

THE POWER
OF PRAYER
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LITTLE BOOKS
ON RELIGION

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The power of prayer

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THE POWER OF PRAYER



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THE POWER OF
PRAYER

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London: Hodder & Stoughton

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P R A Y E R

CONSIDERED IN ITS RELATION TO
THE WILL OF MAN, AND IN ITS
DEPENDENCE ON THE SACRIFICE
OF CHRIST'S DEATH

PRAYER

CONSIDERED IN ITS RELATION TO THE
WILL OF MAN, AND IN ITS DEPEND-
ENCE ON THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST'S
DEATH.

‘ Man gropes in twilight dim,
Encompassed all his hours
By fearfullest powers
 Inflexible to him ;
That so he may discern
His feebleness,
And even for earth's success,
To Him in wisdom turn,
Who holds for us the keys of either home,
Earth and the world to come.’

EVERY subject worthy of true and deep consideration must be considered *in itself*; its parts, if reviewed separately, must yet be viewed in their relation to the laws, conditions,

and ultimate design of the great Whole they belong to. Christianity is a living whole; it is a system transcending the world system, with which it is now connected; it is a supernatural system based upon a series of supernatural transactions. It is a solemn world-appealing, world-accusing *fact*,—a fact existing along with many other facts, with which it seems in apparent disagreement; it is a kingdom, as was emphatically declared by its Great Founder, ‘not of this world.’ It is simply idle, therefore, in considering any of the great laws of this kingdom, to speak of the doctrines¹ of expiation, sacrifice, and the like, ‘as mystical enthusiasm, a dithyrambic mode of expression,’—as idle as it would be in a person wholly ignorant of the

¹ The *Saturday Review*, Sept. 9, 1865, on De Maistre.

great laws of the natural kingdom in discussing the question of light or heat to set down electricity as 'a mystical theory.' Let us at least learn something about this great kingdom; let us make ourselves familiar with its genius, its laws, its administration, and then to talk nonsense about it will be at least a conscious and responsible act.

*'Muto non è, come altri crede, il cielo
Sordi siam noi, a cui l'orecchio serra
Lo strepito insolente della terra.'*

An unbeliever, whether his denial of supernatural influence and aid assume an explicit form or not, is, in a simple and literal sense, a man of this world. He is a man who lives and is guided by the natural order, and is not solicitous as to influences that may lie outside of it. He lives by what he sees, as well as

for what he sees. The believer, or Christian, moves also among facts, but among facts of a supernatural order; *he* also lives by what he sees, but faith has enlarged his range of vision, and brought within its ken a world of spiritual realities; has opened up a life to be even now lived among them, with laws by which his actual life is explained and guided. *This life is one life*, interdependent, connected by the strictest organic unity. It lives, it moves, it works through its own appointed laws; it breathes its own breath, its slenderest thread is linked with its mightiest power. 'He who receiveth Me,' saith our Lord, 'receiveth Him that sent Me.' The works of this kingdom are works of faith, and its faith is counted to it for righteousness. 'He who believeth on the Son is not con-

denmed; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.'

In this great system there is nothing really arbitrary, though much that appears so. All is unseen order, invisible yet sure connexion. In the kingdom of grace, as in that of nature, are

'lasting links
From highest Heaven let down.

The flowers still faithful to their stem
Their fellowship renew,
The stems are faithful to the root
That worketh out of view,
And to the rock the root adheres
In every fibre true.
Close clings to earth the living rock,
Though threatening still to fall,
The earth is constant to her sphere,
And God upholds them all.'¹

¹ Wordsworth.

All things in Christianity hold by its great central truth, Redemption; each doctrine, each rite of the Christian Church, each instinct (if I may so express myself) of the Christian heart, leads, if tracked home, to that meritorious Sacrifice which burst the gates of Death for our ransomed race, and made a highway of peace and reconciliation between the redeemed spirit and its God. We know not the nature and degree of intercourse that Adam originally enjoyed with his Maker. It was probably close and intimate to a degree which we cannot now realise even in thought. It might be *natural* to him to talk to God simply, confidingly, as a child talks to its parent; but since the entrance of sin into humanity there has been a wall of separation between man and God. They have stood farther off

from each other, and it seems evident that *since the Fall* there has been no true approach to God, no loving communion with Him, in fact, *no prayer* without sacrifice. The history of the elder Church surrounds us as regards this point with a cloud of witnesses. We find a proof of it in the story of Cain and Abel, with its test of acceptance and rejection. Noah, Abraham, and Job, the priestly fathers of the primæval dispensation, all offered sacrifice. Then came the Law, the school-master bringing us to Christ, under whose teaching prayer and sacrifice are never disunited. 'Under the old Covenant,' says Kurtz, 'sacrifice is *not* the symbol of prayer, the mere outward sign of an inward dedication — *it is the objective assurance of the expiation which man requires in drawing near to God.*' Sacrifice

makes prayer possible ; it opens the way to God.

Even the altar of incense, that great type of the prayers of the Christian Church, on which no bleeding sacrifice was offered, but only the bloodless one of incense, representing the prayers of the congregation already reconciled, sanctified, and restored to fellowship with God, was *itself* sprinkled by the priest with the blood of atonement.

Then came Christianity, a better covenant, established on better promises, and, as the apostle emphatically tells us, on better¹ sacrifices, dedicated like the first one, 'not without blood.' The way into its holiest places, its deepest spiritual communions, opened not as before 'through the blood of others,' but its entrance into heaven² itself, obtained

¹ Hebrews ix. 23.

² Hebrews ix. 24.

through the might of that one perfect, all-sufficient Sacrifice, through which it still lives, and moves, and breathes, and *prays*.

Even the most false religions, so long as they retain the idea of sacrifice, always retain along with that idea the instinct of prayer; and in this respect Paganism is a deeper thing than so-called¹ Natural Religion, and contains within it seeds of which pure Deism knows nothing; a sense of need and sin, a value for expiation which has doubtless even in the most darkened nations, been derived from primæval knowledge of the true God. Mahometanism is, on the other hand, a creed without sacrifice, without mystery, and (so far as I am informed on this point) without *prayer*; its deep-rooted fatalism

¹ 'The term "*revealed religion*,"' says Coleridge, 'is a pleonasm. *There is no other.*'

leaves no room for the pleading human voice of supplication; its only language is that of acquiescence in that 'inexorable will which it calls God.'¹ Deism also adores and acquiesces, it does not *pray*. 'I accustom my mind,'² says Rousseau, 'to sublime contemplations. I meditate upon the order of the universe, not for the sake of reducing it to vain systems, but to admire it unceasingly, to adore the wise Creator who makes Himself felt within it. I converse with the Author of the universe; I imbue all my faculties with His Divine essence. My heart melts over His benefits. I bless Him for all His gifts, but *I do not pray to Him. What have I to ask Him for?*'

We might say, reasoning *a priori*, What is there so simple as prayer?

¹ Palgrave's *Arabia*. ² *Emile*.

What so *natural* as to seek the help and favour of One who is confessed to be the cause and ruler of all things? Yet it may be doubted whether the natural man ever prays; it may be doubted whether any heart save that which is renewed by the Holy Spirit ever lifts up to God that fervent, *inwrought* prayer which availeth much; and this because the sense of fixity and order is so deep sunk within the human spirit that a secret distrust of prayer seems native to it, and it appears idle to expect that God, whose goings are from everlasting, will break His appointed order at a request from mortal lips. So strong is the sense of this fixity, that there seems but one other thing strong enough to break it,—the voice of a risen Saviour, which, when the spiritually dead hear, they live and pray. The realm of nature, however

fair and fruitful, is but the land of Egypt, *the house of bondage*; and until man's spirit hears the voice that calls him out of it, baptizing him in the cloud and in the sea, he is unable to break through the network of the subtle spells and sorceries she weaves around him. He is a captive to the strength of her continual miracle, her procession of days and nights, of summer and winter, of youth and age; the exhibition of God's power lays such hold upon him, that the sense of the Divine as *Power* only grows upon the mind (as it does in every form of Paganism) *till it leaves no room for any action of the human will*, until it is met by the other great, ever-enduring miracle of God's love, as it is manifested in Him who lived and died and rose again for man; in Him who for man and as man ever

liveth, the everlasting Witness, He who bears record in heaven, as He bare it on earth, to God's sympathy with His creature. Nature is God's *going* forth, terrible in splendour and majesty; grace is His *coming* forth in pity and in love; the Father coming forth to meet His erring son.

'*He who hath the Son hath the Father also,*' and he who hath not the Son hath not seen, neither known the Father. Nature shows us no Father. 'Nature,' says one¹ who acknowledges no other God, 'acts with fearful uniformity. Stern as fate, absolute as tyranny, merciless as death; too vast to praise, too inexorable to propitiate, *it has no ear for prayer, no heart for sympathy, no arm to save.*' 'He,' saith Christ, 'who hath seen Me hath seen the Father

¹ Holyoake.

also.' He who has seen Christ has seen a greater sight than that of

'Suns on suns that rise and set
From creation to decay.'

He has seen God sympathising with and aiding man. He has come to a pause in nature's overwhelming chorus, a break in her adamant chain. He has passed from a world of fixity into a world of life. 'If ye believe in the Son, the Son shall make you free.' The sight of the cross, God's mighty interference for man, is the death-blow to Fatalism,¹

¹ Yet is the cross itself a decreed thing, a part of God's everlasting purpose. The Lamb was 'slain from the foundation of the world.' But Predestination and Fatalism, though they seem to have many points in common, hold by such different roots that they cannot co-exist in the same mind. Fatalism is Atheistic, and rests upon the idea of a blind and unintelligent, *therefore* unrelenting force, rigid, though ever working. Foreknowledge and counsel presup-

which but for it, under one or another form, reigns over all the sons of Adam. And I venture to repeat once more, that no one truly prays who does not pray in the freedom of Christ's life, and work, and death. I venture also to state that the measure of faith in His merits and sacrifice will be found to be the measure of prayer in the case of any individual or of any Church. The two great branches of our Lord's family differ so widely as to all which constitutes the government and administration

pose the presence and action of an intelligent power, and *with that*, involve the possibility of changing and influencing its determination. We cannot, for example, hope to stop the action of a machine, unless we either know and can direct the laws it works by, or are strong enough to break it altogether; but we may always hope to prevail with a Being capable of thought and feeling, howsoever stern and terrible.

of Divine grace, that any communion between them, except that of charity, is little short of an intellectual impossibility. But the Catholic and the Protestant are at one as regards redemption. Each agrees as to the facts of man's fall, and sin, and need. Each for his restoration relies upon the supernatural help which Christ's work for man obtained; therefore, though these two may misunderstand and misrepresent each other, they are none the less brethren.

‘See

Their speech is one, their witnesses agree.’

