God may be added, that the name and title he takes to himself for the encouragement of his people in prayer, is, that he is a God that hears prayer, {[Ps 65:2](#)} and answers it too; he never said, no not at any time, to the seed of Jacob, seek ye my face in vain: {[Isa 65:19](#)} every praying soul can set his seal to the truth of this testimony, that it is always good to draw near to God; {[Ps 73:26](#)} for his eyes are always upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. {[Ps 34:15](#)} To say no more, the Lord that is to be called upon, stands in the relation of a father to his people; and they are taught and instructed to address him in prayer under this character and relation, our Father which art in heaven: {[Mt 6:9](#)} and the Lord loves to have his children come about him, and call him their Father, and not turn away from him; it is with pleasure he hears them cry Abba, Father, in the strength of faith, and under the testimony of the spirit of adoption; and such may assure themselves, that he will graciously hear and answer their requests; for if earthly fathers know how to give good things to their children, how much more shall our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him, {[Lu 11:13](#)} and all other good things they stand in need of. And since then there is such great encouragement from the name, nature, and perfections of God; from the titles, characters, and relations he bears, how heinous must the sin be, to neglect calling upon his name!

2. The Name of the Lord takes in all the divine persons who are to be invoked: as baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Ghost; so the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, is to be called upon in prayer, either separately or together. The name of the Father is to be invoked, and for the most part is called upon; if ye call upon the Father, or seeing ye call upon the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth; {[1Pe 1:17](#)} the apostle Paul says, I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: {[Eph 3:14](#)} The scriptural instances of prayer are generally in this way; the address is commonly made to the first person, and we usually and for the most part, direct our petitions to him; and there is good reason

why they should be directed to him; since the other two Persons sustain an office which he does not, an office with respect to prayer: The Son is the Mediator, by whom we draw nigh to God; and the Spirit, is the Spirit of grace and supplication, who helps and assists in approaches to him; though this is not to be done to the exclusion of either the Son or Spirit, who, in conjunction with the Father or apart, may be called upon or addressed in prayer: the same blessings of grace and peace {[Ro 1:7](#)} are frequently wished from our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as from the Father. Ananias exhorted Saul, when converted, to arise and be baptized, calling on the name of the Lord, {[Ac 22:17](#)} that is, calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and the apostle Paul directs one of his epistles to the Corinthians, and to all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord: {[1Co 1:2](#)} special petitions are sometimes put up to him; particularly Stephen, in his last moments, called upon him, and said, Lord Jesus receive my spirit: {[Ac 7:59](#)} The holy Ghost is also prayed unto: sometimes along with the other two persons, as in [Re 1:4-5](#). and sometimes he is singly invoked, as when the apostle thus prays, the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ; {[2Th 3:5](#)} where the Lord, the Spirit, seems to be designed as distinct from God and Christ.

3. This phrase of calling on, or in the name of the Lord, as it may be rendered, seems particularly to point at the invocation of God, in the name of Christ; and which perhaps is the true meaning of it here, and in that remarkable passage, then began men to call upon, or in the name of the Lord; {[Ge 4:26](#)} not that men did not pray unto God, or call upon him before; but now another seed being raised in the room of Abel, whom Cain slew, and this increasing and multiplying, men either began to meet together in bodies, in communities, to carry on social worship, particularly to perform social prayer; or having now clearer discoveries, and better notions of the promised seed, the Messiah, they began to call upon God in his name; and this was practiced, more or less, by the saints in all succeeding ages; though it seems greatly to have got into disuse in the times of Christ, who exhorted his disciples to pray to the Father in his name; assuring them, that whatsoever they asked in this way, both he and his Father would do it for them; and complains of their neglect of it; hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask, and ye shall receive: ([Joh 14:13-14](#) and [Joh 16:23-24](#)) Christ is the only mediator between God and men; the days-man that lays his hands on both, the only way to the Father, the new and living way by which we have access to God with boldness and confidence; his name is to be used in prayer; our supplications are not to be presented to God for our righteousness-sake, but for his name-sake; we are to make

mention of his righteousness, and of his only, and plead his precious blood and sacrifice, and desire the Lord would look upon the face of his anointed, and regard us for his sake; acceptance of our persons and services is only through him: our righteousness is as filthy rags, and cannot render us acceptable unto God; our acceptance is only in the beloved; our sacrifices of prayer and praise become only acceptable unto God, as they are offered up through Christ, and on him, that altar which sanctifies every gift: and all favours and blessings of grace are conveyed through him to his people; the first grace in conversion is shed in the hearts of men abundantly through Christ their Saviour, and all after-supplies of grace are out of his fulness; and therefore, seeing we have such a mediator, advocate, and interceding high priest, to introduce our persons, to present our petitions, and to obtain all grace for us, we have great encouragement to call upon the Lord in his name, and to neglect this, must be an aggravated evil. I proceed,

