

A Treatise on Prayer

A declaration what true prayer is, how we should pray, and for what we should pray

Set forth by John Knox, preacher of God's Holy Word
Unto the small and dispersed flock of Jesus Christ

It is not becoming for any Christian to misunderstand how necessary is the right invocation of God's name (otherwise called perfect prayer), seeing it is the very branch which springs forth from true faith. If any man be destitute of it, notwithstanding he be endowed with whatsoever other virtues, yet in the presence of God he is reputed as no Christian at all. Therefore it is a manifest sign, that such as are always negligent in prayer understand nothing of perfect faith. For if the fire may be without heat, or the burning lamp without light, then true faith may be without fervent prayer. But because in times past that was reckoned to be prayer (and yet, alas! with no small number still is), which in the sight of God was and is nothing less, I intend shortly [briefly] to touch the circumstances thereof.

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8. For whom we should pray and at what time we should pray

1. What prayer is

Whoever will pray must know and understand that prayer is an earnest and familiar talking with God, to whom we declare our miseries, whose support and help we implore and desire in our adversities, and whom we laud and praise for our benefits received. So that prayer contains the exposition [laying forth] of our dolours [troubles, sorrows], the desire of God's defence, and the praising of His magnificent name, as the Psalms of David clearly teach.

(1) What is to be observed in prayer

In order that this be most reverently done, these consideration should provoke us –

(a) in whose presence we stand, to whom we speak, and what we desire

(b) standing in the presence of the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth (and all they contain), whom a thousand thousand of angels assist and serve, giving obedience to His eternal Majesty (Daniel 3; Job 16)

(c) speaking unto Him who knows the secrets of our hearts, before whom dissimulation and lies are always odious and hateful, and asking that thing which may be most to His glory and to the comfort of our conscience.

But we should attend diligently, that such things as may offend His godly presence may be removed to the utmost of our power. And first, that worldly cares and fleshly cogitations (such as draw us from contemplation of our God) be expelled from us, that we may freely, without interruption, call upon God. But how difficult and hard it is to perform this one thing in prayer, none knows better than such as in their prayers are not content to remain within the bonds of

their own vanity, but as it were, ravished, do strive after a purity allowed of God; asking not such things as the foolish reason of man desires, but that which may be pleasant and acceptable in God's presence. Our adversary, Satan, at all times compassing us about (1 Peter 5) is never more busy than when we address and bend ourselves to prayer. O! how secretly and subtly does he creep into our breasts, and calling us back from God, causes us to forget what we have to do. So that frequently when we should speak to God with all reverence, we find our hearts talking with the vanities of the world or with the foolish imaginations of our own conceit.

(2) How the Spirit makes intercession for us

Without the Spirit of God supporting our infirmities (mightily making intercession for us with unceasing groans which can not be expressed with the tongue), there is no hope that we can desire anything according to God's will. I do not mean that the Holy Ghost mourns or prays, but that He stirs up our minds, giving unto us a desire or boldness to pray, and causes us to mourn when we are extracted or pulled from it. No strength of man suffices to conceive such things, nor is able to do so by itself. But in this matter it is plain that such as do not understand what they pray, or do not expound or declare the desire of their hearts clearly in God's presence - and in time of prayer do not expel vain cogitations from their minds as far as they can - profit nothing in prayer.

(3) Why we should pray, and also understand what we pray

But people will object and say, "Although we do not understand what we pray, yet God understands, who knows the secrets of our hearts. He knows also what we need, although we do not explain or declare our necessities unto Him." Such men truly declare themselves to never have understanding of what perfect prayer meant, nor to what end Jesus Christ commands us to pray: which is:

Firstly, that our hearts may be inflamed with continual fear, honour and love of God, to whom we run for support and help whenever danger or necessity requires; that we thus learning to make known our desires in His presence, He may teach us what is to be desired, and what not.

Secondly, that we knowing our petitions to be granted by God alone, to Him only we must render and give laud and praise; and that we, ever having His infinite goodness fixed in our minds, may constantly abide to receive that which we desire with fervent prayer.

(4) Why God defers granting our prayer

For some time God defers or prolongs granting our petitions for the exercise and trial of our faith, and not that He sleeps or is absent from us at any time; but that with more gladness we might receive that which, with long expectation, we have awaited, that thereby we (assured of His eternal providence, so far as the infirmity of our corrupt and most weak nature will permit) doubt not but that His merciful hand shall relieve us in most urgent necessity and extreme tribulation. Therefore such men as teach us that it is not necessarily required that we understand what we pray, because God knows what we need, would also teach us that we neither honour God nor yet refer or give unto Him thanks for benefits received. For how shall we honour and praise Him, whose goodness and liberality we do not know? And how shall we know, unless we receive and sometime have experience? And how shall we know that we have received, unless we know verily what we have asked?

