

# SACRED DISSERTATIONS ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

Herman Witsius

Foreword by  
Joel R. Beeke



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## FOREWORD

Dutch theologian Herman Witsius was born in 1636 at Enkhuizen to God-fearing parents who dedicated him to the Lord prior to his birth. His father was a man of some renown, having been an elder for more than twenty years and a member of Enkhuizen's city council.

Witsius commenced his theological studies at Utrecht under the tutorship of Professor Johannes Leusden, who taught him Hebrew. By the time he was sixteen years old, he could speak Latin fluently as well as read Greek and Hebrew. He also studied under Gisbertus Voetius, Johannes Hoornbeeck, and Andreas Essenius while in Utrecht and obtained additional theological lessons from Samuel Maresius at Groningen. In 1653 he returned to Utrecht where he was influenced profoundly by the local pastor, Justus van den Bogaard. According to Witsius's later testimony, it was primarily through van den Bogaard's preaching and fellowship that he was preserved "from the pride of science, taught to receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child, led beyond the outer court in which he had previously been inclined to linger, and conducted to the sacred recesses of vital Christianity" (cf. memoir of Witsius prefaced to *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, 1:xiv).

In 1656 Witsius passed his final examinations and was declared to be a candidate for the ministry. Because of the abundance of ministers, he had to wait a full year before receiving a pastoral call. On July 8, 1657, he was ordained into the ministry at Westwoud at the age of twenty-one. Two years later he published his first book, *'t Bedroefde Nederlant* (The Sad State of the Netherlands).

At Westwoud, Witsius met considerable opposition owing to the congregation's ignorance of their Reformed heritage. Many medieval

customs were still embedded among the people, such as praying for the dead and Sunday burials.

In 1661 Witsius was installed in his second congregation, at Wormer, where he labored with Petrus Goddaeus. Both pastors took turns teaching a doctrinal class on weekday evenings in order to instruct their hearers how to “defend the truth of our teachings against false doctrines,” and to inculcate “the sanctity of our teachings in terms of God-fearing conduct,” for this is “indeed the pith and marrow of Christianity.” The outgrowth of these class lectures was Witsius’s frequently reprinted work, *Praktijke des Christendoms* (The Practice of Christianity). In this, as well as all his writings, Witsius demonstrates his *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Further Reformation) convictions. The Dutch Further Reformation was a largely seventeenth-century movement within the Dutch Reformed churches that zealously strove for the inner experience of Reformed doctrine and personal sanctification as well as the purification of all spheres of life.

Witsius accepted a call to Goes in 1666, where he labored for two fruitful years. In the preface to *De Twist des Heeren met Zynen Wijngaert* (The Lord’s Controversy with His Vineyard, [1669]), he states that he labored in this congregation with much peace together with three colleagues—“two of whom were venerated as fathers, and the third was loved as a brother.” Of these four ministers working together in one congregation, Witsius notes: “We walked together in fellowship to God’s house. We did not only attend each other’s services, but also each other’s catechism classes and other public services, so that what one servant of God might have taught yesterday, the others confirmed and recommended to the congregation the next day.” Under the influence of these four ministers, “all sorts of devotional practices blossomed, piety grew, and the unity of God’s people was enhanced” (*Het blijvende Woord*, 243).

After serving Goes, Witsius went to his fourth pastoral charge, Leeuwarden, where he served for seven years (1668–1675). In 1673 he was again joined by a renowned colleague—this time, Wilhelmus à Brakel, with whom he served two years. At Leeuwarden Witsius played a critical role in mediating the disputes between Voetius and Maresius to a satisfactory conclusion.

In 1675 Witsius was called to be a professor of theology—first at Franeker (1675–1680), subsequently at Utrecht (1680–1698), and finally at Leiden (1698–1707).

Shortly after his arrival at Franeker, Witsius received his doctorate in theology. Under his leadership the small Franeker seminary grew, especially after the arrival of a youthful, twenty-year-old professor, Johannes à Marck, in 1678. During his Franeker professorship, Witsius produced his greatest theological classic, *De Oeconomia Foederum Dei* (*The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*), now reprinted again by Reformation Heritage Books. In this classic Witsius utilizes certain Cocceian methods while maintaining essentially Voetian theology.