2dly, To consider for what, and when we are to call upon the name of the Lord, or in his name; and this we are to do for all things; for he is nigh to us in all things we call upon him for: [{De 4:7}](#) we should pray unto him for all temporal mercies, for he is the father of them we are directed to pray to him for our daily bread, [{Mt 6:11}](#) which takes in all the necessaries of life; and such who have the true grace of God, and the power of godliness in them, may expect to be heard and answered; for godliness has the promise of this life, [{1Ti 4:8}](#) as well as of that which is to come: and we are to call upon him for spiritual mercies, for all spiritual blessings in Christ; for though these things are in his heart, and in his hands, and which he has laid up in his Son, and in the covenant of his grace, for his people, yet he will be enquired of by them, to do them for them; [{Eze 36:37}](#) even for the fresh discoveries and application of pardoning grace, for the light of his countenance, and communion with him, and for all supplies of grace and mercy, to help in time of need. And this is to be done at all times; our Lord spake a parable to encourage men to pray always, and not faint; [{Lu 18:1}](#) and the apostle Paul exhorts the saints to pray always, with all prayer and supplication, and to pray without ceasing, [{Eph 5:18; 1Th 5:17}](#) constantly, continually, and incessantly, and especially in times of trouble; Call upon me, says the Lord, in the day of trouble, I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me: [{Ps 50:15}](#) all times and seasons are proper for prayer, but especially afflictive ones; a time of affliction is a peculiar time for prayer; Is any afflicted? let him pray; [{Jas 5:13}](#) yea sometimes, when the people of God are negligent of the work and business of prayer, he sends an affliction to them, to bring them to his throne of grace; in their affliction they will seek me early: [{Ho 5:15}](#) and particularly in times of

public calamity and distress, it is right and highly necessary to call upon God; and happy it is for a nation, when there are, at such seasons, many praying souls in it; it was well for Israel they had a Moses to stand in the breach, and deprecate the wrath and vengeance of God, that he might not destroy them; and that they had an Aaron, who put on incense, and made atonement., and then stood between the living and the dead, and so the plague was stayed: but sad is the case of a people, when there is not one to stand in the gap, and intercede for them, that they perish not. This is what is here complained of.

3dly, The manner in which this duty of calling upon God should be performed; that is, in faith, with fervency, in sincerity of heart, and with great importunity. It cannot be done aright without faith; for how shall they call on him, in whom they have not believed? ([Ro 10:14](#)) Whoever comes to God, or draws near to him, in any part or branch of worship, and particularly in prayer, must believe that he is, {[Heb 11:6](#)} not only that he exists, and is possessed of all divine perfections, but that he is the God of all grace, that keeps covenant, and is faithful to his promises: he must not only believe in the object of prayer, but with respect to the things prayed for; these must he asked in faith, for it is the prayer of faith that is prevalent with God; ([Jas 1:6](#) and [Jas 5:15](#)) this is the holy confidence that should be cherished, that whatever we ask according to the revealed will of God, that will make for his glory, and our good, shall be given us: and then our petitions should not be put up in a cold, lukewarm, and indifferent manner, but it becomes us to be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord {[Ro 12:11](#)} in every part of worship, and particularly in this of prayer; for it is the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man that availeth much: {[Jas 5:16](#)} and we should also draw nigh to God, in this duty, with true hearts, as well as with full assurance of faith, in the sincerity and uprightness of our souls; for if men draw near to God with their mouths, and honour him with their lips only, but remove their hearts far from him, and their fear towards him is taught by the precept of man, {[Isa 29:13](#)} they cannot expect to be regarded by him; but he is nigh to all them that call upon him in truth; {[Ps 145:18](#)} who are hearty and sincere in their requests unto him; and such may, and should, use an holy importunity with him. Our Lord has given us two instances of importunity, ([Lu 11:5-9](#) and [Lu 13:1-8](#)) on purpose to encourage the same in prayer; the one is of a man that had a friend come to his house late at night, and he without provisions, upon which he calls up his neighbour at midnight, to lend him some bread, but he excuses rising on account of his door being shut, and his children in bed with him; nevertheless, continuing to solicit him, he rises, and gives him what he would have, not on the score of friendship, but because of his importunity: the

