

The Spirit of Prayer

James Buchanan

IN the Scriptures a special operation of the Spirit is mentioned, by which he aids his people in the exercise of *prayer*; and it is spoken of as one that is common to all believers, and permanent through all ages of the Church. This cheering truth is implied in God's promise of old, 'I will pour upon the house of David, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, *the Spirit of grace and of supplications*;' and it is implied also in the declared duty of all believers, which is described in the apostle's exhortation, 'Praying always with all prayer and supplication in *the Spirit*.' But the most emphatic testimony on the subject is contained in the words of the apostle (Rom. viii. 26), 'Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered.' That the Spirit of God does in some way 'make intercession for the saints,' is abundantly evident from these passages; but it may be useful to inquire, first, In what sense this is to be understood, or in what way the Spirit acts as a Spirit of grace and supplication; and secondly, What lessons, whether of warning, direction, or encouragement, may be deduced from the doctrine of his agency in prayer.

1. In explanation of this doctrine, it is not to be understood as importing that the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us in his own person, or that he directly addresses his prayer to the Father on our behalf. Christ, as Mediator, prayed for his disciples while he was yet on earth, and he still makes continual intercession for them in heaven, by appearing in the presence of God for them; but the Holy Spirit is never represented in Scripture as interceding in the same way, either by offering up his own personal request, or by appearing for us at the throne. He does intercede, however, in another way, by 'dwelling in us' as 'the Spirit of grace and supplication,' disposing and enabling us to pray for ourselves. He is the Spirit of supplication, just as he is the Spirit of faith, and repentance, and hope. He is the author of these spiritual graces, the source whence they flow, and by which they are continually sustained. Yet they exist in the believer, and are exercised by him, so as to form part of his own personal character; and just so the Spirit is said to make intercession for us, when he stirs us up to intercede for ourselves, and gives us grace to desire and to ask what blessings we severally require. That this is the sense in which the doctrine is to be understood appears from several expressions, which imply that, by the Spirit's grace, believers are taught and enabled to offer up their own supplications at the throne; for, first of all, it is not the Spirit considered as a distinct person of the Godhead that is said to intercede, but 'the Spirit *that dwelleth in you*,' even the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, 'Abba, Father'. And, secondly, it is expressly said, that the *Spirit helpeth our infirmities*; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought — our *own* prayers being directly referred to, and his interposition designed to remove those hindrances, and supply those defects *in us*, which would otherwise impair or interrupt our communion with God: — and thirdly, it is added, that 'he maketh intercession for us with *groanings* which cannot be uttered;' an expression which cannot be applied personally to the Spirit, but is aptly descriptive of that moral earnestness and deep

concern which he awakens in *our own hearts*; and accordingly it is added, 'He that searcheth *the hearts* knoweth the mind of the Spirit.' These various expressions are sufficient to show, that, by the intercession of the Spirit, we are to understand the earnest supplication and prayer which we are disposed and enabled, by his grace, to offer up at the throne.

If any one doubt the *necessity* of the Spirit's aid in the exercise of prayer, there is enough in the words of the apostle to convince him of his error; for even an inspired man, classing himself along with other believers, says, 'The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought.' This humbling confession of our own infirmity and ignorance, and of our simple dependence on the grace and strength of the Spirit, is, indeed, much at variance with the natural feelings of the human heart, which is prone to self-sufficiency and presumptuous confidence in its own unaided powers; but there is reason to fear that those who have never felt their need of the Spirit's grace in the exercise of prayer have either never prayed at all, or if they have observed the outward form, are still strangers to its spiritual nature, as the greatest work, the highest and holiest service of the soul, by which it holds communion with God, in the exercise of those graces of faith, and love, and hope, which are all inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The careless and presumptuous sinner, or the cold and formal professor, may be conscious of no difficulty in prayer which cannot be overcome by the power of his own natural faculties: he may content himself with a repetition of a form of words, such as his memory can easily retain and recall, and caring for no further communion with God than what may be implied in the occasional or regular use of that form, he is not sensible of any infirmity such as calls for the aid of the Spirit. But not such are the feelings of any true believer, for never is he more sensible of his own infirmity, and of his absolute dependence on the Spirit's grace, than when he seeks, in the hour of prayer, to spread his case before the Lord, and to hold communion and fellowship with him as his Father in heaven. Having some idea, however inadequate, of the greatness and majesty of God; and some sense, however feeble, of the spirituality of his service; knowing that 'God is a Spirit, and that they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth;' but conscious at the same time of much remaining darkness, of the corruptions which still cleave to him, and of the manifold distractions to which his mind is subject, even in the most solemn exercises, he knows what those 'infirmities' are of which the apostle speaks, and will be ready to join with him in the humbling confession, 'We know not what things we should pray for as we ought.' His own experience teaches him that the spirit of prayer is not the natural and spontaneous product of his own heart; that it was implanted there, and that it must be continually sustained by grace from on high; and long after he has been enabled to come with comfort to the throne of grace, and to pour out his heart with much of the peace which a spirit of adoption imparts, he may be reminded, by the variations of his own experience, that he must be dependent, from first to last, on the Spirit's grace for all his earnestness and all his enjoyment in prayer. Oh! what believer has not occasionally felt his own utter emptiness, and the barrenness even of this precious privilege, when, left to himself, he attempted to pray, while the spirit of prayer was withheld! You may have retired at your usual hour to your closets, and fallen upon your knees, and used even your accustomed words; but you felt that your affections were cold, your desires languid, and your whole heart straitened and oppressed. You strove once more to renew your request, and with greater urgency than before; but in spite of all your efforts your thoughts began to wander even in God's immediate presence; and as you rose from your knees, you were ready to exclaim, 'Oh that it were with me as in months past! Oh, that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.' On such occasions you complain of unbelief, of a wandering mind,