Each believes, each loves, each prays, and that from the very depth and ground of the heart. And as regards any individual member of either communion, we shall find that it is the sight of the cross, and of all the tremendous associations that are

bound up with it—the sense of guilt, of condemnation, of deliverance, of infinite loss, and everlasting gain,—that brings, that *binds* the soul to prayer. It is this sight that makes of every awakened soul a priest, an intercessor, no longer bringing, as does the mere nominal believer, his ‘fruit of the lips,’ as tithes and offerings were brought under the law, at stated times, and in connexion with stated ceremonies, but offering up to God *sacrifice through sacrifice*; no longer trusting in its own repentance, its own faith, its own prayer, but joining its every petition to the might of that prevailing blood, which is ‘*itself* the most powerful of all intercessions.’¹

To talk to nominal believers on the subject of prayer, is generally to find that they have little confidence

¹ F. W. Faber.

in prayer *as a power*. Do they believe that effects, *alters* anything? No, for nominal Christianity is but a refined naturalism; it wears the cross, seeing that it cannot be got out of either the Bible or the Church, as an ornament, but it never presses it to its heart, it never roots its life beneath its shadow; it is to it a thing extrinsic, adventitious, out of harmony with all that it *really* believes and grows to. Nominalism contains within it no deep-seated sense of sin, of need, or of dependence; how then can it lay its grasp upon the great co-related truths of sacrifice, expiation, mediation? But far otherwise is it with him who has learnt to look upon himself *as a mortal and corruptible being with immortal and perfect ends*; far otherwise with him who feels himself urged towards communion with the

Divine through the instinct and necessity of the renewed nature, yet unable *from a felt deficiency in that nature* to attain to such communion without help from the Divine itself! Such a spirit is prepared to look beyond itself for deliverance and for aid: 'How,' asks Chateaubriand, 'is man in his state of actual imperfection to attain to that ideal to which he continually tends? Some will say, through the exertion of his own energy. *But there is a manifest disproportion between the given amount of force, and the weight it has to remove.*' Hence the demand for auxiliary aids to human weakness: hence the need of Christ, of faith, of *prayer*, 'the dynamic agency of heaven.'¹

The Christian's prayer is a supernatural intercourse founded upon a

¹ De Maistre.

supernatural work; it is built upon Christ's express command, and linked for ever with His explicit promise, 'Ask *in My name* and ye shall receive'; it is based upon faith in His meritorious work; it is never so strong as when it seeks to join to His great sacrifice the chief oblation of the Christian covenant, the offering up of the human will, *the freedom of which is a costly present made by God to man*, that the son of His adoption might have somewhat of his own to offer. And it is in vain to come before God without this chosen offering, this sacrifice of a free heart, prized by Him long after He has ceased to delight in burnt-offerings and material sacrifices for sin. Many prayers, doubtless, fail or are hindered because they are not *submitted* prayers. He offers up a true, prevailing prayer, who, while

he prays, keeps his eye ever fixed upon the one great Sacrifice, while he offers up that of his own will, submitted, *slain*, or if not slain, at least bound and captive,—a will which, through submission, has become *one* with the will of God. Yes, I would say also, that there are eminent sacrifices which God is too merciful to demand of all His children, but to which He *invites* His chosen servants, sacrifices which, but for the strength which God gives, would be impossible, but which, when offered up through His eternal Spirit, even with strong crying and tears, He never fails to bless, to make them fruitful, and to multiply them exceedingly through accepted and *answered* prayers.¹

¹ So close and evident is the union between accepted prayer and the sacrifice of the human will, that it has led me to meditate upon the

Prayer is the voice of one who was created free, although he was

meaning of those lives on which God has laid so heavy a burden of pain and repression, that they can only be lived at all by 'leaving out the whole natural man'; lives so filled up by endurance, that there is little room left in them for self-denial or sacrifice. A life filled with pain is perhaps meant by God to be a life filled with prayer. However blank and unintelligible it may be to men, its Godward aspect may be full of meaning. Stript of leaf and blossom, it may stand bare like a cross, appealing and interceding. Pain, in its origin, and its uses, is as deep a mystery as sin, and like that cognate mystery, it is one which grows but the more obscure and perplexing for being closely tracked. The medicinal, disciplinary property of pain is one that lies upon the surface, so easily seen that it cannot be missed; it is a bitter herb which has been in every age and clime gathered freely by the whole Christian Church, and eaten at Her great continual Passover,—

'The Master sayeth "*Where?*"

The heart makes ready answer; on its Chief
Long waiting, little hath it to prepare
To keep the Feast of Grief.'

born in chains; it is at once self-assertion and self-surrender; *it*

Yet, when we have allowed that pain is remedial and purifying, we feel that we have not exhausted its meaning, perhaps have not approached to that which is its highest value. The Church of Rome, in its profound appreciation of that saying of St. Paul's, 'I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, discovers in pain, even in that which is simply physical and inarticulate, a power which in the extent of its working can be but dimly guessed at,—a mighty power of *expiation*, ever joining itself to the one atonement, inseparable from that work, which has given a value to all suffering, so that not even the moth

'Shrivels in an ineffectual fire.'

Lacordaire, in words that do not at once disclose their awful depth of meaning, speaks of earth's mute and many sufferers as being '*the obscure victims of the cross which has saved them.*' Pascal's prayers are like swords of fire, swift and prevailing, moulded and sharpened in the furnace, *victorious through pain.*

I have seen a curious letter from Chateau-

claims a will even in surrendering it, when it says, 'Not my will, but Thine, be done.' It is, perhaps, the greatest of all witnesses to the spiritual nature of man, as nothing so dignifies human nature, or so enhances the sense of its fixed relation with the Divine as does prayer, the true conception of which involves the idea of a certain power possessed by humanity over God. Neither is there any such other witness to man's spiritual freedom as

briand to Guizot in answer to a criticism in which Guizot appears to have objected to his ascribing a redeeming power to the death of a martyr. 'I admit that the word *redeemed* escaped me inadvertently, and in truth contrary to my intention, and I shall efface it from the next edition. The question is not of a redemption, but of *expiation*, which is entirely consistent with faith. *The blood of the martyr draws down blessings from heaven through the merits of the blood of the Saviour.*'

is wrapped up in prayer, man's *permitted*, though *submitted* wish and will and choice. When God gave man reason, says Milton, He gave him freedom to choose, *for freedom is but choosing*. Prayer is God's acknowledgment, His indorsement of His own gift of freedom to man; it is His royal invitation (an invitation which has in it the nature and force of a command) to man to exert this privilege, to use this power. It is God the Almighty who says, and who says to man, 'Ask Me concerning My sons, and concerning the work of My hands, *command ye Me*.'

Prayer is spirit acting upon spirit; *it is the will of man brought to bear upon the will of God*. An idea of its all-powerful and *determining* influence with God may be gathered from our Saviour's deeply significant

words, 'Believing ye shall receive.' Prayer must be believing to be effectual. Now, in any natural action, say that of sowing a seed, the mental attitude of the sower signifies nothing; the seed will come up whether he expects it to do so or not; but in any act between two conscious intelligent beings, the mental attitude being obviously everything, the measure of faith is the measure of prayer. Faith makes the soul God's *creditor* (believer), in a literal sense it gives the soul a claim and hold upon Him.

When we look a little further into the nature of the human will, we shall find in it, as regards Divine things, a passivity, an inability to move of its own accord towards God, which corresponds with the saying of Scripture, 'A man can receive nothing unless it be given

him from heaven.' Yet in this very subjection there is a principle of freedom, and the work and teaching of Christ, even in proclaiming man's absolute dependence upon God, frees the soul, by placing it in affinity with Him, the source of spiritual freedom. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.'

The soul's passivity is intelligent and responsive,¹ and in the work of

¹ And to the presence of this responsivity within the human soul is owing that peculiar favour of its Maker, which has caused Him to find His delight in the sons of men. For this cause hath God set His love upon them, that they only of all His works have been made able to know His name. While nature is held to obedience by a perpetual decree, bound by a law which cannot be broken, to man has been imparted the capacity of uncompelled obedience, of rational reciprocating love. So greatly does God respect the freedom of the soul's choice, that He asks man for his heart as for a free gift, 'My son, give me thine heart.'

regeneration the Spirit of God does not move upon chained unconscious matter, *but upon spirit, the communicated breath of God's own freedom.* The first Adam was made a living soul, the second Adam was made a quickening spirit; and it is in the action of this spirit upon this soul, *in life acting upon life,* that renewal unto God consists. The Spirit of God, in acting upon the human spirit, acts upon that which can attract, which can invite, which can *resist* it. It acts upon a living

Poets are fond of contrasting the magnificent harmony of outward creation with the social disorganisation that is everywhere so apparent. This is sometimes done with a view to the disparagement of human nature, but if we look deeper, we see in these very wanderings, these evil choices of the will, the patent of its true nobility. While in creation all things continue in a fixed mechanical routine, 'the Man has become as one of us, to know good and evil.'

agent, which having once received an impulse, needs not, as do things without life, to be dragged or propelled onwards. It can say, '*Draw me, and I will run after thee.*' Therefore is the voice¹ of the Spirit a call,

¹ Nowhere does this voice find a clearer utterance than in the Psalms, those responsive songs in which the soul, lowly, submissive, and depending, seeks guidance, encouragement, and protection from a Divine helper. It confesses its incapacity for unaided goodness, yet conscious of the favour it has already received, it meekly allows for the presence of something within itself, which can both attract and respond to the blessing it craves for.

'Make me to go in the way of Thy commandments, *for therein is my desire.*'

'I will run in the way of Thy commandments, *when Thou shalt enlarge my heart.*'

'The distinguishing characteristic of the Hebrew poetry is that it is a *covenant poetry, founded on a sense of friendship and of established relation with God.*' Do not these words of Herder's give the key to that human element within the Psalms, free and yet depending, which, as is ever the case with love which

wakening up the soul to its own life, and giving it credit for an ability to hearken, to answer, and to obey.

Work,' says the apostle, and why?—because God is working in you to will and to do; 'Pray,' says the believer, because the Holy Spirit itself is praying in your prayer.

The voice of prayer, it may be again repeated, is free, *because* it is depending. The more firmly the soul believes in God's providential ordering of human affairs, the more clearly does it recognise that *along-side of this order there is a space left for the action of the will of man.* What can appear more fastbound than material nature does! 'A law cannot exist but in reciprocity, claims much, and yet continually brings something of its own? How different is Browning's (so-called) Hebrew thought of God in his poem of 'Ben-Ezra,' the mere yielding up of humanity to destiny to be shaped out of the passive clay at will!

of nature' has become a proverbial expression for whatever is fixed and irrevocable, yet even in this region, 'the hiding-place of God's power,' it is clear that man can and does work along with his great Father; it is evident, as Mansel remarks, that human will and human action are continually working changes and modifications in outward nature which would never have taken place had nature been left to herself, and *this without deranging the fixed stability of nature as a whole.* And have we not the strongest grounds for extending this elasticity to the unseen kingdom of God's grace, where it is certain that God has left room for prayer—where it is evident that He even waits for it? Is Will less powerful in this region than in the natural one, where, as De Maistre observes, its irresistible

energy has passed into a proverb Can Will cleave and pave its way through heaven as upon earth? Probably far more surely; or where had been Faith's far-extended conquests, where the promises obtained, the kingdoms subdued, the righteousness wrought, the dead raised to life again through prayer?

We know that God's nature is unchangeable; *are we sure that His will is equally so?* Is the wish, *the submitted wish* of a human heart able to alter the counsel of the Almighty? Can the humble request of believing lips restrain, accelerate, *change* the settled order of events? Can prayer make things that are not to be as though they were? Are events, in short, brought about through prayer that would not otherwise take place? Yes, a thousand times yes! To believe anything

short of this is to take the soul out of every text that refers to prayer, is to do away the force of every scriptural illustration that bears upon it—to believe anything short of this is to believe that God has placed a mighty engine in the hands of His creature, *but one that will not work*, useful only as a scientific toy might be, that helps to bring out a child's faculties, valuable only as a means of training the soul to commune with God. Yet what so easy for the unbeliever as to cavil at prayer; what so easy even for the Christian as to fail and falter in this region, and to stop short of the fulness of this, God's own Land of Promise, through unbelief? The commonplace objection to prayer, founded upon the supposed immutability of the laws by which God governs the world, is easily met and answered by the fact,

that *prayer is itself one of these laws*, upon whose working God has determined that a certain result shall follow—

‘An element

That comes and goes unseen, yet doth effect
Rare issues by its operance.’

