

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is often regarded as America's greatest theologian and philosopher. Born in Windsor, Connecticut as the only son of eleven children to a well-known pastor, Timothy Edwards, whose wife Sarah was the daughter of the famous minister, Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan received his early education in his father's school, where he was nurtured in Reformed theology and Puritan piety. At age 13, he went to college at New Haven, earned the BA degree in 1720, and stayed on at Yale to complete a master's degree. He was ordained as a Congregationalist minister and as pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, where his powerful preaching was abundantly blessed in stimulating the Great Awakening. From 1751 to 1758, he ministered in Stockbridge, while evangelizing the Indians. In 1758, he accepted the presidency of Princeton, only to die a month later from a smallpox injection. Edwards was a prolific writer of scores of books as well as a champion of Christian zeal and spirituality.

Praying Together for a True Revival

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities, and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD.

—ZECHARIAH 8:20–22

In his introductory remarks, Edwards summarizes his sense of what God intends for His church in the latter days, showing from many parts of Scripture that God is planning to bring great revival and growth to His church, subsequent to a season of united and earnest prayer on the part of His people.

In this chapter, we have a prophecy of a future glorious advancement of the church of God, wherein it is evident that something further is intended than ever was fulfilled for the Jewish nation under the Old Testament. For here are plain prophecies of such things as never were fulfilled before the coming of the Messiah: particularly, what is said in the last two verses regarding “many people and strong nations” worshipping and seeking the true God, and of so great an accession of Gentile nations to the church of God that by far the greater part of the visible worshippers should consist of this new accession, so that they should be to the other as ten to one. Nothing happened, from the time of the prophet Zechariah to the coming of Christ, to answer this prophecy; it can have no fulfillment except either in the calling of the Gentiles in and after the days of the apostles, or in the future glorious enlargement of the church

of God in the latter ages of the world, foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament and by the prophet Zechariah in particular, in the latter part of his prophecy. It is most probable that what the Spirit of God refers to is that last and greatest enlargement and most glorious advancement of the church of God on earth, the benefits of which especially the Jewish nation were to have a very eminent and distinguished share.

There is great agreement between what is here said and other prophecies that must manifestly have respect to the church's latter-day glory: "The Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee" (Isa. 60:2-4). That whole chapter, beyond all dispute, refers to the most glorious state of the church of

God on earth. "Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once?" (Isa. 66:8). "Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her" (Isa. 66:10). "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream" (Isa. 66:12). "But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Micah 4:1-3). The beginning of Isaiah 2 is the same. There has been nothing yet brought to pass, in

any measure, to answer these prophecies. As the prophecy in my text, and the following verse, agrees with them, there is thus reason to think it refers to the same times. And indeed there is a remarkable agreement between the description given throughout this chapter and the representations made of those times elsewhere in the prophets.

However the prophet, in some parts of this chapter, may mean to future smiles of heaven on the Jewish nation, lately returned from the Babylonish captivity and resettled in the land of Canaan with a great increase of their numbers and wealth, and the return of more captives from Chaldea and other countries, yet the Spirit of God doubtless refers to things far greater than these, and of which these were but faint resemblances. We find it common in the prophecies of the Old Testament that when the prophets are speaking of divine favors and blessings on the Jews, attending or following their

return from the Babylonish captivity, the Spirit of God takes occasion to speak of the incomparably greater blessings on the church that shall attend and follow her deliverance from the spiritual or mystical Babylon, of which those were a type—and then speaks almost wholly of these latter and vastly greater things, seemingly to forget the former.

Whereas the prophet in this chapter speaks of God bringing His people again from the east and west to Jerusalem (Zech. 8:7–8) and multitudes of all nations taking hold of the skirts of the Jews (so far as this means literally the nation of the prosperity of Jacob), it cannot chiefly intend any return of the Jews from Babylon and other countries in the ancient times before Christ, for no such things attended any such return. It must therefore refer to the great calling and gathering of the Jews into the fold of Christ, and their being received to the blessings of His kingdom

after the fall of antichrist or the destruction of his mystical Babylon.