of a hard and insensible heart; and these complaints are frequently heard amongst God's people, for I believe that he often visits them with such experiences for the very purpose of impressing them with a humbling sense of their own *infirmity*, and reminding them of their dependence on the Spirit for the right use and enjoyment of all the means of grace.

The grace of the Holy Ghost, then, is indispensable, if we would maintain the spirit and enjoy the exercise of prayer; but we must ever remember, that in this, as in every other part of his work, he acts by the use of means, and in a way that is wisely adapted to the rational and moral nature with which we are endowed. He acts upon us, not as mere machines, but as moral agents; and by various considerations and motives, he teaches and disposes us to pray. Every part of his work as the Spirit of grace has a tendency to prepare us for this exercise; for whether he act as a reprover, convincing us of sin, — or as a sanctifier, subduing our corruptions, or as a comforter, giving us peace and joy in believing, or as a teacher, enlarging our views of divine truth, and confirming our faith in it, all the operations of his grace are subservient more or less directly to the exercise of prayer. But that we may have a clear and distinct idea of the Spirit's agency as 'the Spirit of grace and supplication,' it may be observed more particularly, that —

I. He enables us for prayer, by disclosing to us our *necessities and wants, our sins and shortcomings*, so as to impress us with a deep sense of our absolute dependence on God. This is intimated when it is said, 'The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not *what we should pray for* as we ought.' Self-ignorance is a great hindrance to fervent prayer. We are not duly sensible of our wants, and hence we have no earnest desire for those supplies of grace which we really need: we are apt to say with the Laodiceans, 'I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing;' not knowing that 'we are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.'

Our prayers have respect either to our temporal or our spiritual wants; and with reference to both we need the enlightening and directing grace of the Spirit. In respect to our temporal wants, it might seem that we could have little difficulty in understanding them, and in praying for what things we need; but I apprehend every experienced believer will be ready to acknowledge his ignorance on this subject, and to confess that he often knows not what is really good for him. Every condition of life has its peculiar snares, and temptations, and trials; and one of the most precious fruits of the Spirit is a disposition to resign ourselves to the will of God, and to pray for temporal blessings only insofar as they may be consistent with, or conducive to, our spiritual welfare. This resigned and spiritual frame of mind is beautifully expressed in the prayer of Agur: 'Give me neither poverty nor riches: feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.' This is so far from being the natural disposition of our hearts, that the apostle represents the very opposite spirit as prevailing among professing Christians, and breathing in their very prayers: 'Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it on your lusts.'

In reference, again, to our spiritual wants, we are often lamentably ignorant of their nature and extent; and they who have paid most attention to the state of their hearts will be the first to feel how much they need the grace of the Spirit to direct them to a discovery of their sins. Thus David exclaims, 'Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults;' 'Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked

way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’ Nothing is more necessary to prayer than to know the ‘plague of our hearts.’