Witsius's next professorial chair was in Utrecht, where he labored for eighteen years and also found opportunity to preach a few dozen times each year. Two times he served as president of the Utrecht University; once he took a leave of absence to study Puritan theology in England. His years at Utrecht were not free from strife, however, as Witsius felt obliged to oppose the erroneous theology of Professor Hermann A. Roëll, who advocated a unique mixture of the biblical theology of Johannes Cocceius and the rationalistic philosophy of René Descartes. Subsequently, Witsius also opposed the seeds of rationalism in the teachings of Balthasar Bekker.

Finally, at sixty-two years of age, Witsius was called to Leiden as professor. Within a year (1699), he was appointed regent of the state college—a position which he held until he retired in 1707 because of ill health. He died on October 22, 1708, at the ripe age of seventy-two.

Witsius held a central place in the Dutch Further Reformation. He emphasized that the motto “The Reformed church needs to be ever reforming” (*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*) applied in his day only to the church's life and not to doctrine, since Reformation doctrine was established as foundational truth. Hence his stress on the need for godly piety, typical of the Dutch Further Reformation. At the same time, however, he was one of the first covenant theologians among Dutch Further Reformation divines who drew close ties between the doctrines of election and covenant. He was a mediating theologian who aimed at reconciliation between orthodoxy and federalism, while simultaneously

stressing biblical theology as a proper study in itself far more than most of his contemporaries.

Witsius had many and varied gifts, as this reprinted volume readily reveals. As an exegete, he was gifted in bringing history and historical theology from numerous sources to bear upon his reasoning. As an ethicist, he probed the heart and guided the believer in his walk of life.

Throughout his life as pastor and later as professor, Witsius was a man of peace and frequently a mediating figure in disputes. He managed to remain friends with both Voetius and Cocceius. His motto was “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, prudence and charity.” He was noted for meekness and patience. One biographer summarizes his life beautifully in this tribute: “With him it was a fundamental maxim, that Christ ‘in all things must have the pre-eminence’; and free and sovereign grace, reigning through the person and righteousness of the great Immanuel, he cordially regarded as at once the source of all our hope, and the grand incitement to a holy practice” (memoir, xxvii).

More than a century after Witsius’s death, two of his most significant works, originally published in the 1680s in Latin, were translated into English: *Sacred Dissertations on What Is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*, translated by Donald Fraser, two volumes (Edinburgh, 1823), recently reprinted by Reformation Heritage Books, and *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord’s Prayer*, translated by Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh, 1839). Both of these works are judicious and practical, pointed and edifying. They are meat for the soul.

Like *The Apostles’ Creed*, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord’s Prayer* is a composition of lectures delivered to Witsius’s theological students. As such, it is a bit heavily freighted with Hebrew and Greek words in its more formal parts; happily, however, Pringle’s able translation also incorporates a rendering of the original languages into English in most instances.

*The Lord’s Prayer* represents the third part of Witsius’s trilogy (together with his works on the covenants and the Apostles’ Creed). It contains more than its title reveals. Prefaced to a 230-page exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, Witsius devotes six chapters (approximately 150 pages) to the subject of prayer in general: “First, to explain *what is prayer*; next, in what our *obligation* to it consists; and lastly, in what *manner* it ought to be performed” (p. 1). Though certain portions of this introductory

material may seem a bit outdated (cf. especially chapter 4), the bulk of it is eminently practical and often very insightful. For example, Witsius's third dissertation, "On the Preparation of the Mind for Right Prayer," contains much valuable guidance on a subject seldom addressed and little thought of in our hectic day in which, for the most part, we approach prayer far too carelessly.

Throughout this introductory material, Witsius establishes that genuine prayer is the pulse of the renewed soul. The constancy of its beat is the grand test of spiritual life. For Witsius, prayer is rightly deemed, in the words of John Bunyan, "a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan."