Observations on the Text

In the text, we have an account how this future glorious advancement of the church of God should be introduced, namely, by great multitudes in different towns and countries taking up a joint resolution, and coming into an express and visible agreement that they will, by united and extraordinary prayer, seek to God that He would come and manifest Himself, and grant the tokens and fruits of His gracious presence. Particularly, we may observe:

The Duty of Prayer

The duty, the attendance to which the glorious event foretold shall be brought on, is the duty of prayer. Prayer, some suppose, is here to be taken synechdochially¹ for the whole of divine worship, prayer being a principal part of worship in the

days of the gospel, when sacrifices are abolished. If so, this is to be understood only as a prophecy of a great revival of religion, and of the true worship of God among His visible people, the accession of others to the church, and turning of multitudes from idolatry to the worship of the true God. But it appears to me reasonable to suppose that something more special is intended with regard to the duty of prayer; considering that prayer is here expressly and repeatedly mentioned; and also considering how parallel this place is with many other prophecies that speak of an extraordinary spirit of prayer as preceding and introducing that glorious day of religious revival and advancement of the church's peace and prosperity. Add to this the agreeableness of what is here said, with what is said afterwards by the same prophet of the pouring out of a spirit of grace and supplication, as that with which

this great revival of religion shall begin (cf. Zech. 12:10).

The Good to be Sought in Prayer

The good that shall be sought by prayer is God Himself. It is said once and again, "They shall go to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts." This is the good they ask for: they seek by prayer the Lord of hosts Himself. To seek God, as the expression may perhaps be sometimes used in Scripture, may signify no more than seeking the favor or mercy of God. And if it be taken so here, praying before the Lord and seeking the Lord of hosts, must be synonymous expressions. It is a common thing in Scripture to signify the same thing repeatedly, by various expressions of the same import, for the greater emphasis.

But certainly the expression of seeking the Lord is very commonly used to signify something more; it implies that

God Himself is the great good desired and sought after; that the blessings pursued are God's gracious presence, the blessed manifestation of Himself, union and communion with Him—in short, God's manifestation and communications of Himself by His Holy Spirit. Thus the psalmist desired God, thirsted after Him, and sought Him (Ps. 42:2). "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.... My soul followeth hard after thee" (Ps. 63:1–2, 8). "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:25). The psalmist earnestly pursued after God, his soul thirsted after Him, he stretched forth his hands unto Him, and so forth (Ps. 143:6). It is therefore in Scripture the peculiar character of the saints that they seek God: "This is the generation

of them that seek him" (Ps. 24:6). "Your heart shall live that seek God" (Ps. 69:32).

If the expression in the text [Zech. 8:20–22] be understood in this sense—to seek the Lord of hosts—we must understand it as seeking that God, who had withdrawn or as it were hid Himself for a long time, would return to His church, and grant the tokens and fruits of His gracious presence and those blessed communications of His Spirit to His people and to mankind on earth, which He had often promised and which His church had long waited for.

It seems reasonable to understand the phrase "seeking the LORD of hosts" in this sense, not as merely signifying praying to God, because not only is the expression repeatedly added to praying before the Lord in the text, but the phrase, taken in this sense, is also exactly agreeable to other parallel prophetic representations. God's people seeking by earnest prayer the promised restoration of the church of God after the Babylonish captivity, and the

great apostasy that occasioned it, is called their *seeking God*, and *searching* for Him; and God's granting this promised revival and restoration is called his being *found* of them. "For thus saith the LORD, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity" (Jer. 29:10–14a). The prophets, from time to time, represent God to a low afflicted state of His church as being withdrawn and hiding Himself. "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isa. 45:15). "I hid me, and was wroth" (Isa. 57:17).

And they represent God's people, while His church is in such a state, before God delivers and restores the same, as seeking Him, looking for Him, searching and waiting for Him, and calling after Him. "I will go and return unto my place, till they acknowledge their offense, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early" (Hos. 5:15).

When God, in answer to their prayers and succeeding their endeavors, delivers, restores, and advances His church according to His promise, then He is said to answer, and come, and say, "Here am I," and to show Himself; and they are said to find Him. "Then shalt thou cry, and ye shall say, Here I am" (Isa. 58:9). "I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain" (Isa. 45:19). "The Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off the earth. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us:

this is the LORD; we have waited for him; we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:8–9); together with the next chapter (Isa. 26:8–9), we have waited for thee: "the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." "Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion" (Isa. 52:6–8).

Who is to be United in Seeking the Lord

We observe who will be united in thus seeking the Lord of hosts: the inhabitants of many cities and of many countries, strong nations, great multitudes in different parts of the world. From the representation made in the prophecy, it appears rational to suppose that it will be fulfilled something after this manner: a spirit of great prayer will be given to God's people in many places, disposing them to unite in prayer to God in an extraordinary manner, that He would appear for the help of His church and, in mercy to mankind, pour out His Spirit, revive His work, and advance His spiritual kingdom in the world as He has promised. This disposition to prayer, and union in it, will gradually spread more and more, increasing to greater degrees; at length a revival of religion will be gradually introduced with a disposition to greater engagement in the worship and service of God among

His professing people. Observing this will be the means of awakening others, making them sensible of the wants of their souls, exciting in them a great concern for their spiritual and everlasting good, leading them to earnestly cry to God for spiritual and everlasting good, and disposing them to join in that extraordinary seeking and serving of God.