But not so easily answered are other and deeper objections, to which this great question lies open. If prayer is indeed so efficacious, it may be asked, why not so universally,—why not so immediately? How long, will sincere experience testify, have we prayed in faith for certain objects, how long and how vainly! To a thousand such thoughts and surmises we may be unable to give a single satisfactory answer, only we shall do well to remember that there is not one of them which does not equally tell against any other part of the system included in the work

of Christ for man. All that we as yet see of the Christian dispensation would lead a thoughtful person to *expect* in prayer, as in all else that belongs to it, an apparent check and inadequacy. For all that we see as yet of Christ's work presupposes a deficiency, all connected with His office is remedial and *partial* in its efficacy, as the remedial must ever be. Why, it may be asked, has Christ's great sacrifice of Himself for the world, His abiding gift of the Holy Spirit to His Church, told so partially on the mass of mankind,—so feebly even in the hearts that have received them? Why, to go back a step further, was man created a being *needing* to be redeemed? To all such questions, not only any one part, but the whole plan of salvation lies open, and if we could answer any one of them sin, pain,

death, *redemption*, earth's darkest shadows, heaven's most dazzling light, would probably be no longer mysterious to us, and the veil would be lifted from all hearts and from all nations.

Meanwhile, all that we see around and within us testifies to the presence of a mighty opposing agency, and bears witness, also, to a reserve or economy of grace, a hiding of God's power, in which we can, even in this hiding, as through a glass darkly, even now discern a merciful purpose. All that we now see of Christ's kingdom bears upon it the marks of cost and labour, of infinite gain secured by finite loss; the song of the Church carries on from age to age the burden of the old Greek chorus—

‘Sing sorrow, strife and sorrow, but let
Victory remain.’

The work of our salvation, it is evident, *is a work*. Nature brings forth with ease and rejoicing; the earth its grass, its herb, its fruit-bearing tree, the waters bring forth 'abundantly'; but every birth of the redeemed is single, and bears upon it the marks of the Lord Jesus, the birth-mark of a mighty soul that has travailed for it betwixt life and death. Why should we expect that the work of prayer would be easy, swift, and triumphant, while the work of grace in general is so slow and difficult, while the march of the Church is so uneven and hesitating, the miracle of conversion so tardy¹ and interrupted?

All that we see in Christ's kingdom bears witness to powerful outward resistance on the part of an enemy, and also testifies to a secret restraint

¹ '*Conversion, ce tardif miracle.*'—MASSILLON.

on the part of a friend; we find in it reserve, economy, something kept in store, not yet wholly given. This reserve enters largely into prayer. It is not every faithful Christian who can say unto his Lord 'Thou hast given me my heart's desire, Thou hast not denied me the request of my lips'; neither can all of God's children join in that fervent ascription of the Psalmist's, 'I love the Lord *because* He has heard the voice of my petitions.' We hear another, a deeper voice exclaim, 'O my God, I cry in the day-time and Thou hearest not, and in the night season also I take no rest.'

'But Thou continuest holy, O Thou Worship of Israel.' God, the Eternal, liveth, and while He lives, no prayer that has been truly lifted up to Him can die. The Christian rejoices in an answered prayer; he waits for

the accomplishment of a yet unfulfilled one; he is inured to delay, resigned to denial; through Christ which strengtheneth him, he can do all things except cease to pray. A Christian's daily common life is full of unseen, unrecognised miracles, *and among the greatest of all miracles worked by prayer is faith in prayer itself.* The Christian believes in Christ, though he sees not yet all things put under Him; he believes in prayer though he sees not yet floods descend in answer to it. *Prayer is the instinct of the redeemed soul.* It is usual to speak of praise as of something in its nature higher and more complete than prayer. It may possibly be so in so far as it is more suited to the glorified, the angelic state, the life which has all and abounds, and has nothing to desire or to ask for. But in our present

order, there is no voice so sweet, so powerful, so essentially human, as that of prayer, none other so natural to a being like man, at once rational, fallen, and *redeemed*. It is possible, without any great strain upon imagination, to conceive of inanimate creation as filled with praise. It is easy to think of the winds and waves in their restless movement, the birds in their song, the stars in their silence, the very grass and flowers, as worshipping God in their beauty and their gladness. Often the air around us seems full of thanksgiving, breathless with adoration; but who, even in poetry, ever dreamt that nature *prayed*? Prayer is the voice of one who errs and loves; of one who sins, and suffers, and aspires; it is the voice of a child to its father, the voice of man to his God.

And in entering even a very little way into the perplexed question of denials and delays in prayer, it seems well to touch upon a point too little taken into account in the general Christian mind, that question of the times and seasons which the Father hath left in His own hand, and which we cannot take into ours. 'All things,' said the heathen, 'are not possible to all men at all times'; and for want of duly acknowledging this statute of limitation, many devotional books, and a great deal of religious teaching, tend only to bring strain and anguish upon the sincere mind, which feels that it cannot rise to the prescribed level until it is lifted there by God Himself. There come alike to individuals and to churches days of refreshing from the Lord, times of visitation which the strongest urgency of the human

spirit cannot antedate, but which it is its highest wisdom to *meet*, so as to be found willing in the day of God's power. If the whole year were one long harvest, where were then the sowing, the patient expectation, the ploughing in the cold? A vintage comes once in a year, a triumph perhaps once in a lifetime. So has the Christian life its seasons, its epochs, its days of benediction. There are times, probably, in the life of *every* faithful believer, when things long desired and sought after, are dropt like golden gifts within his bosom. There are few tried Christians who have not known times when God, suddenly or gradually, has lifted a weight from out their lives, has brought a power within their souls, has so mitigated some afflictive dispensation, as to make that endurable which was previously intolerable, has

rendered some long desired and apparently unattainable temporal or spiritual aim possible, practicable, easy. How many blessings at such a season will God, by one sweep of His mighty arm, bring within the soul's grasp! He will at once enlarge the soul's border, and visibly defend the land He has made so broad and fruitful, giving it rest from all its enemies round about. Often in times of great tribulation¹ the prophecy of

¹ In prayer there are many voices, none of them, however faint and formal, altogether without signification; but there is among these the prayer of instance (*instantia*), the prayer which the soul even in offering it feels that God *must* answer. We know not why it is that in prayer man's direst necessity should be God's chosen opportunity, that the fierce onset of temptation, the pang of sharp tribulation, the pressure of some irresistible weight impending over the whole being, and threatening to crush out life itself, should enable the soul to lift itself up straight to God as it

such a season will be borne like a breath from heaven across the wasted and desolate spirit—

‘A little hint to solace woe,
A hint, a murmur breathing low,
I may not speak of what I know.’

There are times in the life of every Christian when some great truth is clearly revealed to him, some long-locked door of promise left with the

cannot do under ordinary circumstances, should give it power to plead with God and to prevail, to take hold of His great strength against His great strength, to contend with Him in His own might—the might of love. Why it should be so it seems impossible to explain; but it seems certain that times of danger, distress, and keen anguish are often times of chosen access to God. When the heart is driven into its deepest recess, it finds itself nearest to its God; let but its distress step short of despair, which makes prayer impossible,—despair, the last, worst device of the enemy which would rob the soul of its God.

key hanging in the wards, *only waiting to be turned by a prayer.* At these times God is waiting to be gracious, and what He appears in many cases to wait for is the full consent and submission of the human will. Often, at such times, the Holy Spirit, instructed in the mind and will of God, will allure the soul into the direction where God intends to meet and bless it. The life will be drawn towards the attainment of some specific object, the heart will be enticed to covet earnestly some peculiar grace; God will appear to *invite* the soul to pray for the especial gift he intends to bestow.¹ ‘*Yet for this thing,*’ He says, speaking of some boon which He kept in store for His ancient Church, ‘*will I be inquired of by them.*’ God sometimes seems in His dealings with the world to

¹ Ezekiel xxxvi. 36, 37.

wait till He has secured the co-operation of man's wish and will. 'Pray,' says our Lord Himself, 'to the Lord of the harvest, that He may send forth labourers into His harvest.' The harvest is God's, and it is He who must send the labourer; still man must pray. His great Father worketh not alone; He has need of man's voice, man's heart, man's energy, man's *prayer*.

And great as is the admitted mystery of prayer, there can be little doubt that much of its secret lies wrapped in the co-operation of the divine and human will. In prayer man is 'a labourer together with' his God. We have had enough in our day of the shallow evangel of labour, man's gospel preached to man; we have been told till we are weary of hearing it, 'that he who works prays'; but let us lift up our

hearts high enough to meet a fuller, deeper, richer truth; let us learn that 'he who prays works,' works even with his God, is humble enough, is bold enough to help Him who upholds all things with the word of His power. Let us look through the history of the whole Church, beginning with that elder one, whose story is but the initial of our own writ large and plain. What is the Old Testament but the record of the universal Christian heart and life rudely dramatised, flung forth as a deep spiritual truth might be shadowed and outlined in some mediæval mystery play, and left in that picture-writing for ever? And what do we find in its every record but this, God instructing, pardoning, blessing man through man? 'He maketh His angels spirits, and His ministers a flaming fire.' They are,

as their names import, God's messengers, His flaming pursuivants, His heralds of peace and goodwill. But who, through the whole spiritual history of our fallen yet mighty race, have been chosen by God as teachers, as enlighteners, as intercessors for man but men—'Prophets from among our brethren'? When it is an angel who is the medium of communication between God and man, the work is an outward one, it is something to be done or told. When man bears the Lord's message and burden, the work is intimate, searching, spiritual; the word sent, be it of reproof or of consolation, is a true gospel, bringing man nearer to his God, placing him in a new and spiritual relation with his Creator, showing him plainly of the Father. It is not angels, but men, who are the princes of both the new and elder covenant—'having

power with God.' 'Surely the Lord will do nothing but He revealeth it to His servants the prophets.'¹ The time would fail me to tell of Abraham, of Jacob (the type of so many feeble yet faithful believers), of Moses, of Hezekiah, of Job, of Elijah, of Daniel, men whose attitude with God is that of priests, whose outstretched hands at once deprecate wrath and draw down blessing. The New Testament is but one long acknowledgment to man's power with God, in form less striking, perhaps, than in the Old, because less concentrated, but in fact more wondrous, because it is referred to as such a simple acknowledged thing. St. Paul, throughout his whole Epistles, not only confidently intends and expects to bless his converts through his prayers for them; but continually claims their

¹ Amos iii. 7.

prayers for him as something which he absolutely *needs*. It is through their prayers that he must be enlarged, 'helped,' 'furthered.' But what need to multiply examples? Why seek further illustrations of the truth that God, through Him whom He hath chosen, hath made of man 'a priest for ever'? When God would bless man, He chooses oftentimes to bless him through man. Yea, when God would save man, it was His will (to borrow the sublime expression of Jeremy Taylor) to save him by way of a Man.