Witsius stresses the twofold channel of prayer: those who would have God hear them when they pray must hear Him when He speaks. Prayer and work must be unitedly engaged in. To pray without working is to mock God; to work without praying is to rob Him of His glory.

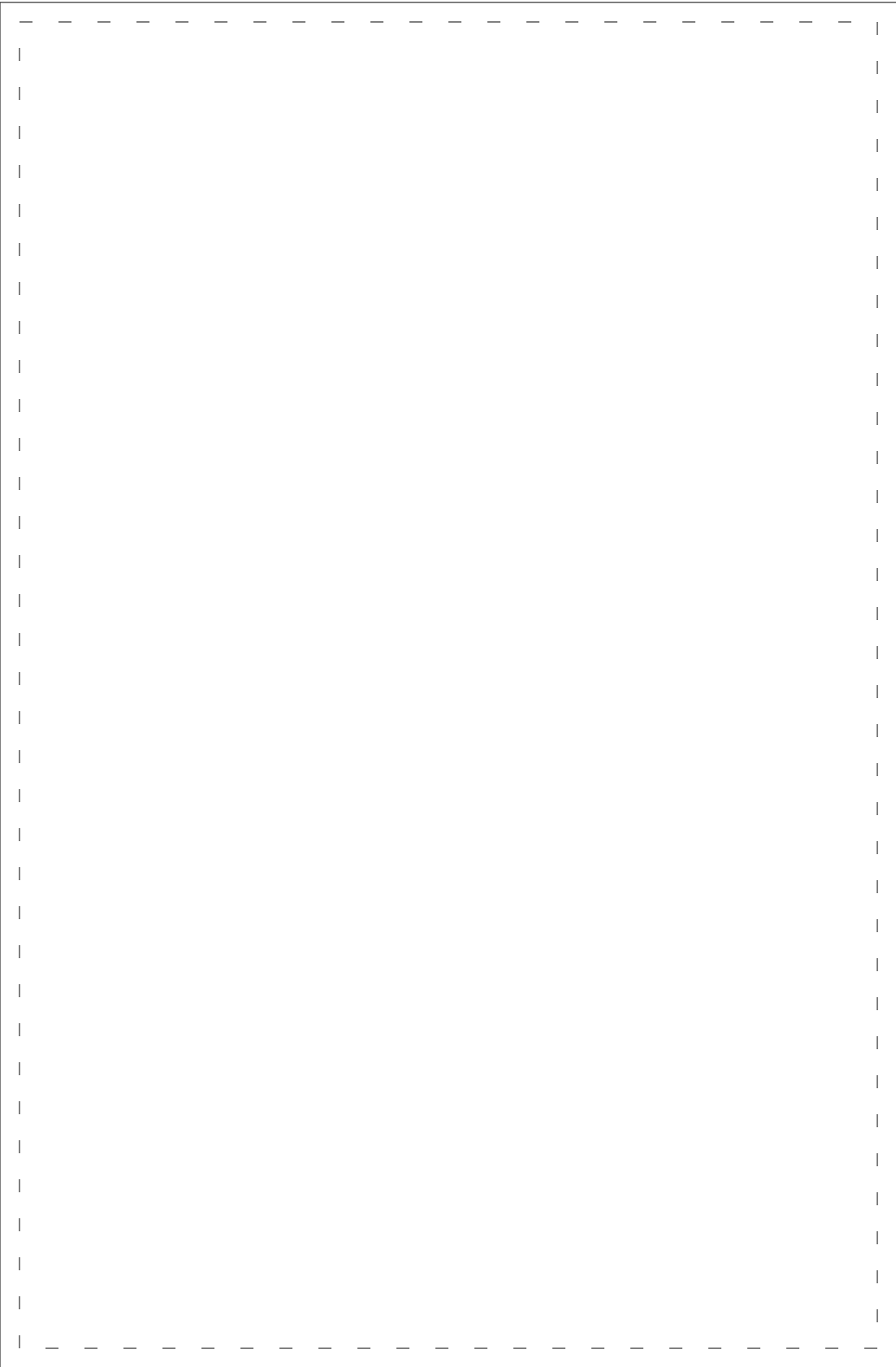
Witsius's exposition of the individual petitions of the Lord's Prayer itself is a masterpiece. In many instances, the questions grappled with receive greater scriptural and practical clarity from Witsius's pen than from anything else written to date. For example, where else can such balance and insight be found on the question of whether the infant believer and the unregenerate should use the name Father in addressing God (see pp. 168–70)?

*Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* represents the cream of Reformed theology. Sound biblical exegesis and practical doctrinal substance abound. May God bless this reprint abundantly in the lives of many, such that the Lord's Prayer may take on a new depth of meaning for them. Oh, to be more centered upon God—hallowing His name, longing for the coming of His kingdom, doing His will!

Herman Witsius influenced many theologians and pastors in his lifetime—particularly Campegius Vitringa and Bernardus Smytegelt in the Netherlands, Friedrich Lampe in Germany, and Thomas Boston and the Erskine brothers (Ralph and Ebenezer) in Scotland. I trust that the influence of his writings—including this reprinted gem, may also have a God-glorifying impress upon each of us who "take up and read."

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SACRED DISSERTATIONS

ON

THE LORD'S PRAYER,

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN OF

HERMAN WITSIUS, D.D.

PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF  
FRANEKER, UTRECHT, AND LEYDEN ;

WITH NOTES,

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM PRINGLE,

AUCHTERARDER.

EDINBURGH :  
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## DISSERTATION III.

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HITHERTO we have spoken of prayer, and of our obligation to it. We come now to inquire in what manner it ought to be performed, so as to be pleasing and acceptable to God. The manner in which a person prays is of no small consequence. There are some whom James thus reproves, *Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.*<sup>1</sup> There are some whose prayers are declared to be *an abomination* to God.<sup>2</sup> Our Lord Jesus, therefore, while he enjoins his disciples to pray, prescribes the manner of performing that duty aright, "ΟΥΤΩΣ οὖν προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς, *After this manner, therefore, pray ye.*<sup>3</sup>

An act confined and regulated by I know not what rules and forms is, indeed, a widely different thing from a holy and devout prayer. In the familiar intercourse of friends, nothing is more agreeable than the unaffected freedom of sincerity and uprightness. The farther it is removed from the studied ornaments of style, it becomes the more delightful. In the same manner, as prayer is a conversation between the soul and God, that prayer ought to be considered as the best which is the simplest, and which expresses most

<sup>1</sup> James iv. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. xv. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mat. vi. 9.

briefly the pious desires produced by the Holy Spirit. Its principal object ought to be, that the mind of the suppliant may be laid open to God in all its recesses, so that God may not only hear the prayers as they are expressed in language, but may see them as they are formed in the heart.

There are many things, however, to which the worshipper ought to attend, in order to avoid in prayer whatever would be unsuitable to himself and to God. These will chiefly be included under the four following heads. I. That **THE MIND OF THE SUPPLIANT** may be rightly prepared. II. That the **ATTITUDES AND GESTURES OF THE BODY** may be suitable to this most sacred action. III. That **STATED TIMES OF PRAYER** be observed. IV. That we ask from God **THOSE THINGS** only which it is worthy of him to give, or of us to receive.

A holy and devout preparation of mind includes some things *before* prayer, some *in* prayer, and some *after* prayer. *Before prayer*, the mind ought to be properly prepared, אַם אַתָּה הַכִּינוֹת לְבָבְךָ, “If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hand toward him; if iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles. For then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot, yea, thou shalt be steadfast, and shalt not fear.”<sup>1</sup> Happy is that man who, when he is going to pray, is at liberty to say with David, נִכּוֹן לִבִּי אֱלֹהִים נִכּוֹן לִבִּי, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed.”<sup>2</sup> To this proposition belong.—I. The exclusion of all un-

<sup>1</sup> Job xi. 13—15.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. lvii. 7.