2. The Holy Spirit, besides disclosing to us our wants, our weaknesses, and our sins, makes known *the rich provision of all needful grace* which is treasured up in Christ; and this is as useful for our direction and encouragement as the discovery of our necessities is for awakening our desires, since it is, in a great measure, owing to our ignorance or unbelief in regard to the rich provision of the Gospel, that we ‘know not what we should pray for as we ought.’ The Holy Spirit makes known to the believer, in all their fulness and variety, the inestimable blessings of redemption; for ‘he takes of the things, of Christ, and shows them unto us;’ and he is sent that we may ‘know the things which are freely given to us of God.’

A clear discovery of the rich and glorious privileges which Christ has purchased for his people, is at once a means of direction and a source of encouragement in prayer: when they are placed before us in all their variety and extent, we feel how much we need them, how suitable they are to our real wants, and how infinitely precious and desirable in themselves. Pardon, repentance, holiness, peace of conscience, eternal life — when these and similar blessings are vividly conceived of as having been purchased by the Saviour for his people, and offered to all without exception in the Gospel, we see what we should pray for; and we feel also that we have a free right and warrant to pray for them, infinitely great and precious though they be. Ignorance of the gracious provisions of the Gospel, or a dim and indistinct apprehension, either of the nature of these blessings, or of the method by which they were provided, or of the terms on which they are offered, is a great hindrance to prayer; but prayer becomes free and lively in proportion as we are taught by the Spirit to know the things which are ‘*freely* given to us of God.’ These are great blessings, and when we pray for them we may well feel that we make a great request of God; but when we know that they are all treasured up for us in the fulness that is in Christ, and that they are freely tendered to us in the Gospel, ‘we come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in every time of need.’

3. The Holy Spirit assists us in prayer, by working in us such *dispositions and desires* as make us to seek for those supplies of grace which we need, with earnest, importunate, and persevering supplication: ‘As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?’

Naturally we have no such disposition or desire. The carnal mind, which is enmity against God, is naturally averse from those spiritual blessings of which it stands in need. True, it is desirous of exemption from pain and punishment and danger; but whatever is spiritual is obnoxious to its taste, insomuch that were an unrenewed mind supposed (if we may suppose a case which is never realized in actual experience) to be sensible, on the one hand, of its sin and misery and danger, and enabled to perceive, on the other, the number and variety of the blessings which have been purchased and offered by Christ; it would, if left to follow its own inclination without the restraining and renewing grace of the Spirit, refuse to accept God’s great salvation!

The awakening of spiritual desire in the heart is the work of God’s Spirit; and that desire must be kept alive by his continued agency: ‘Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.’ This new disposition or desire makes prayer natural, easy, and delightful to the people of God. Just as a natural man hungers and thirsts for food and drink, so the renewed man hungers and thirsts after righteousness. He has a new spiritual appetite, which naturally and

spontaneously seeks its proper spiritual aliment. And hence those commands and observances which are a burden and bondage to mere formalists are an easy yoke to every living Christian.

4. The Holy Spirit helps us in prayer by strengthening and exciting into lively exercise *those spiritual graces* which are essentially implied in communion with God. Prayer properly consists in the exercise of these graces: it is not the mere utterance of words, nor is it even the mere expression of natural feeling; it is an exercise of repentance, of faith, of love, of trust and delight in God; of repentance, which is expressed in the language of confession; of faith, for he that cometh to God must believe that he is the rewarder of them that ‘diligently seek him;’ of love, for we call him ‘Abba, Father,’ ‘our Father which art in heaven;’ of trust, for we commit our case into his hands; and of delight, for the promise is, ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and he will give thee the desires of thine heart.’ These graces are not only presupposed or implied in prayer, but prayer properly consists in the lively exercise of them, insomuch, that where these graces are wanting, there is no prayer, whatever forms may be observed, and whatever words employed. Now let it be remembered, that all these graces are the fruits of the Spirit, that they are at first implanted, and must ever afterwards be nourished, by the Spirit, and you will perceive at once how the Spirit may assist us in prayer simply by strengthening and exciting into lively exercise all the gracious affections of the soul. By this means he gives us freedom and comfort in prayer: for where these graces are absent, prayer is a mere form; where they are weak, prayer is cold and languid; but where they abound, prayer is the soul’s communion with God.

5. The Spirit aids us in this exercise, by helping our infirmities, when he either removes *the hindrances* to prayer, or stirs us up to watch against them, and to rise above them.