2. How to pray

The second thing to be observed in perfect prayer is, that standing in the presence of God, we may be found such as bear reverence to His holy law, earnestly repenting our past iniquity and

intending to lead a new life; for otherwise all our prayers are in vain, as it is written, "Whoever withdraweth his ear that he may not hear the law of God, his prayer shall be abominable" (Proverbs 28:9). Likewise Isaiah and Jeremiah say thus: "Ye shall multiply your prayers, and I shall not hear, because your hands are full of blood:" that is, of all cruelty and mischievous works (Isaiah 1:15; compare with Jeremiah 11:14; 14:12). Also the Spirit of God appears by the mouth of the blind whom Jesus Christ illuminated, by these words, "We know that God heareth not sinners" (John 9:31): that is, such as do glory in and continue in iniquity. So that of necessity, true repentance must needs be had and go before perfect prayer, or sincere invocation of God's name.

(1) When sinners are not heard by God

And unto these two preceding things must be annexed the third, which is the dejection of ourselves in God's presence, utterly refusing and casting off our own righteousness with all cogitations and opinions thereof. And let us not think that we shall be heard for anything proceeding from ourselves. For all such as advance, boast, or depend anything upon their own righteousness, reject and stay away from the presence of His mercy along with the high proud Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). And therefore we find the most holy men most dejected and humbled in prayers. David says, "O Lord, our Saviour, help us, be merciful unto our sins for thy own sake. Remember not our old iniquities, but haste thou, O Lord, and let thy mercy prevent us" (Psalm 79:8-9). Jeremiah says, "If our iniquities bear testimony against us, do thou according to thy own name" (Jeremiah 14:7). And behold Isaiah: "Thou art angry, O Lord, because we have sinned, and are replenished with all wickedness, and our justice [righteousness] is like a defiled cloth. But now, O Lord, thou art our Father: we are clay, thou art the workman, and we the workmanship of thy hands. Be not angry, O Lord; remember not our iniquities for ever" (Isaiah 64:5-6,8-9). And Daniel, greatly commended by God, in his prayer makes most humble confession in these words: "We be sinners, and have offended; we have done ungodly, and fallen from thy commandment: therefore not in our own righteousness make we our prayers before thee, but thy most rich and great mercy bring we forth for us. O Lord, hear! O Lord, be merciful and spare us! O Lord, attend, help, and cease not, my God, even for thy own name's sake do it; for thy city and thy people are called after thy own name" (Daniel 9:5,18-19). Behold that in these prayers is no mention of their own righteousness, their own satisfaction, or their own merits; but most humble confession, proceeding from a sorrowful and penitent heart, having nothing whereupon it might depend but the sure mercy of God alone, who had promised to be their God (that is, their help, comfort, defender, and deliverer) as He has also done to us by Jesus Christ in time of tribulation. And therefore they did not despair; but after the acknowledging of their sins, called for mercy and obtained the same. Wherefore it is plain that such men as in their prayers have respect to any virtue proceeding from themselves, thinking thereby their prayers are accepted, never prayed aright.

(2) What fasting and alms-deeds are with prayer

And although fasting, watching and alms-deeds are joined to fervent prayer, yet none of these are the cause that God accepts our prayers. But they are spurs which do not allow us to wander in prayer, but rather make us more able to continue in prayer, which the mercy of God accepts.

But here it may be objected that David prays, "Keep my life, O Lord, for I am holy: O Lord, save my soul, for I am innocent; and suffer me not to be consumed" (Psalm 38; Psalm 86:2). Also Hezekiah, "Remember, Lord, I beseech thee, that I have walked righteously before thee, and that I have wrought that which is good in thy sight" (2 Kings 20:3). These words are not spoken of men who are vainglorious, nor who are yet trusting in their own works. But herein they testify themselves to be the sons of God by regeneration, to whom He promises always to be merciful, and at all times to hear their prayers.

(3) The cause of their boldness was Jesus Christ

And so their words spring from a wonted, constant and fervent faith, surely believing that, as God of His infinite mercy had called them to His knowledge, not suffering them to walk after their own natural wickedness, but partly had taught them to conform them to His holy law, and that for the promised Seed's sake; so He might not leave them destitute of comfort, consolation and defence in such a great and extreme necessity. And so they do not allege their righteousness to glory in it, or to put trust in it, but to strengthen and confirm them in God's promises. And this consolation I would wish all Christians in their prayers: a testimony of a good conscience to assure them of God's promises. But to obtain what they ask must only depend upon Him, all opinion and thought of our own righteousness laid aside. And moreover David, in the words above, compares himself with King Saul and with the rest of his enemies who wrongfully persecuted him, desiring of God that they might not prevail against him, as he would say, "Unjustly do they persecute me, and, therefore, according to my innocency, defend me." For otherwise he confesses himself to have offended God most grievously, as in the preceding places he clearly testifies.