seasonable thoughts and affections from the heart. The crowd and bustle of the world must be shut out from our mind, as well as from our chamber.<sup>1</sup> II. A holy humility of mind, arising from the view of our vileness, poverty, unworthiness, and exposure to condemnation, and of the majesty, holiness, and justice of God.<sup>2</sup> III. The withdrawing of our thoughts from every other subject, earnest application to the matters in hand, and fixed attention to these objects, together with the excitement of the affections, and of all the faculties of our soul to a work of such magnitude, which truly demands the whole soul.<sup>3</sup> IV. The imploring of the Spirit of prayer, by whom our naturally sluggish mind may be quickened, and all things suggested which it is proper for us to say to God, and in the manner which God will most highly approve. For unless God shall give the prayer, it will not be rightly performed.<sup>4</sup>

These remarks must not be understood as implying that, unless the acts now specified be conducted in a formal and regular order, no prayer is rightly and lawfully conceived. It is enough if the mind be kept in a state of habitual preparation. There is more of pomp and ostentation than of true piety and solid usefulness in what is related of the Hasideans, that, while they were preparing their minds for prayer, they spent a whole hour in meditation. If I am not mistaken in the opinion I have formed of the weakness of our minds, a preparation so laborious as this would not

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xxvi. 20; Matt. vi. 6.    <sup>2</sup> Eccl. v. 1.    <sup>3</sup> Ps. ciii. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Luke xi. 1; Rom. viii. 16.

prepare but exhaust the mind. It is hardly possible for any person to be otherwise than fatigued who applies his mind, with such intensity, to a single internal object. And, after all, if we choose to speak the truth, what sort of prayer is that which follows so laborious a preparation ; and in what way is the preparation to be distinguished from prayer ? Our transactions with God are not to be regulated in the same manner as with men. We must not first meditate, then contrive a method, next apply artificial ornaments, and, last of all, repeat the composition. Meditation itself, ardent desires, and the groanings earnestly put forth from the bottom of the heart, overthrowing all beauty of arrangement, and springing not from set study but from the occasion, are commonly prayers of extraordinary richness and energy. All we have to do is to maintain, in our stated prayers, that preparation of mind, in which there shall be no idle display of art or constraint, but everything shall flow, if I may so express it, naturally. When I say *naturally*, I must be understood as referring to that *nature* which comes from the regenerating and sanctifying Spirit.

*In prayer itself* we must observe.—I. That the prayer proceed from faith.<sup>1</sup> This implies (1), some hope, at least, that our persons have been accepted by God. (2.) A conviction that the thing asked is good. (3.) A belief, resting on the promise of God, that it will be obtained, but accompanied by submission to the Divine wisdom and goodness, which per-

<sup>1</sup> James i. 6, 7.

haps has looked out something better for us. II. That it be performed with *attention*—with attention to *God*, to the *things* asked, and to *ourselves*. *Lauspergius*, in his *Manual of a Christian Soldier*, has elegantly said, “Keep your eye on God alone, as if there were not another being in the universe besides God and yourself.” Equally beautiful is the following statement, “If, while you are praying, you allow your mind to wander, you will resemble one who holds the bow, and yet cannot direct the arrow against his adversary.” Here, if anywhere, does the old saying apply, *Hoc age, do this*, attend to the business in hand. III. That it be performed with *ferveur*. Let the fire burn this incense, that “the Lord may smell a sweet savour.” “Let my prayers come up before thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup> But let it be a sacred flame, kindled by the holy Spirit, at the farthest possible remove from the fire of lust and of depraved affections.<sup>2</sup> Such is that earnestness in prayer, which is mentioned with commendation in various passages of holy writ, Ἐκτενέστερον προσήυχετο, “he prayed more earnestly.”<sup>3</sup> Προσευχὴ δὲ ἣν ἐκτενὴς γενομένη ὑπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας πρὸς τὸν Θεόν. EARNEST prayer was made by the church unto God.” IV. That it be performed *without ceasing*.<sup>4</sup> The mind must be kept in a state of prayer, and, very frequently, as occasion offers, during the intervals of other employments, and even in the midst of these employments, it must send