other instance is that of the unjust judge, who neither feared God, nor regarded man, yet being pressed by a poor widow, time after time, to take her case in hand, and do her justice; he at length did undertake it, not for the sake of doing justice, but lest he should be wearied by her continual coming; which our Lord applies thus, and shall not God avenge his own elect, that cry day and night unto him? such as, Jacob-like, lay hold on the Lord, and will not let him go without the blessing, always succeed; God cannot deny them any thing that ask in faith, fervently, sincerely, and importunately; and therefore a man that neglects this duty and privilege, must be greatly wanting to his own interest.

4thly, Many are the scripture arguments, exciting and encouraging the saints to call upon the Lord; I shall do little more than name the passages in which they are: the Lord himself, whose name is to be called upon, bids, invites, and encourages men to call upon him; Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver thee; ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; [{Ps 50:15; Mt 7:7}](#) what more can be desired, than to ask and have? The Lord is nigh to all that call upon him in truth; [{Ps 145:18}](#) he draws near to them in a way of grace and mercy, that draw nigh to him in a way of duty: he is rich unto all that call upon him; [{Ro 10:12}](#) that is, he liberally bestows on such the riches of his providential goodness, the riches of his grace here, and the riches of glory hereafter he is plenteous in mercy to all that call upon him; [{Ps 86:5}](#) he largely and plentifully bestows his grace and mercy on such; abundantly pardons their sins, which, as it is an encouraging argument with sensible sinners, to turn unto the Lord, so it is a no less powerful one, to engage saints to pray unto him for fresh discoveries of pardoning grace and mercy. To add no more, it is said, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved; [{Ro 10:13}](#) saved from all afflictions and distresses; saved out of the hands of enemies; saved with a temporal, and with an everlasting salvation.

And now how great must the sin and folly be of such professors, that neglect to call upon the name of the Lord! not to call upon the name of the Lord is heathenish; and of heathens nothing else is to be expected; for how should they call on him, in whom they have not believed? [{Ro 10:14}](#) they know not God, and have no faith in him, and therefore it is no wonder they do not call upon him; and yet the wrath and fury of God are imprecated on the heathen, that know him not, and on the families that call not on his name; [{Jer 10:25}](#) and even these, in time of distress, will call upon those they take to be God, as did Jonah's mariners. Not to call upon God, is to do as hypocrites do; who, though they may pray openly and publicly before men sometimes, that they

may be seen of them, and seem outwardly to take delight in approaching to God; yet as Job says, {[Job 27:10](#)} will he, the hypocrite, delight himself in the Almighty? will he always call upon God? No, he will not; he may for a time, but not always: nor does he ever take any real delight and pleasure in it. Now, for a professing people not to call upon God, is to do as heathens and hypocrites do: and such must be under great decays and declensions, if truly gracious persons, that restrain prayer before God; {[Job 15:4](#)} so to do is highly resented by the Lord; it is a charge he once brought against his church of old, she drew not near to her God: {[Zep 3:2](#)} such act very unbecoming the names of Jacob and Israel, by which they are called. Jacob had the name of Israel given him, because wrestling with God, he had power as a prince, and prevailed; but how unsuitable is this name to such who call not on the Lord? or how disagreeable to their name and character do they act? the Lord complains of it, Thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob, but thou hast been weary of me, O Israel: {[Isa 43:22](#)} and this is the first branch of the complaint here in our text. I proceed to consider the other part of it.

II. That there were none, or few, that bestirred and aroused themselves to lay hold of the Lord. Here I shall briefly shew what is to lay hold on the Lord; and then, what it is for a man to stir up himself to do this; the neglect of which is complained of.