3. Hypocrisy is not allowed with God

Thirdly it is to be observed in prayer that we must earnestly desire what we ask of God, acknowledging ourselves to be indigent and void thereof; and that God alone may grant the petition of our hearts when it is His good will and pleasure. For nothing is more odious before God than hypocrisy and dissimulation, that is, when men ask from God things of which they have no need, or that they believe to obtain by others than by God alone. As if a man might ask from God remission of his sins thinking, nevertheless, to obtain the same by his own works or by other men's merits, he mocks God and deceives himself. And in such cases a great number do offend, principally the mighty and rich of the earth, who for a common custom will pray this part of the Lord's prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11): that is, a moderate and reasonable sustenance; and yet their own hearts will testify that they do not need to pray thus, seeing they abound in all worldly solace and felicity. I do not mean that rich men should not pray this part of prayer, but I would wish they understood what they ought to pray in it (of which I intend to speak afterwards), and that they ask nothing of which they do not feel themselves marvellously indigent and needful. For unless we call in truth, He shall not grant. And except we speak with our whole heart, we shall not find Him.

4. Asking in faith

The fourth rule necessary to be followed in prayer is a sure hope of obtaining what we ask. For nothing more offends God than when we ask doubting whether He will grant our petitions; for in so doing, we doubt if God be true, if He be mighty and good. Such, says James, obtain nothing of God (James 1). And therefore Jesus Christ commands that we firmly believe to obtain whatever we ask, for all things are possible to him that believes. And therefore, in our prayers, desperation [absence of hope] is always to be expelled. I do not mean that any man in extremity of trouble can be without a present sorrow and without a greater fear of trouble to follow.

(1) Troubles are the spurs to stir us to pray

Trouble and fear are the very spurs to prayer; for when man (compassed about with vehement calamities and vexed with continual solicitude, having no hope of deliverance by help of man, with sorely oppressed and punished heart, fearing also greater punishment to follow) calls to God from the deep pit of tribulation for comfort and support, such prayer ascends into God's presence, and does not return in vain.

(2) God delivers His own from their trouble and enemies

As David, in the vehement persecution of Saul, hunted and chased from every hold, fearing that one day or other he should fall into the hands of his persecutors, prayed vehemently after he had complained that no place of rest was left to him, saying, "O Lord, who art my God, in whom alone I trust, save me from them that persecute me, and deliver me from my enemies. Let not this man (meaning Saul) devour my life, as a lion doth his prey; for of none seek I comfort but of thee alone" (Psalm 7:1-2).

In the midst of these anguishes the goodness of God sustained him, so that the present tribulation was tolerable. And the infallible promises of God so assured him of deliverance that fear was partly mitigated and gone, as plainly appears to such as diligently mark the process [course] of his prayers. For after long menacing and threatening made to him by his enemy, he concludes with these words, "The dolour [sorrow] which he intended to me, shall fall upon his own pate; and the violence wherewith he would have oppressed me shall cast down his own head: but I will magnify the Lord according to his justice [righteousness], and shall praise the name of the Most High" (Psalm 7:16-17). This is not written for David only, but for all such as shall suffer tribulation to the end of the world. For I, the writer of this (let this be said to the laud and praise of God alone), in anguish of mind and vehement tribulation and affliction, called upon the Lord when not only the ungodly but even my faithful brother - yea, and my own self (that is, all natural understanding) - judged my cause to be irremediable. [Knox here refers to his bodily and mental sufferings during the time of his confinement on board the French galley]. And yet in my greatest calamity and when my pains were most cruel, His eternal wisdom willed that my hands should write, far contrary to the judgment of carnal reason; which His mercy has proved true, blessed be His holy name! And, therefore, I dare be bold in the truth of God's Word, to promise that, notwithstanding the vehemence of trouble, the long continuance of it, the despair of all men, the fearfulness, danger, sorrow and anguish of our own hearts, yet if we call constantly to God, He shall deliver beyond the expectation of all men.

(3) The petition is granted where there is constant prayer

Let no man think himself unworthy to call and pray to God because he has grievously offended His majesty in times past, but let him bring to God a sorrowful and repenting heart, saying with David, "Heal my soul, O Lord, for I have offended against thee. Before I was afflicted, I transgressed; but now let me observe thy commandments" (Psalm 41:4 6, 119 in my copy). To mitigate or ease the sorrows of our wounded conscience, our most prudent Physician has provided two plasters to give us encouragement to pray (notwithstanding the knowledge of offences committed), that is, a Precept and a Promise. The precept or commandment to pray is universal, frequently inculcated and repeated in God's scriptures. "Ask, and it shall be given unto you" (Matthew 7:7). "Call upon me in the day of trouble" (Psalm 50:15). "Watch and pray, that ye fall not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41). "I command that ye pray ever without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). "Make deprecations incessantly, and give thanks in all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:17,18). Whoever contemns [treats with disregard] or despises these commandments sins equally with him that steals. For as this commandment, "Thou shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15) is a negative precept; so, "Thou shalt pray" is an affirmative commandment. And God requires equal obedience of all His commandments and to all His commandments. Yet more boldly will I say: He who, when necessity constrains, does not desire support and help of God, provokes His wrath no less than such as make false gods or openly deny God.