Therefore let men pray always. Our present day seems full of question, of urgency on all points connected with prayer. It seems disposed to put it to the proof, to ask what it can effect or alter; it appears inclined, as regards this great subject, to ask for a sign from heaven; but

what sign can be given it but the sign of the Son of Man in heaven? The warfare of prayer and its accomplishment is the warfare, the accomplishment of the Cross, a conquest through apparent defeat. Its work is one with that great effectual Work in which its strength lies wrapped and hidden. It is, like it, a real work and an effectual work, though one of which the believer, with his Lord, must sometimes be content to say,—‘I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength in vain, yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, *and my work with my God.*’

PRAYER AS INCESSANT

PRAYER AS INCESSANT

DORA GREENWELL'S chapter throws a welcome stress upon two points in respect of prayer. First, it is more a matter of will, and therefore of freedom, than we mostly think. And second, it is connected more directly and vitally than we realise with the cross of Christ.

I should like to follow up her suggestions on these heads in the first chapter I add to hers,¹ and in so doing I should like by a word to express my sense of the deep spiritual insight that pervades all her work—the deeper as she nears the centre. She is a great expositor of the cross

¹ In my second chapter I take up a third point on which she presses towards her close—the insistency in prayer.

and its poignancy. And her vision is as delicate as it is deep. She has the saintly note.

As a point of departure I quote two sentences which reflect briefly the position she takes—a position which any one must take who connects prayer seriously with positive Christianity. She says, ‘No one truly prays who does not pray in the freedom of Christ’s life and work and death. And the measure of faith in His merits and sacrifice will be found to be the measure of prayer in the case of any individual or any Church.’

Prayer as Christian freedom, and prayer as Christian life—these two points I would expand.

I. First, briefly, as to the moral freedom involved and achieved in prayer.

Prayer has been described as religion in action. But that as it stands is not a sufficient definition of prayer which revolves on the cross. The same thing might be said about the choicest forms of Christian service to humanity. It is true enough, and it may carry us far; but only if we become somewhat explicit about the nature of the religion at work. It is certainly not the action of a religion mainly subjective. It is the effective work of a religion which hangs upon the living God, of a soul surer of God than of itself, and living not its own life, but the life of the Son of God. To say prayer is faith in action would be better; for faith carries a more objective reference than religion. Faith is faith in another. In prayer we do not so much work as cooperate. We are fellow workers

with God. And as God is the freest Being in existence, co-operant prayer is the freest thing that man can do. If we were free in sinning, how much more free (so far as God is concerned) in praying. If we were free to break God's will how much more free to turn it or to accept it. Petitionary prayer is man's co-operation in kind with God amidst a world He freely made for freedom. The world was made by a freedom which not only left room for the cognate freedom of prayer, but which so ordered all things in its own interest that in their deepest depths they conspire to produce it. To pray in faith is to answer God's freedom in its own great note. It is to be taken up into the fundamental movement of the world. It is to realise that for which the whole world, the world as a whole, was made. It is an earnest of the world's

consummation. The object the Father's loving wisdom had in appointing the whole providential order was intercourse with man's soul. That order is therefore no rigid fixture, nor is it even a fated evolution. It is elastic, adjustable, flexible, with margins for freedom, for free modification, in God and man; always keeping in view that final goal of communion, and growing into it by a spiritual interplay in which the whole of Nature is involved. The goal of the whole cosmic order is the 'manifestation of the sons of God,' the realisation of complete sonship and its confidences.

Thus we rise to say that prayer is the momentary function of the eternal Son's communion and intercession with the eternal Father. We are integrated in advance into the final Christ, for whom, and to whom

all creation moves. Our prayer is more than the acceptance of God's will; it is its assertion. The will of God is that men should pray everywhere. He wills to be entreated. It is that will of God's making itself good. When we entreat we give effect to His will. And in His will is our eternal liberty. In His will ours finds itself and is at home. It ranges the liberties of the Father's house. But here prayer must draw from the cross, which is the central act of our emancipation as well as the central revelation of God's own freedom in grace. The action of the Atonement and of its release is in the nature of prayer. It is the free return of the Holy upon the Holy.

II. Then, secondly, and at more length, as to prayer being the ex-

pression of the perennial new life of faith in the cross. The Christian life is prayer without ceasing.

When we are told to pray without ceasing it seems to many tastes to-day to be somewhat extravagant language. And no doubt that is true. Why should we be concerned to deny it. Measured language and the elegant mean is not the note of the New Testament at least. *Μῆδεν ἄγαν* said the Greek—too much of nothing. But can we love or trust God too much? Christian faith is one that overcomes and commands the world rather than balances it. It surmounts the whole, it does not play off one part against another. The grace of Christ is not but graciousness of nature, and He does not rule His Church by social tact. The peace of God is not the calm of culture, it is not the charm of breed-

ing. Every great forward movement in Christianity is associated with much that seems academically extravagant. Erasmus is always shocked with Luther. It is only an index of that essential extravagance which makes the paradox of the cross, and keeps it as the irritant, no less than the life of the world—perhaps because it *is* the life of the world. There is nothing so abnormal, so unworldly, so supernatural, in human life as prayer; nothing that is more of an instinct, it is true, but also nothing that is less rational among all the things that keep above the level of the silly. The whole Christian life in so far as it is lived from the cross and by the cross is rationally an extravagance. For the cross is the paradox of all things: and yet it is the principle of the world. Paradox is but the expression of

that dualism which is the moral foundation of a Christian world. I live who die daily. I live another's life.

To pray without ceasing is not, of course, to engage in prayer without break. That is an impossible literalism. 'They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who wert, and art, and art to come.' It is mere poverty of soul to think of this as the iteration of a doxology. It is deep calling unto deep, eternity greeting eternity. The only answer to God's eternity is an eternity of prayer.

Nor does the phrase mean that the Church shall use careful means that the stream and sound of prayer shall never cease to flow at some spots of the earth, as the altar lamp goes not out. It does not mean the continuous murmur of the mass following the

sun round the world, incessant relays of adoring priests, and functions going on day and night.

But it means the constant bent and drift of the soul—as the word which was from the beginning (John i. 1) was *πρὸς τὸν θεόν*. All the current of its being set towards Him. It means being ‘in Christ,’ being in such a moving Christ, reposing in this Godward, and not merely God-like, life. The note of prayer becomes the habit of the heart, the tone and tension of its new nature, in such a way that when we are released from the grasp of our occupations the soul rebounds to its true bent, quest, and even pressure upon God. It is the soul’s habitual appetite and habitual food. A growing child of God is always hungry. Prayer is not identical with the occasional act of praying. Like the act of faith, it is a

whole life. It is the life of faith in its purity, in its vital action. Eating and speaking are necessary to life, but they are not living. And how hidden it may be—beneath even gaiety! If you look down on Portland Race you see but a shining sea; only the pilot knows the tremendous current that pervades the smiling calm.

So far is this 'pray without ceasing' from being absurd, because extravagant, that every man's life is in some sense a continual state of prayer. For what is his life's prayer but its ruling passion. All energies, ambitions, and passions are but expressions of a standing *nisus* in life, of a hunger, a draft, a practical demand upon the future, upon the unattained, and the unseen. Every life is a draft upon the unseen. If you are not

praying towards God you are towards something else. You pray as your face is set—towards Jerusalem or Babylon. The very egotism of craving life is prayer; the great difference is the object of it. To whom, for what, do we pray? The man whose passion is habitually set upon pleasure, knowledge, wealth, honour, or power is in a state of prayer to these things or for them. He prays without ceasing. These are his real gods, on whom he waits day and night. He may from time to time go on his knees in church, and use words of Christian address and petition. He may even feel a momentary unction in so doing. But it is a flicker; the other devotion is his steady flame. His real God is the ruling passion and steady pursuit of his life taken as a whole. He certainly does not pray in the name of Christ. And

what he worships in spirit and in truth is another God than he addresses at religious times. He prays to an unknown God for a selfish boon. Still he prays. The set and drift of his nature prays. It is the prayer of instinct, not of faith. It is prayer that needs total conversion. But he cannot stop praying either to God or to God's rival—to self, society, world, flesh, or even devil. Every life that is not totally inert is praying either to God or God's adversary.

What do we really mean, whom do we mean, when we say 'My God'? In what sense mine? May our God not be but our exploited idol, and in due course our doom?

There is a fearful and wonderful passage in Kierkegaard's *Entweder-Oder* which, if we transfer it to this connexion, stirs thoughts deeper than

its own tragedy. The seduced, heart-broken, writes to the seducer.

‘John! I do not say *my* John. That I now see you never were. I am heavily punished for ever letting such an idea be my joy. Yet—yet, mine you are—*my* seducer, *my* deceiver, *my* enemy, *my* murderer, the spring of my calamity, the grave of my joy, the abyss of my misery. I call you mine, and I am thine—thy curse for ever. Oh do not think I will slay you and put a dagger into you. But flee where you will, I am yours, to the earth’s end yours. Love a hundred others, but I am yours. I am yours in your last hour. I am yours, yours, yours—your curse.’

Beware lest the whole trend of the soul fix on a deity that turns a doom. There is a prayer which makes God our judgment as well as one which makes Him our joy.

Prayer is the nature of our hell as well as our heaven.

Our hell is ceaseless, passionate, fruitless, hopeless, gnawing prayer. It is the heart churning, churning, grinding itself out in misery. It is life's passion and struggle surging back on itself like a barren, salt, corroding sea. It is the heart's blood rising like a fountain only to fall back on us in red rain. It is prayer which we cannot stop, addressed to nothing, and obtaining nothing. It calls into space and night. Or it is addressed to self, and it aggravates the wearing action of self on self. Our double being revolves on itself, like two millstones with nothing to grind.

And prayer is our heaven. It goes home to God, and attains there, and rests there. We are 'in Christ,' whose whole existence is prayer, who is wholly *πρὸς τὸν θεόν* for us. He is

there to extinguish our hell and make our heaven—far more to quench our wrath and our seething than God's.

To cultivate the ceaseless spirit of prayer, use more frequent acts of prayer. To learn to pray with freedom force yourself to pray. The great liberty begins in necessity.

Do not say, 'I cannot pray. I am not in the spirit.' Pray till you are in the spirit. Think of analogies from lower levels. Sometimes when you need rest most you are too restless to lie down and take it. Then compel yourself to lie down, and to lie still. Often in ten minutes the compulsion fades into consent, and you sleep, and rise a new man.

Again it is often hard enough to take up the task which in half an hour you enjoy. It is often

against the grain to turn out of an evening to meet the friends you promised. But once you are in their midst you are in your element.

Sometimes, again, you say, 'I will not go to church. I do not feel that way.' That is where the habit of an ordered religious life comes in aid. Religion is the last region for chance desires. Do it as a duty and it may open out as a blessing. Omit it and you may miss the one thing that would have made an eternal difference. You stroll instead, and return with nothing but an appetite; when you might have come back with an inspiration. Compel yourself to meet your God as you would meet your promises, your obligations, your fellow men.

So if you are averse to pray, pray the more. Do not call it lip-service. That is not the lip-service God dis-

owns. It is His Spirit acting in your self-coercive will, only not yet in your heart. What is unwelcome to God is lip-service which is untroubled at not being more. As appetite comes with eating, so prayer with praying. Our hearts learn the language of the lips.