1. It is to exercise faith upon him, as to lay hold on Christ is to believe in him; Wisdom, or Christ is a tree of life, the Author and Giver of Spiritual and eternal life to them that lay hold upon him, {[Pr 3:18](#)} that is, that exercise faith on him; by faith men look to Christ, go to him, and lay hold upon him; the believer lays hold on Christ as his Saviour; and says, he also shall be my salvation, and none else; and, though he slay me; yet will I trust in him; {[Job 13:15-16](#)} this is laying hold on Christ to a purpose: believers come to Christ as the mediator of the covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, and deal with it for pardon, peace, and cleansing; they lay hold on his righteousness, the skirt of him that is a Jew, as their justifying-righteousness; they lay hold on him as the strength of the Lord, and say, surely in the Lord have I righteousness and strength; {[Isa 45:24](#)} this is laying hold on him for themselves, and exercising faith upon him; and so to lay hold on God, is to exercise faith on him, as a covenant-God and father; it is to avouch him to be our God. It was a noble act of faith in David, when he said, I trusted in thee, O Lord; I said, Thou art my God; {[Ps 31:14](#)} Job wished to find him, that he might come even to his seat; {[Job 23:2](#)} and what would he have done there and then? why, lay hold on him as his own God. And such believers as these

will lay hold on the covenant itself; for this is one of the characters of a good man, that he chooses the things that please God; and takes hold of his covenant; {[Isa 56:4](#)} claims his interest in it, and which is his support in life and in death; as it was to David in his last moments, who could say, Although my house be not so with God, yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure; {[2Sa 23:5](#)} this was taking fast hold of the covenant for himself: and such will claim all the blessings of it as theirs, even all spiritual blessings, which are in Christ; he being theirs; and also all the promises of it, of which they are heirs, and so have a right unto them; and who, when they find them; take them to themselves, and rejoice at them, and plead them with God; for there is not a promise in the covenant, but the meanest believer has a right unto: promises as well as blessings are common to all; as may be observed from that peculiar promise made to Joshua, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee; which every 'believer may take hold on for himself, and take the comfort of, as appears from [Heb 13:5-6](#).

2. To lay hold on God, is to exercise faith on him, particularly in prayer: prayer is a wrestling with God; and in wrestling, persons lay hold on one another; faith lays hold of God in prayer, as Jacob did on the angel he wrestled with, and will not let him go, without having the blessing he is earnest for: and when this is the case, whatever men ask in prayer, believing, they shall receive. {[Mt 21:22](#)} The Lord sometimes seems to be departing from his church and people: As the glory of the Lord in Ezekiel's Vision {[Eze 10:4,18](#)} went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the house; and then departed from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim, threatening a removal from the temple; so the Lord sometimes seems to be taking his leave of his people; which, when observed by truly gracious souls, they hold upon him, and most earnestly solicit his continuance with them; as the two disciples that travelled with Christ to Emmaus, when he seemed as if he would go further, they constrained him; {[Lu 24:28-29](#)} they most earnestly intreated him to stay with them; they held him from going further; and thus faith in prayer lays hold on a departing God to retain him. Sometimes the Lord does really depart from his people; their sins and iniquities separate between God and them, and cause him to hide his face from them; when they seek after him, and seeking find him, and having found him, they hold him fast, and will not let him go, until he returns to his church again; their importunate request to him is, Return we beseech thee, and behold and visit this vine, and the vineyard thy right hand hath planted. {[Ps 80:14-15](#)} Sometimes the Lord, being offended with his dear children, lifts up his hand to correct and chastise; when faith in prayer steps in between, and

lays hold on his hands, when he is just going to strike the blow; even as when a father displeased with his child, lifts up his hand to strike him; and a friend that is by him, lays hold on his hand, and will not suffer him to give the blow: this might be exemplified in the case of the Israelites, when they had made the golden calf, and worshipped it; the Lord was greatly provoked by them, and thought to destroy them, or signified his desire to do so; and therefore says to Moses, who he knew would intercede for them, Let me alone that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation. [{Ex 32:10}](#) But Moses would not let him alone, nor suffer him to do what he seemed desirous of doing; but interceded for the people, and, as it were, held the hands of the Lord from destroying them. What amazing condescension is this, that the infinite and tremendous Being, should suffer himself to be held by a creature from doing what he shewed an inclination to! See here the force of prayer, and the strength of faith! and what encouragement saints have to stir up themselves to lay hold on him; and what that is, I shall next consider.