(4) He that does not pray in trouble denies God

For just as it is to know no physician or medicine (or in knowing them, to refuse to use and receive the same); so, not to call upon God in your tribulation is like as if you did not know God, or else utterly deny Him.

(5) Not to pray is a sin most odious

O! why do we cease then to call instantly upon His mercy, having His commandment to do so? Above all our iniquities, we work manifest contempt and despising of Him when, by negligence, we delay to call for His gracious support. Whoever calls on God obeys His will and finds no small consolation in it, knowing nothing is more acceptable to His majesty than humble obedience.

To this commandment He adds His most undoubted promise in many places: "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find" (Matthew 7:7). And by the prophet Jeremiah God says, "Ye shall call upon me, and I shall hear you; ye shall seek, and ye shall find me" (Jeremiah 29:13). And by Isaiah He says, "May the father forget his natural son, or the mother the child of her womb? And although they do, yet shall I not forget such as call upon me" (Isaiah 49:15). And to these correspond and agree the words of Jesus Christ, saying, "If ye, being wicked, can give good gifts to your children, much more my heavenly Father shall give the Holy Ghost to them that ask him" (Matthew 7:11, Luke 11:13). And that we should not think God to be absent, or not to hear us, Moses accuses, saying, "There is no nation that have their gods so adherent, or nigh unto them as our God, who is present at all our prayers" (Deuteronomy 4:7). Also the psalmist, "Near is the Lord unto all that call upon him in verity [truth]" (Psalm 145:18). And Christ says, "Whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

(6) The readiness of God to hear sinners

That we shall not think that God will not hear us, Isaiah says, "Before ye cry I shall hear, and while they speak I shall answer" (Isaiah 65:24). And also, "If at even come sorrow or calamity, before the morning spring, I shall reduce [restore], and bring gladness" (Psalm 30:5). And these most comfortable words the Lord does not speak to carnal Israel only, but to all men sore oppressed, abiding God's deliverance. "For a moment and a little season have I turned my face from thee, but in everlasting mercy shall I comfort thee" (Isaiah 54:7-8).

(7) The hope of obtaining our petitions should depend upon the promises of God

O! hard are the hearts which so manifold, most sweet and sure promises do not mollify; upon these should depend the hope of obtaining our petitions. The indignity or unworthiness of ourselves is not to be regarded; for albeit we are far inferior in holiness and purity of life to the chosen who are departed, yet in that part we are equal, in that we have the same commandment to pray, and the same promise to be heard. For His Gracious Majesty does not esteem the prayer nor does it grant the petition for any dignity of the person that prays, but for the sake of His promise only. And therefore David says, "Thou hast promised unto thy servant, O Lord, that thou wilt build a house for him; wherefore thy servant hath found in his heart to pray in thy sight. Now, even so, O Lord, thou art God, and thy words are true: thou hast spoken these things unto thy servant. Begin, therefore, to do according to thy promise: multiply, O Lord, the household of thy servant" (2 Samuel 7:27-29). Behold, David altogether depends upon God's promise. As also did Jacob who, after he had confessed himself unworthy of all the benefits received, yet he dared to ask greater benefits in time to come, and that because God has promised (Genesis 32:10-12; Genesis 32:26). In the like manner let us be encouraged to ask whatsoever the goodness of God has freely promised. What we should ask principally, we shall hereafter declare.

5. Of necessity we must have a mediator

The fifth observation which godly prayer requires is the perfect knowledge of the advocate, intercessor, and mediator.

(1) Of necessity we must have a mediator

For, seeing no man is of himself worthy to compear [present himself] or appear in God's presence, by reason that sin continually rests [remains] in all men which, by itself, offends the majesty of God, raising also debate, strife and division betwixt His inviolable justice and us: for which (unless satisfaction be made by another than by ourselves) so little hope rests [remains] that we can attain anything from Him, that we may have no surety with Him at all. To exempt us from this horrible confusion our most merciful Father (knowing that our frail minds should have been continually dejected by this) has given unto us His only beloved Son, to be unto us righteousness, wisdom, sanctification and holiness (1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 John 2:2). If we faithfully believe in Him, we are so clad that we may with boldness compear [present ourselves] and appear before the throne of God's mercy, doubting nothing but that whatever we ask through our Mediator we shall most assuredly obtain (Hebrews 8:6; 4:14-16).

(2) Note diligently by whom we must pray

Here is most diligently to be observed that without our Mediator, forespeaker [intercessor] and peacemaker, we do not enter into prayer; for the petitions of such as pray without Jesus Christ are not only vain but also they are odious and abominable before God. This was most evidently prefigured and declared to us in the Levitical priesthood: for as within the sanctum sanctorum (that is, the most Holy Place) entered no man but the high priest alone – and as all sacrifices offered by any other than by priests only provoked the wrath of God upon the sacrifice-maker (Leviticus 16; Numbers 3:10; 1 Kings 12:31) – so whoever intends to enter into God's presence or to make prayers without Jesus Christ shall find nothing but fearful judgment and horrible damnation.