Compel yourself often to shape on your lips the detailed needs of your soul. It is not needful to inform God, but to deepen you, to inform yourself before God, to enrich that intimacy with yourself which is so necessary to answer the intimacy of God. To common sense the fact that God knows all we need and wills us all good, the fact of His infinite Fatherhood, is a reason for not praying. Why tell Him what He knows? Why ask what He is more than willing to give? But to Christian faith and to spiritual reason it is just

the other way. Asking is polar cooperation. Jesus turned the fact to a use exactly the contrary of its deistic sense. He made the Fatherhood the ground of true prayer. We do not ask as beggars but as children. Petition is not mere receiptivity, nor is it mere pressure; it is filial reciprocity. As God knows all, you may reckon that your brief and humble prayer will be understood (Matt. vi. 8). Where should you carry your burden but to the Father where Christ took the burden of all the world. So Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us and gives our broken prayer divine effect (Rom. viii. 26). To be sure of God's sympathy is to be inspired to prayer, where His mere knowledge would crush it. There is no father who would be satisfied that his son should take everything and ask for nothing. It

would be thankless. To cease asking is to cease to be grateful. And what kills petition kills praise.

Go into your chamber, shut the door, and cultivate the habit of praying audibly. Write prayers and burn them. Formulate your soul. Pay no attention to literary form, only to spiritual reality. Read a passage of Scripture and then sit down and turn it into a prayer, written or spoken. Learn to be particular, specific, and detailed in your prayer so long as you are not trivial. General prayers and stately phrases are, for private prayer, traps and sops to the soul. To formulate your soul is one valuable means to escape formalising it. This is the best kind of self-examination. Speaking with God discovers us safely to ourselves. We 'find' ourselves, come to ourselves, in the Spirit. Face your special weaknesses

and sins before God. Force yourself to say to God exactly where you are wrong. When anything goes wrong, do not ask to have it set right, without asking in prayer what it was in you that made it go wrong. It is somewhat fruitless to ask for a general grace to help specific flaws, sins, trials, and griefs. Let prayer be concrete, actual, a direct product of life's real experiences. Pray as your actual self, not as some fancied saint. Let it be closely relevant to your real situation. Pray without ceasing in this sense. Pray without a break between your prayer and your life. Pray so that there is a real continuity between your prayer and your whole actual life. But I will bear round upon this point again immediately.

Meantime, let me say this. Do not allow your practice in prayer to

be arrested by scientific or philosophic considerations as to *how* answer is possible. That is a valuable subject for discussion, but it is not entitled to control our practice. Faith is at least as essential to the soul as science, and it has a foundation more independent. And prayer is not only a necessity of faith, it is faith itself in action.

Criticism of prayer dissolves in the experience of it. When the soul is at close quarters with God it becomes enlarged enough to hold together in harmony things that oppose, and to have room for harmonious contraries. For instance: God of course is always working for His Will and Kingdom. But man is bound to pray for its coming, while it is coming all the time. And it cannot come without his praying. Why? Because its coming is the prayerful

frame of soul. So again with God's freedom. It is absolute. But it reckons on ours. Our prayer does not force His hand; it answers His freedom in kind. We are never so active and free as in prayer to an absolutely free God. We share His freedom when we are 'in Christ.'

If I must choose between Christ, who bids me pray for everything, and the savant, who tells me certain answers are physically and rationally impossible, must I not choose Christ? Because, while the savant knows much about nature and its action (and much more than Christ did), Christ knew everything about the God of nature and His reality. He knew more of what is possible to God than anybody has ever known about what is possible in nature. On such a subject as prayer, any one is a greater authority who wholly

knows the will of God, than he who only knows God's methods, and knows them but in part. Prayer is not an act of knowledge but of faith. It is not a matter of calculation but of confidence—'that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.' Which means that in this region we are not to be regulated by science but by God's self-revelation. If God is really the Father that Christ revealed, then the principle is—take everything to Him that exercises you. Apart from frivolity, such as praying to find the stud you lost, or the knife, there is really no limitation in the New Testament on the contents of the petition. Any regulation is as to the spirit of the prayer, the faith it springs from. In all distress which mars your peace, petition must be the form your faith takes—petition

for rescue. Keep close to Christ, ever closer, and then ask for anything you desire in that contact. Ask for everything you can ask in Christ's name, *i.e.* everything desirable by a man who is in Christ's kingdom of God, by a man who lives for it at heart, everything in tune with the purpose and work of the kingdom in Christ. If you are in that kingdom then pray freely for whatever you need or wish, to keep you active and effective for it, from daily bread upwards and outwards. In all things make your requests known. It will not unhinge such faith if you do not obtain them. At least you have laid them on God's heart; and faith means confidences between you and not only favours. And there is not confidence if you keep back what is hot or heavy on your heart. If prayer is

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not a play of the religious fantasy, or a routine task, it must be the application of faith to a concrete actual and urgent situation. Only remember that prayer does not work by magic, and that stormy desire is not fervent, effectual prayer. You may be but exploiting a mighty power, whereas you must be in real contact with the real God. It is the man that most really has God that most really seeks God.

I said a little ago that to pray without ceasing also meant to pray without a breach with your actual life and the whole situation in which you are. This is the point at which to dwell on that. If you may not come to God with the occasions of your private life and affairs then there is some unreality in the relation between you. If some private crisis absorbs you, some business or family

anxiety of little moment to others but of much to you, and if you may not bring that to God in prayer, then one of two things: either it is not you, in your actual reality, that came to God, but it is you in a pose—you in some rôle which you are trying with poor success to play before Him. You are trying to pray as another person than you are, a better person, perhaps, as some great apostle, perhaps, who should have on his worshipping mind nothing but the grand affairs of the Church and kingdom, and not be worried by common cares. You are praying in court dress. You are trying to pray as you imagine one *should* pray to God, *i.e.* as another person than you are, and in other circumstances. You are creating a self and a situation to place before God. Either that, or you are not praying to a God who

loves, helps, and delivers you in every pinch of life, but only to one who uses you as a pawn for the victory of his great kingdom. You are not praying to Christ's God. You are praying to a God who cares only for the great actors in his kingdom, for the heroic people, or for the calm people who do not deeply feel life's trials, who cherish nothing but the grand style. The reality of prayer is bound up with the reality and intimacy of life.

And its great object is to get home to God, and to win response even when we get no compliance. The prayer of faith does not mean a prayer absolutely sure that it will receive what it asks. That is not faith. Faith is that attitude of soul and self to God, which is the root and reservoir of prayer apart from all answer. It is what turns need

into request. It is what moves your need to need God. It is what makes you sure your prayer is heard and stored, whether granted or not. 'He putteth all my tears in his bottle.' God has old prayers of yours long maturing by Him. What wine you will drink with Him in His kingdom: Faith is sure that God refuses with a smile; that He says No in the spirit of Yes, and gives or refuses in Christ our great Amen. And better prayers are stirred by the presence of the Deliverer than even by the need of deliverance.

It is not sufficiently remembered that before prayer can expect an answer it must be itself an answer. That is what is meant by prayer in the name of Christ. It is prayer which answers God's gift in Christ, with whom are already given us all things.

And that is why we must pray without ceasing because in Christ God speaks without ceasing. Natural or instinctive prayer is one thing; supernatural prayer is another; it is the prayer not of instinct but of faith. It is our word answering God's. It is more the prayer of fulness even than of need, of strength than of weakness—though it be 'a strength girt round with weakness.' Prayer which arises from mere need is flung out to a power which is only remembered, or surmised, or unknown. It is flung into darkness and uncertainty. But in Christian prayer we ask for what we need because we are full of faith in God's power and word, because need becomes petition at the touch of His word. (I always feel that in the order of our public worship prayer should immediately follow the lesson without the intrusion of

an anthem. And for the reason I name, that Christian prayer is our word answering God's.) We pray, therefore, in Christ's name, or for His sake, because we pray as answering the gift in Christ. Our prayer is the note the soul utters when its cords are smitten by Him. We answer above all things God's prayer to us in His cross that we would be reconciled. God so beseeches us in Him. So that if we put it strongly we may say that our prayer to God in Christ is our answer to God's prayer to us there. 'The best thing in prayer is faith,' says Luther.

And the spirit of prayer in Christ's name is the true child-spirit. A certain type of religion is fond of dwelling on faith as the spirit of divine childhood; and its affinities are all with the tender and touching element in childhood. But one does

not always get from the prophets of such piety the impression of a life breathed in prayer. And the notion is not the New Testament sense of being children of God. That is a manlier, a maturer thing. It is being sons of God by faith, and by faith's energy of prayer. It is not the sense of being as helpless as a child that clings, not the sense of weakness, ignorance, gentleness, and all that side of things. But it is the spirit of a prayer which is a great act of faith. Faith is not simply surrender, but *adoring* surrender, not a mere sense of dependence, but an act of intelligent committal, and the confession of a holiness which is able to save, keep, and bless for ever.

How is it that the experience of life is so often barren of spiritual culture for religious people. They

become stoic and stalwart, but not humble; they have keen sight but no insight. Yet it is not the stalwarts but the saints that judge the world, *i.e.* that take the true divine measure of the world, and get to its subtle, silent, and final powers. Whole sections of our protestantism have lost the virtue of humility or the understanding of it. It means for them no more than modesty, or diffidence. It is the humility of weakness, not of power. To many useful, and even strong, people, no experience seems to bring this subtle, spiritual intelligence, this finer discipline of the moral man. No rebukes, no rebuffs, no humiliations, no sorrows seem to bring it to them. They have no spiritual history. Their spiritual biography not even an angel could write. There is no romance in their soul's story. At

sixty they are, spiritually, much where they were at twenty-six. To calamity, to discipline of any kind they are simply resilient. Their religion is simply elasticity. It is but lusty life. They rise up after the smart is over or the darkness fades away, as self-confident as if they were but seasoned politicians beaten at one election, but sure of doing better at the next. They are to the end just irrepressible, or persevering, or dogged. And they are as juvenile in moral insight, as boyish in spiritual perception, as ever.

Is it not because they have never really had personal religion? That is, they have never really prayed with all their heart; only, at most, with all their fervour, certainly not with strength and mind. They have never 'spread out' their whole soul and situation to a God who knows.

They have never opened the petals of their soul in the warm sympathy of His knowledge. They have not become particular enough in their prayer, faithful with themselves, or relevant to their complete situation. They do not face themselves, only what happens to them. They pray with their heart and not with their conscience. They pity themselves, perhaps they spare themselves, they shrink from hurting themselves more than misfortune hurts them. They say, 'if you knew all you could not help pitying me.' They do not say, 'God knows all and how can He spare me.' For themselves, or for their fellows, it is the prayer of pity, not of repentance. We need the prayer of self-judgment more than the prayer of fine insight.

We are not humble in God's sight, partly because in our prayer there is

a point at which we cease to pray, where we do not turn everything out into God's light. It is because there is a chamber or two in our souls where we do not enter in and take God with us. We hurry Him by that door as we take Him along the corridors of our life to see our tidy places or our public rooms. We ask from our prayers too exclusively comfort, strength, enjoyment, or tenderness and graciousness, and not often enough humiliation and its fine strength. We want beautiful prayers, touching prayers, simple prayers, thoughtful prayers; prayers with a quaver or a tear in them, or prayers with delicacy and dignity in them. But searching prayer, humbling prayer, which is the prayer of the conscience, and not merely of the heart or taste, prayer which is bent on reality, and to win

the new joy goes through new misery if need be—are such prayers as welcome and common as they should be? Too much of our prayer is apt to leave us with the self-complacency of the sympathetically incorrigible, of the benevolent and irremediable, of the breezy octogenarian, all of whose yesterdays look backward with a cheery and exasperating smile.