Thus religion shall be propagated until the awakening reaches those who are in the highest stations and until whole nations be awakened, and there be at length an accession of many of the chief nations of the world to the church of God. After the inhabitants of many cities of Israel, or of God's professing people, have taken up and pursued a joint resolution to go and pray before the Lord and seek the Lord of hosts, others shall be drawn to worship and serve Him with them. Many people and strong nations shall join themselves to them; and there will, in time, be a vast accession to the church so that it will

be ten times as large as it was before—at length, all nations will be converted to God. Thus “ten men shall take hold, out of all the languages of the nations of the skirt of him that is a Jew” (Rom. 2:28–29), “saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23). Psalm 65:2 will be fulfilled: “O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come.”

The Mode of their Uniting Together in Prayer

Their unity is a visible union, a union by explicit agreement, a joint resolution declared by one to another, first proposed by some and readily and expressly followed by others. The inhabitants of one city will approach the inhabitants of another, who will comply, and thus the proposal will prevail and spread; one shall follow another's example, one and another shall say, “I will go also.” Some suppose that the words, “I will go also,”

are to be taken as the words of him who makes the proposal; as if to say, I do not propose that to you which I am not willing to do myself. I want you to go and I am ready to go with you. But this is to suppose no more is expressed in the latter words than was expressed before in the proposal itself; for these words, "let us go," signify as much. It seems to me much more natural to understand these latter words as the consent of those to whom the proposal is made, or the reply of one and another that falls in with it. This agrees with the plain design of the text, which is to represent the concurrence of great numbers in this affair; and more agreeable to the representation made in the next verse, of one following another, many taking hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew.

And though, if the words be thus understood, we must suppose an ellipsis in the text, something understood that is not expressed—as if it had been said, "Those

of other cities shall say, I will go also." Yet this is not difficult to understand, for such ellipses are very common in Scripture. We have an exact parallel with it in Jeremiah 3:22: "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we have come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God." In other words, the backsliding children shall say, "Behold, we have come into thee." Song of Songs 4:16 and 5:1 reads, "Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits. I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse...", and her beloved shall say, "I am come into my garden." So "the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself. Hear, O my people, and I will speak" (Ps. 50:6-7), and the judge shall say, "Hear, O my people." The psalms and prophets abound with such figures of speech.

The Manner of Prayer Agreed On

We now observe the manner of prayer

agreed on, or the manner in which they agree to engage in and perform the duty. Let us go *speedily* to pray, or, as it is in the margin, Let us go continually. When translated literally, the words are, Let us go in going. Such doubling of words is very common in the Hebrew language when its intent is to strongly express the thought. It generally implies the superlative degree of a thing, as the holy of holies signifies the most holy. It commonly denotes not only the utmost degree of a thing, but also the utmost certainty; when God said to Abraham. "In multiplying I will multiply thy seed" (Gen. 22:17), it implies that God would both certainly multiply His seed and also multiply it exceedingly. So when God said to Adam, "In the day that thou eatest thereof, in dying thou shalt die" (as the words are in the original), it implies both that he would surely die and also that he would utterly perish and be destroyed to the utmost.

In short, the repetition of words in the Hebrew generally denotes the strength of expression as various forms of strong speech do in other languages. It signifies not only the utmost degree of something but also the peremptoriness and terror of a threatening, the greatness and positiveness of a promise, the strictness of a command, and the earnestness of a request. When God says to Adam, "Dying thou shalt die," it is equivalent to such strong expressions in English as, "Thou shalt die surely" or "Thou shalt die with a witness." So when it is said in the text, "Let us go in going, and pray before the Lord," the strength of the expression represents the earnestness of those who make the proposal. And with respect to the duty proposed, it may be understood to signify that they should be speedy, fervent, and constant in it so that it be thoroughly performed.

Such Prayer is a Happy Thing

We may learn from the tenor of this prophecy, together with the context, that this union in such prayer is foretold to be a happy thing, acceptable to God and attended with glorious success.

From the whole, we may infer that it is very suitable and well-pleasing to God, for many people in different parts of the world to come into visible union in extraordinary, speedy, fervent, and constant prayer for those great effusions of the Holy Spirit, which shall bring on that advancement of Christ's church and kingdom that God has so often promised for the latter ages of the world. So from hence I would infer the duty of God's people, proposing a method for such an union as has been spoken of, in extraordinary prayer for this great mercy.