(3) Turks and Jews

Wherefore it is plain that Turks and Jews, notwithstanding that they apparently most fervently pray unto God who created heaven and earth, who guides and rules the same, who defends the good and punishes the evil, yet their prayers are never pleasing unto God; neither do they honour His holy majesty in anything, because they do not acknowledge Jesus Christ. For he who honours not the Son, honours not the Father (John 5:23).

(4) When we are not heard

For as the law is a statute that we shall call upon God, and as the promise is made that He shall hear us, so we are commanded only to call through Jesus Christ, by whom alone we obtain our petitions; for in Him alone are all the promises of God confirmed and complete (1 Corinthians 1:2,10-13; 2 Corinthians 1:20). Whereof, without all controversy, it is plain that such as have called or call presently [now] upon God by any other name than by Jesus Christ alone, do in no way regard God's will but obstinately prevaricate and act against His commandments. And therefore they do not obtain their petitions, neither yet do they have entrance to His mercy. "For no man cometh to the Father," says Jesus Christ, "but by me" (John 14:6). He is the right way; whoever declines from [rejects] Him errs and goes wrong. He is our Leader, whom, unless we follow, we shall walk in darkness; and He alone is our captain, without whom we shall never obtain either praise or victory.

(5) Intercession to saints

Against such as depend upon the intercession of saints I will contend in no other way, but will shortly [briefly] touch upon the properties of a perfect mediator.

First, the words of Paul are most sure, that a mediator is not the mediator of one (Galatians 3:20); that is, wherever a mediator is required, there are also two parties; to wit, one party

offending, and the other party who is offended; these parties may in no wise be reconciled by themselves.

Secondly, the mediator who takes upon him the reconciling of these two parties must be such a one as having trust and favour of both parties, yet in some things must differ from both, and must be clear and innocent also of the crime committed against the party offended. Let this be more plain by this subsequent declaration: The eternal God standing upon the one part, and all natural men descending from Adam upon the other part, the infinite justice of God is so offended with the transgression of all men that in no wise can amity be made, except such a one be found as may fully make satisfaction for man's offences. Among the sons of men none was found able, for they were all found criminal in the fall of one. And God, infinite in justice, must abhor the society and sacrifice of sinners.

(6) Angels cannot be mediators

And what did the quibbling of man prevail unto to the angels who, although they would have interposed themselves as mediators, yet they did not have the infinite righteousness. Who then shall here be found the Peacemaker? Surely the infinite goodness and mercy of God might not suffer the perpetual loss and repudiation of His creatures. And therefore His eternal wisdom provided such a Mediator, having wherewith to satisfy the justice of God – differing also from the Godhead – His only Son, clad in the nature of manhood, who interposed Himself a Mediator, not as man only.

(7) Jesus Christ, God and man, Our Mediator

For the pure humanity of Christ (of itself) might neither make intercession nor satisfaction for us, but God and man. In that He is God, He might complete [fulfil] the will of the Father; and in that He is man, pure and clean, without spot or sin, He might offer sacrifice for the purgation of our sins and satisfaction of God's justice. So, unless saints have these two, godhead equal with the Father and humanity without sin, saints may not usurp the office of mediators.

But here will be objected, "Who does not know Jesus Christ to be the only Mediator of our redemption? But that does not impede or hinder saints and holy men from being mediators and to make intercession for us." As though Jesus Christ had been but one hour our mediator, and after had resigned the office unto His servants!

(8) Whoever makes other mediators than Jesus Christ takes honour from Him

Do not such men handsomely [spoken ironically] entreat Jesus Christ, detracting from Him such a portion of His honour? The Scriptures of God speak otherwise, testifying Him to have been made man and to have proved our infirmities, to have suffered death willingly, to have overcome the same; and all to this end, that He might be our perpetual High Sovereign Priest, into whose place or dignity none other might enter (Hebrews chapters 6,7,9,10). As John says, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, even Jesus Christ the Just [Righteous]" (1 John 2:1).

Mark well these words. John says, "We have presently a sufficient Advocate" whom Paul affirms to sit at the right hand of God the Father (Romans 8:34) and to be the only Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). "For He alone," says Ambrose [in the book *Isaac et Anima*], "is our mouth, by whom we speak to God. He is our eyes, by whom we see God, and also our right hand, by whom we offer any thing unto the Father"; who, unless He make intercession, neither we nor any of the saints may have any society or fellowship with God. What creature may say to God the Father, "Let mankind be received into Thy favour; for the pain of his transgression that I have sustained that in my own body? For his cause was I compassed with all infirmities, and so became the most contemned [disregarded] and despised

of all men; and yet in my mouth was found no guile nor deceit; but always obedient to Thy will, suffering most grievous death for mankind. And therefore, behold not the sinner, but me who, by my infinite justice [righteousness] has perfectly satisfied for his offences"? May any other (Jesus Christ excepted) in these words make intercession for sinners? If they may not, then they are neither mediators nor yet intercessors. "For albeit [although]," says Augustine [in the book *Contra Parmen*], "Christians do commend one another unto God in their prayers, yet they do not make intercession, neither dare they usurp the office of a mediator: no, not Paul, albeit [although] under the Head he was a principal member, because he commends himself to the prayers of faithful men."