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cxli. 2.<sup>2</sup> Ja. iv. 2, 3.<sup>3</sup> Luke xxii. 44.<sup>4</sup> 1 Thes. v. 17.

forth warm breathings towards God. Stated prayers, too, on matters of very high importance, ought to be frequently repeated, renewing unceasingly the struggle, until at length you come off a conqueror." I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."<sup>1</sup> This is πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι και μη ἑκκακεῖν, "always to pray, and not to faint."<sup>2</sup>

*After prayer* the following things must be done. I. We must look for the blessing sought, and the answer of God, "I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace unto his people and to his saints."<sup>3</sup> "Therefore I will look unto the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."<sup>4</sup> When the servant of Benhadad, king of Syria, who but a little before had been very proud, now entreated, with humble prayers, that Ahab, king of Israel, would grant his deliverance, and had received a favourable answer, "the men did diligently observe whether anything would come from him, and did hastily catch it."<sup>5</sup> The same thing, but with a proper regard to the relative condition of the parties, must be done towards God by those who engage in prayer. "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me." II. We must look for the blessing in the diligent use of lawful means. One thing have I DESIRED of the Lord, that will I SEEK AFTER.<sup>6</sup> If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver,

<sup>1</sup> Gen. xxxii. 26.<sup>2</sup> Luke xviii. 1.<sup>3</sup> Ps. lxxxv. 8.<sup>4</sup> Mic. vii. 7.<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings xx. 33.<sup>6</sup> Ps. xxvii. 4.



and searchest for her as for hid treasures, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”<sup>1</sup> III. We must leave to God the appointment of the time for bestowing the blessing, satisfied, at all times, with *ἐνκαιρὸν βοήθειαν*, “help in time of need.”<sup>2</sup> “It is not for us to know the times, or the seasons which the Father hath put in his own power.”<sup>3</sup> There is some *acceptable time*, when God in the multitude of his mercies hears.<sup>4</sup> But “our times are wholly in his hand.”<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, our duty to acquiesce, by faith and hope, in that promise of God, “Thus saith the Lord, in an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee.”<sup>6</sup> IV. We must endeavour to ascertain whether we rise from prayer better and holier men. He who has conversed familiarly with God must carry away some of the brightness of the divine holiness. He has sanctified himself that he might approach to the Holy One of Israel. He has conversed, for a while, with the Holy One. Above all things else, he has prayed, as he ought to do, for his own sanctification. After such prayers, is it not fitting that he should apply his mind with greater promptitude and eagerness to his progressive holiness?

We have now finished what we intended to say about the preparation of the mind for prayer. We have handled the subject with the greater brevity on this account, that few or no passages of Scripture occurred which required copious illustration. The whole sub-

<sup>1</sup> Prov. ii. 3—5.    <sup>2</sup> Heb. iv. 16.    <sup>3</sup> Acts i. 7.    <sup>4</sup> Ps. lxi. 13.    <sup>5</sup> Ps. xxxi. 15.    <sup>6</sup> Isa. xlix. 8.

ject, indeed, is better adapted to sincere practice than to lengthened argumentation.

## DISSERTATION IV.

### ON GESTURES IN PRAYER.

OUR body ought to be employed for the honour of God in prayer, and therefore, we now proceed to treat of THE GESTURES OF THE SUPPLIANTS. These are of far less importance to the value of prayer than a holy preparation of mind, but they will furnish matter for more copious discussion, because under this head we shall throw together a multitude of facts drawn from the usages of antiquity. The order we shall observe is,—First, to relate *historically* what gestures were observed by the ancients in prayer, and next, to teach *theologically* what is proper to be done by us in this matter. The gestures of persons engaged in prayer refer either to the *attitude of the whole body*, or to *some particular part* of the body. Those which respect the whole body are, I. KNEELING. II. BOWING. III. FALLING TO THE GROUND. IV. STANDING. V. SITTING.

KNEELING was recommended by God, “Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker.”<sup>1</sup> It was used by the saints, not

<sup>1</sup> Ps. xcv. 6.