There are many hindrances to prayer, some of them external, arising from the body, or the world, others of them internal, arising from the state of our own hearts. Of the latter, I may mention ignorance, unbelief, indifference, despondency, and such like; which are removed by the Holy Spirit, as he is the enlightener, the sanctifier, and the comforter of God’s people: and of the former, bodily infirmities, the cares and business of life, the dissipating influence of society, and such like, from which the Spirit promises no exemption to any of his people, but which he strengthens them to resist, and enables them to overcome. But if we would overcome these *hindrances* to prayer, we must avail ourselves of those *helps* which the Spirit of God has provided for us, remembering that he acts in the use of ordinary means, and that his grace is to be sought in the way of duty.

II. Many lessons might be deduced from the doctrine of the Spirit’s agency as ‘the Spirit of grace and supplication,’ applicable alike for our warning, our direction, and our encouragement in prayer.

We learn from it that prayer is a very solemn exercise, an exercise in which we not only hold direct converse with God whom we address, but in which God also holds converse with us by the operation of his Spirit in our hearts; and as this reflection is fitted to rebuke and humble us on account of the carelessness with which we have too often approached his throne, so it should warn us against the guilt and danger of calling on his name without some suitable feelings of reverence and godly fear.

We learn from it that prayer is an exercise far beyond our natural power, and demands the exercise of *graces* which can only be imparted by the Spirit of God; and this reflection, again,

should direct us to look to the Spirit of all grace, and to implore his aid, as often as we come to the throne.

We learn from it that God has made the most ample provision for our being restored to his communion and fellowship: for not only is he revealed as the hearer and the answerer of prayer, sitting on the throne of grace, and waiting to be gracious; and not only is Christ revealed as our advocate and intercessor, standing beside the throne, and ready to present our requests, perfumed with the incense of his own merits; but lest, when all outward impediments were removed, there might still remain some hindrance in our own hearts, the Holy Spirit is also revealed as 'the Spirit of grace and supplication,' 'who intercedeth for the saints according to the will of God'; and as this precious truth should encourage us to ask his grace to help our infirmities, so should it inspire the hope of an answer in peace; for every prayer that is prompted by the Spirit is a pledge of its own fulfilment, seeing that 'God who searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.' And although we should feel as if we were at a loss for words to express our desires to God, even this should not discourage us; the *desire* of the heart is prayer, although it should find no fit utterance; for Moses' heart spake only, when God said, 'Wherefore criest thou unto me;' and Hannah's, when 'she spake in her heart;' her lips moved, but her voice was not heard, yet without words 'she poured out her heart before the Lord;' and the very want of suitable expressions may only show that the Spirit is making intercession for us 'with groanings that *cannot be uttered*.'

But while we are warned, and directed, and encouraged by this precious truth, we must habitually bear in mind that the Spirit's grace is to be sought in the path of duty; that his influence is not designed to supersede but to stimulate our industry; and that if we would overcome the *hindrances* which prevent or mar our communion with God, we must diligently avail ourselves of the *helps* which he has provided for our use. Where prayer is prevented or abridged by any necessary cause, and especially by bodily infirmity, the words of Christ himself show that he will make every reasonable allowance for our weakness: for on that memorable night, when he was in an agony in the garden, and when his soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death, and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground, his disciples, whom he commanded to watch, began to sleep; he gently rebuked them, saying, 'What! couldest thou not watch one hour?' and exhorted them, 'Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation;' yet no sooner was the warning uttered, than he himself suggested their excuse, 'The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.' But there are other hindrances to prayer, for which no such allowance can be made, and which we must watch against and overcome in the use of every appointed means, if we would expect the blessing of the Spirit. Our bodily infirmities themselves, when they proceed, as they often do, from sloth and self-indulgence, and from the fulness of a pampered appetite, are reasons for deep self-humiliation, when they mar our communion with God; and we should watch unto prayer, and even fast, if need be, remembering the apostle's words, 'I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, having preached the Gospel to others, I should myself be cast away.' And in like manner, the necessary business of life must be attended to; but the absorbing cares, the idle amusements, the mere vanities of the world, which so often abridge the time and destroy the comfort of prayer, should be watchfully guarded against, and steadily resisted, if we would enjoy the communion of the Spirit in our fellowship with God.

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James Buchanan was born in 1804. He held several pastorates before becoming Professor of Apologetics and later of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College in Edinburgh. He attained great fame as a preacher, his manner in the pulpit being marked by sustained clarity of thought and eloquent evangelical fervour. The most experimental of Buchanan's theological works is the one from which this article is taken, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit*, which was first published in 1843 and then republished by the [Banner of Truth Trust](#) in 1966.