But if any do object, "Such is not the condition of the saints departed, who now have put off mortality, and bear no longer the fragility of the flesh" – although I grant this to be most true, yet are they all compelled to cast their crowns before Him that sits on the throne, acknowledging themselves to have been delivered from great affliction, to have been purged by the blood of the Lamb; and therefore none of them do attempt to be a mediator, seeing they neither have being nor righteousness of themselves.

But in so great light of the gospel, which now is beginning (praise be to the Omnipotent!), it is not necessary to remain long upon such matter.

(9) Against such as would have mediators to Jesus Christ

Some say, "We will use but one mediator, Jesus Christ, to God the Father; but we must have saints, and chiefly the Virgin, the mother of Jesus Christ, to pray for us unto Him."

Alas! whoever are so minded show themselves plainly to know nothing of Jesus Christ aright. Is He who descended from heaven and vouchsafed to be conversant with sinners, commanding all sore vexed and sick to come unto Him (Matt. 9:11-13) (who, hanging upon the cross prayed first for His enemies (Luke 23:34)), become now so untractable that He will not hear us without a person to be a mean [mediator]? O Lord, open the eyes of such, that they may clearly perceive Thine infinite kindness, gentleness and love toward mankind.

6. What we must pray for

Above all precedents [these preceding things] is to be observed that what we ask of God ought to be profitable to ourselves and to others, and hurtful or dangerous to no man. Secondly, we must consider whether our petitions extend to spiritual or corporeal things.

(1) Praying for spiritual things

Spiritual things, such as deliverance from impiety, remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost and of life everlasting, we should desire absolutely without any condition from Jesus Christ, in whom alone all these are promised. And in asking for them we should not pray thus: "O Father! forgive our sins if Thou wilt." For He has expressed His will, saying, "As I live, I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he convert, and live." Whoever calls into doubt this immutable and solemn oath makes God a liar and (as far as in him lies) would spoil [rob] God of His Godhead. For He cannot be God except He be eternal and infallible Verity [Truth]. And John says, "This is the testimony which God hath testified of His Son, that who believeth in the Son hath eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13); to the verity [truth] of which we should steadfastly cleave, although worldly sorrow apprehends us. As David, exiled from his kingdom and deprived of all his glory, secluded not himself from God but steadfastly believed reconciliation by the promise made, notwithstanding that all creatures on earth had refused, rejected and rebelled against him. "Happy is the man whom thou shalt inspire, O Lord" (2 Samuel 15).

(2) Praying for corporeal things

In asking for corporeal things, first let us inquire if we be at peace with God in our conscience by Jesus Christ, firmly believing our sins to be remitted in His blood. Secondly, let us inquire of our own hearts if we know temporal riches or substance do not come to man by accident, fortune or chance, neither yet by the industry and diligence of man's labour; but to be the liberal gift of God only, whereof we ought to laud and praise His goodness, wisdom and providence alone.

(3) What should be prayed for

And if we truly acknowledge and confess this, let us boldly ask of Him whatsoever is necessary for us: such as sustenance of this body, health of this body, defence from misery, deliverance from trouble; tranquillity and peace to our commonwealth, prosperous success in our vocations, labours and affairs, whatsoever they be which God wills: we ask all of Him, to certify [inform] us that all things stand in His government and disposition. And also by asking and receiving these corporeal commodities, we have taste of His sweetness and are inflamed with His love, that thereby our faith concerning reconciliation and remission of our sins may be exercised and increase.

(4) Why God defers or prolongs granting us our petitions

But in asking for temporal things, we must observe, first, that if God defers or prolongs granting our petitions, even so long that He apparently rejects us, yet let us not cease to call, prescribing Him neither time nor manner of deliverance; as it is written, "If he prolong time, abide patiently upon him." And also, "Let not the faithful be too hasty, for God sometimes defers, and will not hastily grant for the probation [trial] of our continuance," as the words of Jesus Christ testify: and also that we may receive with greater gladness that which we have long looked for with ardent desire – as Hannah, Sarah and Elizabeth, after great ignominy of their barrenness and sterility, received fruit of their bosoms with joy.

Secondly, because we know the Kirk [Church] at all times to be under the cross; in asking temporal commodities, and especially deliverance from trouble, let us offer unto God obedience if it shall please His goodness that we be longer exercised in order that we may patiently abide it. As David, desiring to be restored to his kingdom (what time he was exiled by his own son), offers unto God obedience, saying, "If I have found favour in the presence of the Lord, he shall bring me home again. But if he shall say, 'Thou pleasest me not longer to bear authority,' I am obedient; let him do what seemeth good unto him" (2 Samuel 15:25-26).