This Already a Common Practice

I will say something to one objection and

then hasten to the conclusion of the discourse. Some may be ready to object that what is proposed in this memorial is a new thing, never put in practice in the church of God before. But if the proposal is circumstantially new, this cannot be a sufficient objection. The duty of prayer is no new duty. For many of God's people expressly to agree on what they shall ask in prayer is no new thing. For God's people to agree on circumstances of time and place for united prayer, according to their own discretion, is no new thing. For many, in different places, to agree to offer up extraordinary prayers to God at the same time, as a token of their union, is no new thing, but has been commonly practiced by appointing days of fasting and prayer for special mercies. And if the people of God should engage in the duty of prayer for the coming of Christ's kingdom—resolving not to be negligent in this duty, as has been common with

professors of religion, but to be more frequent and fervent in it—this would be such a new thing and would only reform a former negligence. And for the people of God in various parts of the world, visibly and by express agreement, to unite for this extraordinary prayer is no more than their duty and no more than what is foretold the people of God will actually do before the time comes of the church's promised glory on earth. If this be a duty, then it is a duty to come into some method to render this practicable, but it is not practicable by any other method.

This Method of Prayer Not New

As to this particular method proposed to promote union in extraordinary prayer—God's people in various parts setting apart fixed seasons and times to offer up their prayers at the same time—it is not so new as some may possibly imagine. Part of a paper, dispersed abroad in Great Britain

and Ireland from London in the year 1712, was entitled, "A serious call from the city to the country, to join with them in setting apart some time, namely, from seven to eight every Tuesday morning, for the solemn seeking of God, each one in his closet, now in this so critical a juncture—Jonah 1:6, 'Call upon God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.'" What follows is an extract from it:

You have formerly been called upon to the like duty, and have complied with it; and that not without success. It is now thought highly seasonable to renew the call. It is hoped that you will not be more backward, when it is so apparent that there is even greater need. It is scarce imaginable how a professing people should stand in greater need of prayer, than we do at this day. You were formerly bespoke from that very pertinent text, Zechariah 8:21: "The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD (or, as

the marginal reading, more expressive of the original reading, is) continually, from day to day, to entreat the face of the Lord." According to this excellent pattern, we of this city, the metropolis of our land, think ourselves obliged to call upon our brethren in Great Britain and Ireland, at a time when our hearts cannot but meditate terror, and our flesh tremble for fear of God, and are afraid of His righteous judgments: those past being for the most part forgotten; and the signs of the times foreboding evil to come, being by the generality little, if at all, regarded. We cannot therefore but renew our earnest request, that all who make conscience of praying for the peace of Jerusalem, who wish well to Zion, who would have us and our posterity a nation of British Protestants, and not of popish bigots and French slaves, would give us, (as far as real and not pretended necessity will give leave) a meeting at the throne of grace, at the hour mentioned; there to wrestle with God, for turning away His

anger from us, for our deliverance from the hands of His and our enemies, for turning the councils of all Ahithophels, at home and abroad, into foolishness; for mercy to the queen and kingdom; for a happy peace, or successful war so long as the matter shall continue undetermined; for securing the protestant succession in the illustrious house of Hanover (by good and evil wishes to which, the friends and enemies of our religion and civil rights are so essentially distinguished), and especially for the influences of divine grace upon the rising generation, particularly the seed of the righteous, that the offspring of our Christian heroes may never be the plague of our church and country. And we desire that this solemn prayer be begun the first Tuesday after sight, and continued at least the summer of this present year, 1712. And we think every modest, reasonable, and just request, such as this, should not on any account be denied us; since we are not laying a burden on others, to which we will not most

willingly put our own shoulders; nay, indeed, count it much more a blessing than a burden. We hope this will not be esteemed by serious Protestants, or any denomination, a needless step; much less do we fear being censured by any such, as fanciful and melancholy, on account of such a proposal. We with them believe a providence, know and acknowledge that our God is a God hearing prayer. Scripture records, and our age is not barren of instances, of God's working marvelous deliverances for His people in answer to humble, believing, and importunate prayer; especially when prayer and reformation go together; which is what we desire. Let this counsel be acceptable to us, in this day of our church's calamity, and our common fears. Let us seek the Lord while He may be found, and call upon Him while he is near. Let us go and pray unto our God, and He will hearken unto us. We shall seek Him and find Him, when we search for Him with all our hearts. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem;

they shall prosper that love her. And may Zion's friends and enemies both cry out with wonder, when they see the work of God: Behold they pray! What hath God wrought! Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth.

1. That is, as a symbolic element representing the whole worship, of which it—prayer—is a part.