It is an art—this great and creative prayer—this intimate conversation with God. *Magna ars est conversari cum Deo*, says Thomas à Kempis. It has to be learned. In social life we learn that conversation is not mere talk. There is an art in it, if we are not to have a table of gabblers. How much more is it so in the conversation of heaven. We must learn that art by practice, and by keeping the best society. Associate much with the

great masters in this kind; especially with the Bible; and chiefly with Christ. Cultivate His Holy Spirit. He is the grand master of God's art and mystery in communing with man. And there is no other teacher, at last, of man's art of communion with God.

PRAYER AS INSISTENT

PRAYER AS INSISTENT

I

THE work of the ministry labours under one heavy disadvantage when we regard it as a profession, and compare it with other professions. In these, experience brings facility, a sense of mastery in the subject, self-satisfaction, self-confidence; but in our subject the more we pursue it, the more we enter into it, so much the more are we cast down with the overwhelming sense, not only of our insufficiency, but of our unworthiness. Of course, in the technique of our work we acquire a certain ease. We learn to speak more or less freely and aptly. We learn the knack of handling a text, of conducting church

work, or dealing with men, and the like. If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the gospel. We have to lift up Christ—a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence—a humiliating, even a crushing Christ. We have to handle a gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it. There is no real intimacy with the gospel which does not mean a new sense of God's holiness. There is no new insight into the Cross which does not bring, whatever else come with it, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips. If our very repentance is to be repented of, how shall we be proud, or even pleased, with what we may think a success in our preach-

ing? So that we are not surprised that some preachers, after what the public calls a most brilliant and impressive discourse, retire to humble themselves before God, to ask forgiveness for the poor message, and to call themselves most unprofitable servants—yea, even when they knew themselves that they had ‘done well.’ The more we grasp our gospel the more it abashes us.

Moreover, as we learn more of the seriousness of the gospel for human fate, we feel the more that every time we present it we are adding to the judgment of some as well as to the salvation of others. We are not like speakers who present a matter that men can freely take or leave, and agree or differ without moral result. The deeper and surer our gospel the more is our work a judgment on those to whom it is not a

grace. This was what bore upon the Saviour's own soul, and darkened His very agony into eclipse. That He, who knew Himself to be the salvation of His own beloved people, should, by His very love, become their doom! And here we watch and suffer with Him, however sleepily. There is put into our charge our dear people's life or death. For to those to whom we are not life we are death, in proportion as we truly preach, not ourselves, but the real Christ.

How solemn our place is! It is a sacramental place. We have not simply to state our case, we have to *convey* our Christ, and to convey Him effectually. We are sacramental elements, broken often, in the Lord's hands, as He dispenses His grace through us. We do not, of course, believe that orders are an ecclesiastical sacrament, as Rome

does. But we are forced to realise the idea underlying that dogma—the sacramental nature of our person, work, and vocation for the gospel. We are not saviours. There is only one Saviour. But we are His sacraments. We do not believe in an ecclesiastical priesthood; but we are made to feel how we stand between God and the people as none of our flock do. We bring Christ to them, and them to Christ, in sacrificial action, in a way far more moral, inward, and taxing than official priesthood can do. As ministers we lead the sacerdotal function of the whole Church in the world—its holy confession and sacrifice for the world in Christ.

We ought, indeed, to feel the dignity of the ministry; we must present some protest against the mere fraternal conception which so

easily sinks into an unspiritual familiarity. But still more than the dignity of the ministry do its elect feel its solemnity. How can it be otherwise? We have to dwell much with the everlasting burnings. We have to tend a consuming fire. We have to feed our life where all the tragedy of life is gathered to an infinite crisis in Christ. We are not the fire, but we live where it burns. The matter we handle in our theological thought we can only handle with some due protection for our face. It is one of the dangerous industries. It is continually acting on us, continually searching our inner selves. We cannot hold it and examine it at arm's length. It enters into us. It evokes the perpetual comment of our souls, and puts us continually on self-judgment. Our critic, our judge, is at the door. Self-

condemnation arrests denunciation. And the true apostle can never condemn but in the spirit of self-condemnation.

But after all, our doom is our blessing. Our Judge is on our side. For if humiliation be wrung from us, still more is faith, hope, and prayer. Everything that rebukes our self-satisfaction does still more to draw out our faith. He also hath given us the reconciliation. The more judgment we see in the holy cross the more we see it is judgment unto salvation. The more we are humbled the more we 'roll our souls upon Christ.' And we recover our self-possession only by giving our soul again and again to Christ to keep. We win a confidence in self-despair. Prayer is given us as wings wherewith to mount, but also to shield our face when they have carried

us before the great white throne. It is in prayer that the holiness comes home as love, and the love is transfigured to holiness. At every step our thought is transformed to prayer, and our prayer opens new ranges of thought. His great revelation is His holiness, always out-going in atoning love. We receive the reconciliation. We take it home. Then the very wrath of God becomes a glory. The red in the sky is the new dawn. Our self-accusation becomes a new mode of praise. Our loaded hearts spring light again. Our heavy conscience turns to grave moral power. A new love is born for our kind. A new and tender patience steals upon us. We see new ways of helping, serving, and saving. We issue into a new world. We are one with the Christ not only on His cross, but in His resurrection. Think of the

resurrection power and calm, of that awful final peace, that infinite satisfaction in the eternal thing eternally achieved, which filled His soul when He had emerged from death, when man's worst had been done, and God's best had been won, for ever and for all. We have our times of entrance into that Christ. As we were one with Him in the likeness of His death, so we are in the likeness of His resurrection. And the same Eternal Spirit which puts the preacher's soul much upon the cross also raises it continually from the dead. We overcome our mistakes, negligences, sins; nay, we rise above the sin of the whole world, which will not let our souls be as good as they are. We overcome the world, and take courage, and are of new cheer. We are in the Spirit. And then we can preach, pray, teach, heal.

And even the unclean lips then put a new thrill into our sympathy and a new tremor into our praise.

If it be not so, how shall our dangerous work not demoralise us, and we perish from our too much contact with holy things!

The minister's holiest prayer is hardly lawful to utter. Few of his public would comprehend it. Some would dismiss it with their most opprobrious word. They would call it theological. When he calls to God in his incomprehensible extremity they would translate it into an appeal to Elijah (Matt. xxvii. 47). For to them theology is largely mythology.

We are called at the present day to a reconstruction of the old theology, a restatement of the old gospel. We have to reappropriate and remind the truth of our experienced Christianity.

But what a hardship it is that this call should search us at a time when the experimental power of our Christianity has abated, and the evangelical experience is so low and so confused as it often is! It must be the minister's work to recover and deepen this experience for the churches, in the interest of faith, and of the truth in which faith renders account of itself. For the reformation of belief we must have a restoration of faith. And the engine for such recovery of faith is for us what it was for Luther and his like — prayer; and it is that prayer which is the wrestling of the conscience and not merely the cry of the heart, the prayer for reconciliation and redemption and not merely for guidance and comfort, the prayer of faith and not merely of love.

I saw in a friend's house a photo-

graph from (I think) Dürer—just two tense hands, palms together, and lifted in prayer. It was most eloquent, most subduing. I wish I could stamp the picture on the page here and fit it to Milton's line:

'The great two-handed engine at *our* door.'

II

Public prayer is, on the whole, the most difficult part of the work of the minister. To help the difficulty I have always claimed that pulpit notes of prayer may be used. 'The Lord's Prayer' itself is of this nature. It is not a prayer, but a scheme of prayer, heads of prayer, or buoys in the channel. But even with the use of all helps there are perils enough. There are prayers that, in the effort to become real, are much too familiar in their fashion of speech. A young

man began his prayer, in my own hearing, with the words, 'O God, we have come to have a chat with Thee.' It was gruesome. Think of it as a sample of modern piety for the young! No prayers, certainly no public prayers, should be 'chats with God.' Again, other prayers are sentimental prayers. George Dawson's volume has this fault. The prayers of the Church should not be exposures of the affectional man. The public prayer of the Church, as the company of grace, is the soul returning to God that gave it; it is the sinner coming to the Saviour, or the ransomed of the Lord returning to Zion; it is the sanctified with the Sanctifier; it is not primarily the child talking to the Father—though that note may prevail in more private prayers. We are more than stray sheep reclaimed. We are those

whose iniquity has lain upon Christ for us all.

But the root of the difficulty of public prayer lies farther back than in the matter of style. It lies in the difficulty of private prayer, in its spiritual poverty, its inertia, its anæmia. What culture can deal with the rooted difficulty that resides there, out of sight, in the inner man of the heart, for lack of the courage of faith, for sheer spiritual fecklessness? Yet the preparation for prayer is to pray. The culture needed is the practice of prayer. It is only prayer that teaches to pray. The minister ought never to speak before men in God's name without himself first speaking to God in man's name, and making intercession as for himself so for his people.

Intercession! We are properly vigilant that the minister do not

sever himself from his people in any sacerdotal way. But for all that, is the minister's personal and private prayer on exactly the same footing as a layman's? It is a question that leads to the distinction between intercessory and vicarious prayer. The personal religion of the minister is vicarious even when it is not intercessory. Great indeed is the spiritual value of private intercession. The *intercessory* private prayer of the minister is the best corrective of the *critical* spirit which so easily besets and withers us to-day. That reconciliation, that pacification of heart, which comes by prayer opens in us a fountain of private intercession, especially for our antagonists. Only of course it must be private. But the minister is also praying to his people's good even when he is not interceding on their behalf, or leading

them in prayer. What he is for his Church he is with his whole personality. And so his private and personal prayers are vicarious for his people even when he does not know it. No Christian man lives for himself, nor believes for himself. Ten faithful men would have saved Sodom. And if the private Christian in his private prayers does not pray, any more than he lives, unto himself alone, much more is this true for the minister. His private prayers make a great difference to his people. They may not know what makes his spell and blessing: even he may not. But it is his most private prayers; which, thus, are vicarious even where not intercessory.

What he is for his Church, I have said, he is with his whole personality. And nothing gives us personality like true prayer. Nothing makes a man

so original. We cannot be true Christians without being original. Living faith destroys the commonplaceness, the monotony of life. Are not all men original in death? *Je mourrai seul*. Much more are they original and their true selves in Christ's death and their living relation to that. For true originality we must be one, and closely one, with God. The most original spirit in history was the man who said, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' What a reflection on our faith that so much piety should be humdrum and deadly dull! Private prayer, when it is real action, is the greatest forge of personality. It places a man in direct and effective contact with God the Creator, the source of originality, and especially with God the Redeemer as the source of our new creation. For the minister

personality is everything—not geniality, as it is the day's fashion to say, but personality; and prayer is the spring of personality. This impressive personality, due to prayer, you may often have in 'the peasant saint.' And in some cases its absence is as palpable. Hence comes vulgarity in prayer, essential vulgarity underlying much possible fineness of phrase or manner. Vulgarity in prayer lies not so much in its offences to good taste in style as in its indications of the absence of spiritual *habit* and reality. If the theology of rhetoric ousts the theology of reality in the sermon, how much more in prayer?