(5) It is better to obey God than man

And the three children did say unto Nebuchadnezzar, "We know that our God whom we worship may deliver us; but if it shall not please him so to do, let it be known to thee, O king, that thy gods we will not worship" (Daniel 3:17-18). Here they gave a true confession of their perfect faith, knowing nothing to be impossible to the omnipotence of God; affirming also themselves to stand in His mercy, for otherwise the nature of man could not willingly give itself to so horrible a torment. But they offer unto God most humble obedience to be delivered at His good pleasure and will – as we should do in all afflictions, for we know not what to ask or desire as we ought: that is, the frail flesh, oppressed with fear and pain, desires deliverance, ever abhorring and drawing back from giving obedience.

O Christian brethren, I write by experience. But the Spirit of God calls back the mind to obedience, that although it desires and abides for deliverance, yet should it not repine against the good will of God, but incessantly ask that it may abide with patience. How hard this battle is, no man knows but he who in himself has suffered trial.

(6) The petition of the Spirit

It is to be noted that God sometimes does grant the petition of the spirit, while He yet defers the desire of the flesh. As, for example, who doubts but God did mitigate the heaviness of Joseph, although He did not send hasty deliverance in his long imprisonment? and that as He gave him favour in the sight of the jailor, so inwardly also He gave unto him consolation in spirit? (Genesis 39) And moreover God sometimes grants the petition of the spirit where He entirely repels the desire of the flesh. For the petition of the spirit always is that we may attain to the true felicity, whereunto we must needs enter by tribulation and the final death, both of which the nature of man ever abhors. And therefore the flesh under the cross and at the sight of death calls and thirsts for hasty deliverance. But God, who alone knows what is expedient for us, sometimes prolongs the deliverance of His chosen, and sometimes permits them to drink the bitter cup of corporeal death before the maturity of age, that thereby they may receive medicine and cure from all infirmity. For who doubts that John the Baptist desired to have seen more the days of Jesus Christ and to have been longer in conversation with Him? Or that Stephen would not have laboured more days in preaching Christ's gospel, whom, nevertheless, He suffered hastily to taste of this general sentence (Acts 7:59)? And, although we see therefore no apparent help to ourselves, nor yet to other afflicted ones, let us not cease to call, thinking our prayers to be vain. For whatsoever may come of our bodies, God shall give unspeakable comfort to the spirit, and shall turn all things to our advantages beyond our own expectation.

(7) Impediments come from the weakness of the flesh

The cause that I am so long and tedious in this matter is that I know how hard the battle is betwixt the spirit and the flesh, under the heavy cross of affliction, where no worldly defence but present death appears. I know the grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh. I know the anger, wrath and indignation which it conceives against God, calling all His promises in doubt and being ready every hour utterly to fall [turn away] from God. Only faith remains against this, provoking us to call earnestly and to pray for assistance of God's Spirit; if we continue in this He shall turn our most desperate calamities to gladness and to a prosperous end. To thee alone, O Lord, be praise, for with experience I write and speak this.

7. Where, for whom, and at what time we ought to pray

Where, and for whom, and at what time we ought to pray, is not to be passed over with silence.

(1) Private prayer

Private prayer, such as men secretly offer unto God by themselves, requires no separate place; although Jesus Christ commands, when we pray to enter into our chamber and to close the door, and so to pray secretly unto our Father (Matthew 6:6). By this He wills that we should choose for our prayers such places as might offer least occasion to call us back from prayer, and also that we should expel forth from our minds all vain cogitations in time of our prayer. For otherwise Jesus Christ Himself observes no special place of prayer, for we find Him sometimes praying in Mount Olivet, sometimes in the desert, sometimes in the temple, and in the garden. And Peter desires to pray upon the top of the house (Acts 10). Paul prayed in prison and was heard by God; who also commands men to pray in all places, lifting up pure and clean hands unto God, as we find that the prophets and most holy men did whenever danger or necessity required.

(2) Appointed places to pray in may not be neglected

But public and common prayers should be used in the place appointed for the assembly, whence whoever negligently withdraws himself is in no wise excusable. I do not mean that to

be absent from that place is sin because that place is more holy than another; for the whole earth created by God is equally holy. But the promise made, that "whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there shall I be in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20) condemns all such as contemn [despise] the congregation gathered in His name. But mark well the word "gathered". I do not mean gathered to hear piping, singing or playing; nor to patter upon beads or books of which they have no understanding; nor to commit idolatry, honouring that for God which indeed is no God [a reference to transubstantiation]. For with such will I neither join myself in common prayer nor in receiving external sacraments; for in so doing I should affirm their superstition and abominable idolatry which I, by God's grace, never will do, neither counsel others to do, to the end.

(3) What it is to be gathered in the name of Christ

This congregation which I mean, should be gathered in the name of Jesus Christ: that is, to laud and magnify God the Father for the infinite benefits they had received by His only Son our Lord. In this congregation the mystical and last Supper of Jesus Christ should be distributed without superstition or any more ceremonies than He Himself used (and His apostles after Him). And in distributing it, inquisition [enquiry] should be made in this congregation about the poor among them, and support provided until the time of their next convention, and it should be distributed amongst them. Also common prayers should be made in this congregation, such as all men hearing might understand, that the hearts of all subscribing [agreeing] to the voice of one might, with unfeigned and fervent mind, say, "Amen." Whoever withdraw themselves from such a congregation (but alas! where shall it be found?) declare themselves to be no members of Christ's body.