2dly, To stir up a man's self to lay hold on God, is to be diligent in the use of means in seeking after him; as Job was, when being at a loss for him, he went backwards and forwards, on the right hand, and on the left, in order to find him; and as the church, who sought her beloved in the streets of the city, and broad-ways, and inquired here and there, of one, and of another, till she got tidings and sight of him, and then laid hold upon him: [{Job 23:3,8-9; Song 3:1-4}](#) it is to seek the Lord, where and when; and while he is to be found; and to call earnestly and importunately on him, where and when, and while he is near; [{Isa 55:6}](#) and even when afar off, not to quit the pursuit of him, and inquiry about him, until he is pleased to appear and shew himself. This stirring up a man's self, is no other than a frequent use of the gift of prayer: gifts, like some metals, if not used grow rusty, but the more they are used, the brighter they are; yea, gifts may be lost, though grace cannot; the gift of preaching, through disuse, may come to nothing, and therefore should be stirred up; that is, not neglected, but diligently cultivated, and frequently exercised: hence that advice of the apostle to Timothy, Stir up the gift of God which is in thee; just as one would stir up coals under ashes, and embers which seem to be dead, and would go out if not stirred; and is the same with, neglect not the gift that is in thee: [{2Ti 1:6; 1Ti 4:14}](#) so to stir up the gift is not to neglect it, but frequently to use it; and in like manner the gift of prayer should not be neglected, but be often used; and so to do, is to stir it up: and this is not only to be stirred up, but a man should stir up himself to it; which he may be said to do, when he exerts himself, when he calls upon his soul and

all within him; as to bless and praise the Lord for favours bestowed on him, so to pray unto him in faith, for what he stands in need of; as the church resolved to do; With my Spirit within me will I seek thee early; {[Isa 26:9](#)} that is, with my whole heart and soul, in the most earnest and pressing manner, will I pray unto thee, and seek thy face and favour. Stirring up a man's self is opposed to slothfulness in business, and is expressive of that diligence which becomes the people of God: who should be diligent in the exercise of grace, and discharge of duty; and as they should be diligent to add one virtue to another, as to the exercise thereof, and to make their calling and election sure and manifest to others, and to be found of Christ in peace; so they should diligently seek the Lord, who is a rewarder of all such: the frame of spirit here complained of, is a backwardness to prayer; a remissness in the performance of that duty; a doing this part of the work of God negligently, or in a cold, lukewarm, sleepy, drowsy manner; being like the disciples of our Lord, who were sleeping whilst he was praying; whom he thus rebukes, Could ye not watch with me one hour? {[Mt 26:40](#)} It becomes christians to bestir, awake, and arouse themselves, as the word here used {see [Isa 51:17](#)} signifies, from their spiritual stupor and lethargy, at least, to implore the spirit and grace of God to enable them so to do.

The church of Christ and its members are sometimes as it were asleep; the wise as well as the foolish virgins all slumbered and slept; and this is the case with them, when grace lies dormant, or there is a non-exercise of it; an indifference to the duties of religion, or at most a contentedness in the outward performance of them; an unconcernedness about sins of omission and commission; and little or no regard to the glory of God, and the interest of religion. Such a spirit arises from the prevalence of the flesh, or corrupt nature; from the heart being over charged and surfeited with worldly cares; from a weariness in spiritual exercises, and a cessation from religious ones; from keeping carnal company; and from its being a night-season: great and many are the dangers such are exposed unto, and the church of God by their means; which is liable to be filled with hypocrites, and over-run with errors and heresies; for while men sleep, the enemy sows his tares; {[Mt 13:25](#)} such are personally exposed to every sin, and snare, and temptation; liable to have spiritual poverty and leanness brought upon them; to lose their spiritual peace, joy, and comfort; and to be surprised with the midnight-cry: wherefore it is high time for them to bestir themselves, and awake out of sleep; {[Ro 13:11](#)} Christ calls upon them to this purpose, and says, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead; shake off thy lethargy; throw off thy dead companions, and converse no more with them who have been the means of

bringing on this sleepy, drowsy frame, and Christ shall give thee light; {[Eph 5:14](#)} pray, as well as thou canst, that the Lord would quicken thee, that thou mayest call upon his name. {[Ps 80:18](#)}

To come to a close; we may see our own picture in the people here described, that called not on the name of the Lord, and stirred not up themselves to lay hold on him: this is exactly our case; there are none, or however very few, heartily engaged in such spiritual exercises, and which should be matter of lamentation and humiliation: what has been said, should serve to stir up our minds by way of remembrance of the state wherein we are, and from whence we are fallen; and to quicken us to every duty of religion, and particularly to this of prayer, and to the exercise of faith in it; and as we should stir up ourselves, so one another, to this, and every other good work; and which is a principal end of our meeting together at such times as these; and the Lord grant this end may be answered by this discourse and God be glorified.