Prayer is for the religious life what original research is for science—by it we get direct contact with reality. The soul is brought into union with its own vaster nature—God. Therefore, also, we must use the Bible as

an original; for indeed the Bible is the most copious spring of prayer and of power, and of range. If we learn to pray from the Bible, and avoid a mere *cento* of its phrases, we shall cultivate, in our prayer, the large humane note of a universal gospel. Let us nurse our prayer on our *study* of our Bible; and let us therefore not be too afraid of *theological* prayer. True Christian prayer must have theology in it; no less than true theology must have prayer in it and must be capable of being prayed. 'Your theology is too difficult,' said Charles v. to the Reformers, 'it cannot be understood without much prayer.' Yes, that is our arduous puritan way. Prayer and theology must interpenetrate to keep each other great, and wide, and mighty. The failure of the habit of prayer is at the root of much of our

light distaste for theology. There is a conspiracy of influences round us whose effect is to belittle our great work. Earnest ministers suffer more from the smallness of their people than from their sins, and far more than from their unkindness. Our public may kill by its triviality a soul which could easily resist the assaults of wickedness. And our newspaper will greatly aid their work. Now, to resist this it is not enough to have recourse to prayer, and to cultivate devotion. Unfortunately there are signs in the religious world to show that prayer and piety alone do not save men from pettiness of interest, thinness of soul, spiritual volatility, the note of insincerity, or foolishness of judgment. The remedy is not prayer alone, but prayer on the scale of the whole gospel and on the range of searching faith. It is

prayer which rises above the childish petitions that disfigure much of our public pietism, prayer which issues from the central affairs of the kingdom of God. It is prayer with the profound Bible as its book of devotion, and a true theology of faith for half of its power. It is the prayer of a mind that moves in Bible passion, and ranges with Bible scope, even when it eschews Bible speech and 'the language of Canaan.'

And yet, with all its range, it is prayer with *concentration*. It has not only thought, but will in it. The great reason why so many will not decide for Christ is that Christ requires from the world concentration; not seclusion and not renunciation merely, but concentration. And we ministers have our special form of that need. I am speaking not of our share in the common troubles of

life, but of those specially that arise from the ministerial office and care. No minister can live up to his work on the casual or interjectional kind of prayer that might be sufficient for many of his flock. He must think, of course, in his prayers—in his private prayers—and he must pray his faith's thought. But, still more, in his praying he must act. Prayer is not a frame of mind, but a great energy. He must rise to conceive his work as an active function of the work of Christ; and he must link his faith, therefore, with the intercession which is the energy of Christ in heaven. In this, as in many ways, he must remember, to his great relief and comfort, that it is not he who is the real pastor of his Church, but Christ, and that he is but Christ's curate. The final responsibility is not his, but Christ's, who bears the

responsibility of all the sins and frets, both of the world and, especially, of the Church.

The concentration, moreover, should correspond to the positivity of the gospel and the Bible. Prayer should rise more out of God's word and concern for His Kingdom than even out of our personal needs, trials, or desires. That is implied in prayer in Christ's name or for Christ's sake, prayer from His place in the midst of the Kingdom. *Our* Prayer-book, the Bible, does not prescribe prayer, but it does more—it inspires it. And prayer in Christ's name is prayer inspired by His first interest—the gospel. Do not use Christ simply to countersign your petition by a closing formula, but to create, inspire, and shape it. Prayer in Christ's name is prayer for Christ's object—for His Kingdom and His promise of the Holy Ghost.

If we really pray for that and yet do not feel we receive it, probably enough we have it; and we are looking for some special form of it not ours, or not ours yet. We may be mistaking the fruits of the Spirit for His presence. Fruits come late. They are different from signs. Buds are signs, and so are other things hard to see. It is the Spirit that keeps us praying for the Spirit, as it is grace that keeps us in grace. Remember the patience of the missionaries who waited in the Spirit fifteen years for their first convert. If God gave His Son *unasked*, how much more will He give His Holy Spirit to them that *ask* it! But let us not prescribe the form in which He comes.

The true close of prayer is when the utterance expires in its own spiritual fulness. That is the true Amen. Such times there are. We

feel we are at last laid open to God. We feel as though we 'did see heaven opened, and the holy angels, and the great God Himself.' The prayer ends itself; *we* do not end it. It mounts to its heaven and renders its spirit up to God, saying, 'It is finished.' It has its perfect consummation and bliss, its spiritually natural close and fruition, whether it has answer or not.

III

In all I have said I have implied that prayer should be strenuously *importunate*. Observe, not petitionary merely, nor concentrated, nor active alone, but importunate. For prayer is not only meditation or communion. Nor ought it to be merely submissive in tone, as the 'quietist' ideal is. We need not begin with 'Thy will be done' if we but end

with it. Remember the stress that Christ laid on importunity. Strenuous prayer will help us to recover the masculine type of religion—and then our opponents will at least respect us.

I would speak a little more fully on this matter of importunity. It is very closely bound up with the reality both of prayer and of religion. Prayer is not really a power till it is importunate. And it cannot be importunate unless it is felt to have a real effect on the Will of God. I may slip in here my conviction that far less of the disbelief in prayer is due to a scientific view of nature's uniformity than to the kind of prayer that men hear from us in public worship. And I would further say that by importunity something else is meant than passionate dictation and stormy pertinacity — imposing

our egoist will on God, and treating Him as a mysterious but manageable power that we may coerce and exploit.

The deepening of the spiritual life is a subject that frequently occupies the attention of religious conferences, and of the soul bent on self-improvement. But it is not certain that the great saints would always recognise the ideal of some who are addicted to the use of the phrase. The 'deepening of the spiritual life' they would find associated with two unhappy things.

1. They would recoil from a use of Scripture prevalent in those circles, which is atomistic, individualist, subjective, and fantastic.

2. And what they would feel most foreign to their own objective and penetrating minds might be the air of introspection and self-measurement

too often associated with the spiritual thus 'deepened'—a spiritual egoism.

We should distinguish at the outset *the deepening of spiritual life* from *the quickening of spiritual sensibility*. Christ on the cross was surely deepened in spiritual experience, but was not the essence of that dereliction, and the concomitant of that deepening, the dulling of spiritual sensibility?

There are many plain obstacles to the deepening of spiritual life, amid which I desire to name here only, prayer conceived merely, or chiefly, as *submission*, resignation, quietism. We say too soon, 'Thy will be done'; and too ready acceptance of a situation as His will often means feebleness or sloth. It may be His will that we surmount His will. It may be His higher will that we resist His lower. Prayer is an act of will much

more than of sentiment, and its triumph is more than acquiescence. Let us submit when we *must*, but let us keep the submission in reserve rather than in action, as a ground tone rather than the sole effort. Prayer with us has largely ceased to be *wrestling*. But is that not the dominant scriptural idea? It is not the sole idea, but is it not the dominant?

I venture to enlarge on this last head by way of meeting some who hesitate to speak of the power of prayer to alter God's will. I offer two points—

I. Prayer may really change the will of God, or, if not His will, His intention.

II. It may, like other human energies of godly sort, take the form of resisting the will of God. Resisting His will may be doing His will.

I. As to the first point. If this is

not believed the earnestness goes out of prayer. It becomes either a ritual, or a soliloquy only overheard by God; just as thought with the will out of it degenerates into dreaming or brooding, where we are more passive than active. Prayer is not merely the meeting of two moods or two affections, the laying of the head on a divine bosom in trust and surrender. That may have its place in religion, but it is not the nerve and soul of prayer. Nor is it religious reverie. Prayer is an encounter of *wills*—till one will or the other give way. It is not a spiritual exercise merely, but in its maturity it is a cause acting on the course of God's world.¹ It is, indeed, by God's

¹ This position is excluded by Schleiermacher's view of religion as absolute dependence, because that leaves room for no action of man on God. And it is one of the defects of so great a saint as Robertson.

grace that prayer is a real cause, but such it is. And of course there must be in us a faith corresponding to His grace. Of course also there is always, behind all, the readiness to accept God's will without a murmur when it is perfectly evident and final. 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' Yes, but there is also the effort to alter its form according to our sanctified needs and desires. You will notice that in Paul's case the power to accept the sufficiency of God's grace only came in the course of an importunate prayer aiming to turn God's hand. Paul ended, rather than began, with 'Thy will be done.'

'Thy will be done' was no utterance of mere resignation, though it has mostly come to mean this in a Christianity which tends to canonise the weak instead of strengthening them. As prayer it was a piece of

active co-operation with God's will. It was a positive part of it. It is one thing to submit to a stronger will, it is another to be one with it. We submit because we cannot resist it; but when we are one with it we cannot succumb. It is not *a* power, but *our* power. But the natural will is not one with God's; and so we come to use these words in a mere negative way, meaning that we cease to resist. We give in and lie down. But is that the sense of the words in the Lord's Prayer? Do they mean that we have no objection to God's will being done? or that we do not withstand any more? or even that we accept it gladly? Do they not mean something far more positive—that we actively will God's will and aid it, that it is the whole content of our own, that we put into it all the will that there can be in prayer, which is

the great will-power of the race? It is our heart's passion that God's will be done and His kingdom come. And can His kingdom come otherwise than as it is a passion with us? Can His will be done? God's will was not Christ's consent merely, but His meat and drink, the source of His energy and the substance of His task.

Observe, nothing can alter God's grace, His *will* in that sense, His large will and final purpose—our racial blessing, our salvation, our redemption in Jesus Christ. But He is an infinite opportunist. His ways are flexible. His *intentions* are amenable to us if His *will* is changeless. The steps of His process are variable according to our freedom and His.

We are living, let us say, in a careless way; and God proposes a certain

treatment of us according to our carelessness. But in the exercise of our spiritual freedom we are by some means brought to pray. We cease to be careless. We pray God to visit us as those who hear. Then He does another thing. He acts differently, with a change caused by our freedom and our change. The treatment for deafness is altered. God adopts another treatment—perhaps for weakness. We have by prayer changed His action, and so far His will (at any rate His intention) concerning us. As we pray, the discipline for the prayerless is altered to that for the prayerful. We attain the thing God did not mean to give us unless He had been affected by our prayer. We change the conduct, if not the will, of God to us, the *Verhalten* if not the *Verhältniss*.

Again, we pray and pray, and no

answer comes. The boon does not arrive. Why? Perhaps we are not spiritually ready for it. It would not be a real blessing. But the persistence, the importunity of faith, is having a great effect on our spiritual nature. It ripens. A time comes when we are ready for answer. We then present ourselves to God in a spiritual condition which reasonably causes Him to yield. The new spiritual state is not the answer to our prayer, but it is its effect; and it is the condition which makes the answer possible. It makes the prayer effectual. The gift can be a blessing now. So God resists us no more. Importunity prevails, not as mere importunity (for God is not bored into answer), but as the importunity of God's own elect, *i.e.* as a force of the Kingdom, as increased spiritual power, as real moral action, bringing

corresponding strength and fitness to receive. I have often found that what I sought most I did not get at the right time, not till it was too late, not till I had learned to do without it, till I had renounced it in principle (though not in desire). That was God's right time—when I could have it as though I had it not. If it came, it came not to gratify me, but to glorify Him and be a means of serving Him.

One recalls here that most pregnant saying of Schopenhauer: 'All is illusion—the hope or the thing hoped.' If it is not true for all it is true for very many. Either the hope is never fulfilled or else its fulfilment disappoints. God gives the hoped-for thing, but sends leanness into the soul. The mother prays to have a son—and he breaks her heart, and were better dead. Hope may lie to us, or

the thing hoped may dash us. But though He slay me I will trust. God does not fail. Amid the wreck of my little world He is firm, and I in Him. I justify God in the ruins; in His good time I shall arrive. More even than my hopes may go wrong. I may go wrong. But my Redeemer liveth; and, great though God is as my Fulfiller, He is greater as my Redeemer. He is great as my hope, but He is greater as my power. What is the failure of my hope from Him compared with the failure of His hope in me? If He continue to believe in me I may well believe in Him.