8. For whom we should pray and at what time we should pray

Now there remains "for whom and at what time we should pray". Paul commands that we should pray for all men and at all times (1 Timothy 2:1-2). And we should call incessantly principally for such as are of the household of faith who suffer persecution and for commonwealths tyrannically oppressed, so that God, of His mercy and power, will withstand the violence of such tyrants.

(1) God's sentence may be changed

And when we see the plagues of God, such as hunger, pestilence or war coming or appearing to reign [prevail], then we should call unto God with lamentable [lamenting] voices and repenting hearts, that it would please His infinite mercy to withdraw His hand. If we do this unfeignedly, He will, without doubt, revoke His wrath and think upon mercy in the midst of His fury, as we are taught in the scripture by His infallible and eternal verities [truths]. As in Exodus God says, "I shall destroy this nation from the face of the earth" (Exodus 32:10,28). And when Moses addresses himself to pray for them, the Lord proceeds, saying, "Suffer me that I may utterly destroy them." And then Moses falls down upon his face and continues forty days in prayer for the safety of the people, for whom at the last he obtained forgiveness (Deuteronomy 9:14,18). David in the vehement plague called unto God lamentably [in a lamenting manner] (2 Samuel 24:17). And the king of Nineveh says, "Who can tell? God may turn and repent, and cease from his fierce wrath, that we perish not" (Jonah 3:9). These examples and scriptures are not written in vain, but to certify [assure] us that God, from His own native goodness, will mitigate His plagues through our prayers offered by Jesus Christ, although He has threatened to punish, or is presently punishing. He testifies this by His own words, saying, "If I have prophesied against any nation or people, that they shall be destroyed; if they repent of their iniquity, it shall repent me of the evil which I have spoken against them" (Jeremiah 18:7,8). This I write, lamenting the great coldness of men who, under such long scourges of God are in no way kindled to pray by repentance, but carelessly sleep in a wicked life; even as though the continuing wars, urgent famine and quotidian [daily] plagues

of pestilence and other contagious, unaccustomed and strange maladies were not the present signs of God's wrath provoked by our iniquities.

(2) A plague threatened to England

O England! let your intestine battle [civil war] and domestic murder provoke you to purity of life, according to the word which has been proclaimed openly [publicly] in you: otherwise you shall drink the cup of the Lord's wrath! The multitude shall not escape, but shall drink the dregs and have the cup broken upon their heads. For judgment begins in the house of the Lord, and commonly the least offender is punished first, to provoke the more wicked to repentance. But, O Lord! infinite in mercy, if Thou shalt punish, make not consummation, but cut away the proud and luxuriant branches which do not bear fruit: and preserve the commonwealth of such as give succour and harbour to Thy contemned [despised] messengers which have long suffered exile in desert [waste places]. And let Thy kingdom come shortly, that sin may be ended, death devoured and Thine enemies confounded; that we Thy people, delivered by Thy Majesty, may obtain everlasting joy and felicity through Jesus Christ our Saviour, to whom be all honour and praise, for ever. Amen.

John Knox
Hasten Lord, and tarry not.

Background note

The title of the treatise is as follows:

A confession and declaration of prayers added thereunto by John Knox, minister of Christ's most sacred Evangel, upon the death of that most virtuous and most famous King, Edward the VI, King of England, France and Ireland; in which confession the said John accuses no less his own offences than the offences of others to be the cause of the taking away of that most godly Prince, now reigning with Christ while we abide plagues for our unthankfulness. Imprinted in Rome, before the Castle of St Angelo at the sign of Saint Peter. In the month of July in the year of our Lord 1554.

Edward VI died on 6th July 1553, aged 16. For a few months his successor, Queen Mary, tolerated the Protestant ministers, and Knox availed himself of this interval to resume labours in Buckinghamshire and Kent. "Wherever he went, he exhorted the people to repentance under the tokens of Divine displeasure, and to a steady adherence to the faith which they had embraced". He was attended by large congregations and he continued preaching until the end of October. It seems to have been at this time, as Dr McCrie remarks, "that he composed the Confession and Prayer, commonly used by him in the congregations to which he preached, in which he prayed for Queen Mary by name, and for the suppression of such as meditated rebellion". After December 1553, Protestants were subject to prosecution as heretics. Knox was unable to preach without endangering himself and merchants who harboured him. Knox reluctantly left England, arriving in Dieppe in the beginning of March 1553-54.

The Treatise on Prayer is contained in Dr McCrie's MS volume, and was published after Knox had left England, under the fictitious imprint "At Rome, before the Castle of St Aungel, at the signe of Saint Peter" in July 1554.