God's object with us is not to give just so many things and withhold so many; it is to place us in the tissue of His kingdom. His best answer to us is to raise us to the power of answering Him. The reason why

He does not answer our prayer is because we do not answer Him and His. And His prayer was, as though Christ did beseech us, 'Be ye reconciled.' He would lift us to the exercise of confident business with Him, to commerce of loving wills. The painter wrestles with the sitter till he gives him back himself, and there is a speaking likeness. So man with God, till God surrender His secret. He gives or refuses things, therefore, with a view to that communion alone, and on the whole. It is that spiritual, personal end, and not an iron necessity, that rules His course. Is there not a constant spiritual interaction between God and man as free spiritual beings? *How* that can be is one of the great philosophic problems. But the fact that it is, is of the essence of faith. It is the unity of our universe. Many

systems try to explain *how* human freedom and human action are consistent with God's omnipotence and omniscience. None succeed. *How* secondary causes like man are compatible with God as the Universal and Ultimate Cause is not at once rationally plain. But there is no practical doubt that they are. And so it is with the action of man on God in prayer. We may perhaps, for the present, put it thus, that we cannot change the will of God, which is grace, and which even Christ never changed but only revealed; but we can change the intention of God, which is a manner of treatment, in the interest of grace, according to the situation of the hour.

If we are guided by the Bible we have much ground for this view of prayer. *Does not Christ set more value upon importunity than on*

submission? 'Knock, and it shall be opened.' I would refer also not only to the parable of the unjust judge, but to the incident of the Syrophenician woman, where her wit, faith, and importunity together did actually change our Lord's intention and break His custom. Then there is Paul beseeching the Lord thrice for a boon; and urging us to be instant, insistent, continual in prayer. We have Jacob wrestling. We have Abraham pleading, yea haggling, with God for Sodom. We have Moses interceding for Israel and asking God to blot his name out of the book of life, if that were needful to save Israel. We have Job facing God, withstanding Him, almost bearding Him, and extracting revelation. And we have Christ's own struggle with the Father in Gethsemane.

It is a wrestle on the greatest scale

—all manhood taxed as in some great war, or some great negotiation of State. And the effect is exhaustion often. No, the result of true prayer is not always peace.

II. As to the second point. This wrestle is in a certain sense a resisting of God. You cannot have wrestling otherwise; but you may have Christian fatalism. It is not mere wrestling with ourselves, our ignorance, our self-will. That is not prayer, but self-torment. Prayer is wrestling with God. And it is better to fall thus into the hands of God than of man—even your own. It is a resistance that God loves. It is quite foreign to a godless, self-willed, defiant resistance. In love there is a kind of resistance that enhances it. The resistance of love is a quite different thing from the resistance of hostility. The yielding to one you

love is very different from capitulating to an enemy :

‘Two constant lovers, being joined in one,
Yielding unto each other yield to none—’

i.e. to no foreign force, no force foreign to the love which makes them one.

So when God yields to prayer in the name of Christ, to the prayer of faith and love, He yields to Himself who inspired it. Christian prayer is the Spirit praying in us. It is prayer in the solidarity of the Kingdom. It is a continuation of Christ's prayer, which in Gethsemane was a wrestle, an *ἀγώνια* with the Father. But if so, it is God pleading with God, God dealing with God—as the true atonement must be. And when God yields it is not to an outside influence He yields, but to Himself.

Let me make it still more plain. When we resist the will of God we

may be resisting what God wills to be temporary and to be resisted, what He wills to be intermediary and transcended. We resist because God wills we should. We are not limiting God's will, any more than our moral freedom limits it. That freedom is the image of His, and, in a sense, part of His. We should defraud Him and His freedom if we did not exercise ours. So the prayer which resists His dealing may be part of His will and its fulfilment.

Does God not will the existence of things for us to resist, to grapple with? Do we ourselves not appoint problems and make difficulties for those we teach, for the very purpose of their overcoming them? We set questions to children of which we know the answer quite well. The real answer to our will and purpose is not the solution but the grappling,

the wrestling. And we may properly give a reward not for the correct answer but for the hard and honest effort. That work is the prayer; and it has its reward apart from the solution.

That is a principle of education with us. So it may be with God. But I mean a good deal more by this than what is called the reflex action of prayer. If that were all it would introduce an unreality into prayer. We should be praying for exercise, not for action. It would be prayer with a theological form, which yet expects no more than a psychological effect. It would be a prayer which is not sure that God is really more interested in us than we are in Him. But I mean that God's education has a lower stage for us and a higher, He has a lower will and a higher, a prior and a posterior. And the purpose of the lower will is

that it be resisted and struggled through to the higher. By God's will (let us say) you are born in a home where your father's earnings are a few shillings a week, like many an English labourer. Is it God's will that you acquiesce in that and never strive out of it? It is God's will that you are there. Is it God's will that you should not resist being there? Nay, it may be His will that you should wisely resist it, and surmount His lower, His initial will, which is there for the purpose. That is to say, it is His will that you resist, antagonise, His will. And so it is with the state of childhood altogether.

Again: Is disease God's will? We all believe it often is—even if man is to blame for it. It may be, by God's will, the penalty on human ignorance, negligence, or sin. But let us suppose there were only a few cases where disease is God's will. It was

so in the lower creatures, before man lived, blundered, or sinned. Take only one such case. Is it God's will that we should lie down and let the disease have its way? Why, a whole profession exists to say no. Medicine exists as an antagonism to disease, even when you can say that disease is God's will and His punishment of sin. A doctor will tell you that resignation is one of his foes. He begins to grow hopeless if the patient is so resigned from the outset as to make no effort, if there be no will to live. Resistance to this ordinance of God's is the doctor's business, and the doctor's ally. And why? Because God ordained disease for the purpose of being resisted; He ordained the resistance, that from the conflict man might come out the stronger, and more full of resource and dominion over nature.

Again, take death. It is God's will. It is in the very structure of man, in the divine economy. Is it to be accepted without demur? Are doctors impious who resist it? Are we sinning when we shrink from it? Does not the life of most people consist in the effort to escape it, in the struggle for a living? So also when we pray and wrestle for another's life, for our dear one's life. 'Sir, come down ere my child die.' The man was impatient. How familiar we are with him! 'Do, please, leave your religious talk, which I don't understand, and cure my child.' But was that an impious prayer? It was ignorant, practical, British, but not quite faithless. And it was answered as many a similar prayer has been. But, then, if death be God's will, to resist it is to resist God's will. Well, it is His will that we should.

Christ, who always did God's will resisted His own death, slipped away from it often, till the hour came; and even *then* He prayed with all His might against it when it seemed inevitable. 'If it be possible release Me.' He was ready to accept it, but only in the last resort, only if there was no other way, only after every other means had been exhausted. To the end He cherished the fading hope that there might be some other way. He went to death voluntarily, freely, but—shall we say reluctantly? *ἐκὼν, ἀέκοντί γε θυμῶ*—resisting the most blessed act of God's will that ever was performed in heaven or on earth; resisting, yet sure to acquiesce when that was God's clear will.

The whole of nature indeed is the will of God, and the whole of grace is striving with nature. It is our nature to have certain passions. That

is God's will. But it is our calling of God to resist them as much as to gratify them. They are there as God's will to be resisted as much as indulged. The redemption from the natural man includes the resistance to it, and the release of the soul from what God Himself appointed as its lower stages—never its dwelling-place, and never its tomb. So far prayer is on the lines of evolution.

Obedience is the chief end. But obedience is not mere submission, mere resignation. It is not always acquiescence, even in prayer. We obey God as much when we urge our suit, and make a *real* petition of it, as when we accept His decision; as much when we try to change His will as when we bow to it. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence. There is a very fine passage in Dante, *Parad.* xx. 94 (Longf.).

' *Regnum coelorum* suffereth violence
 From fervent love, and from that living
 hope
 That overcometh the divine volition.
 Not in the way that man o'ercometh man ;
 We conquer it because it will be con-
 quered,
 And, conquered, conquers by benignity.'

It is His will—His will of grace—
 that prayer should prevail with Him
 and *extract* blessings. And how we
 love the grace that so concedes them !
 The answer to prayer is not the com-
 plaisance of a playful power lightly
 yielding to the playful egoism of His
 favourites. 'Our antagonist is our
 helper.' To struggle with Him is
 one way of doing His will. To resist
 is one way of saying 'Thy will be
 done.' It was God's will that Christ
 should deprecate the death God re-
 quired. It pleased God as much as
 His submission to death. But could

it have been pleasing to Him that Christ should pray so, if no prayer could ever possibly change God's will? Could Christ have prayed so in that belief? Would faith ever inspire us to pray if the God of our faith must be unmoved by prayer? The prayer that goes to an inflexible God, however good He is, is prayer that rises more from human need than from God's own revelation, or from Christian faith (where Christian prayer should rise). It is His will, then, that we should pray against what seems His will, and what, for the lower stage of our growth, *is* His will. And all this without any unreality whatever.

Let us beware of a pietist fatalism which thins the spiritual life, saps the vigour of character, makes humility mere acquiescence, and piety only feminine, by banishing the will

from prayer as much as thought has been banished from it. 'The curse of so much religion,' says Mr. Meredith, 'is that men cling to God with their weakness rather than with their strength.'

The popularity of much acquiescence is not because it is holier but because it is easier. And an easy gospel is the consumption that attacks Christianity. It is the phthisis of faith.

Once come to think that we best say 'Thy will be done' when we acquiesce, when we resign, and not also when we struggle and wrestle, and in time all effort will seem less pious than submission. And so we fall into the ecclesiastical type of religion, drawn from an age whose first virtue was submission to outward superiors. We shall come to canonise decorum and subduedness

in life and worship (as the Episcopal Church with its monarchical ideas of religion has done). We shall think more of order than of effort, more of law than of life, more of fashion than of faith, of good form than of great power. But was subduedness *the* mark of the New Testament men? Our religion may gain some beauty in this way, but it loses vigour. It may gain style, but it loses power. It is good form, but mere aesthetic piety. It may consecrate manners, but it impoverishes the mind. It may regulate prayer by the precepts of intelligence instead of the needs and faith of the soul. It may feed certain pensive emotions, but it may emasculate will, secularise energy, and empty character. And so we decline to a state of things in which we have no shocking sins—yes, and no splendid souls; when all souls are dully correct, as

like as shillings, but as thin, and as cheap.

All our forms and views of religion have their test in prayer. Lose the importunity of prayer, reduce it to soliloquy, or even to colloquy with God, lose the real conflict of will and will, lose the habit of wrestling, and the hope of prevailing, with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk; and, precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last. In principle you make it mere conversation instead of the soul's great action. You lose the food of character, the renewal of will. You may have beautiful prayers—but as ineffectual as beauty so often is, and as fleeting. And so in the end you lose the reality of religion. Redemption turns down into mere revelation, faith to assent, and devotion to a phase of culture.

For you lose the *power* of the cross and so of the soul.

Resist God, in the sense of rejecting God, and you will not be able to resist any evil. But resist God in the sense of closing with God, cling to Him with your strength, not your weakness only, with your active, and not only your passive faith, and He will give you strength. Cast yourself into His arms not to be caressed but to wrestle with Him. He loves that holy war. He may be too many for you, and lift you from your feet. But it will be to lift you from earth, and set you in the heavenly places which are theirs who fight the good fight and lay hold of God as their eternal life.

Edinburgh University Press

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