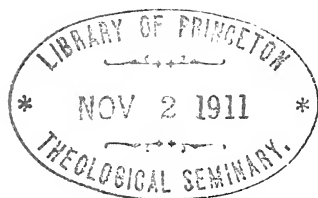


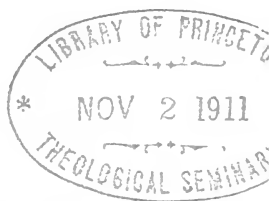


Prayer ❀

William Parsons Warburton



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Prayer



By the

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Prayer

YOU will, I trust, pardon me for introducing, even in a brotherly circle like our own, so difficult a subject as that of prayer. I do so with the greatest diffidence, but not without some hope that our discussion this evening may help us, in the mutual exchange of ideas, to profit by the experience of others on this perhaps the deepest of all questions,—to reap “the harvest of a quiet eye that broods and sleeps on his own heart.”¹ An Englishman, as a rule, takes a certain characteristic pride in reserve, in not

¹ Wordsworth.

wearing his heart upon his sleeve,—but do we not sometimes, do we not often, in fact, lose valuable opportunities of sympathy and mutual encouragement by carrying our reticence on religious subjects too far? Is it not sometimes an unworthy self-consciousness which makes us shrink from opening our hearts to one another about things which, after all is said and done, are the most deeply interesting, the most urgently important things in the world—not (to us Christians) abstract speculations, but emphatically “the things which belong unto our peace.” I believe it to be one, and not the least admirable, of the features of that so-called Evangelicalism which did so much for the Church of England in a past period, and is now again reasserting itself and colouring the teaching of men supposed to stand

as it were at the opposite pole of ecclesiastical opinion, that it has always encouraged, even to the verge of inquisitiveness, the mutual exchange among Christian brethren of their experiences on the needs and perils of the soul. Let us speak about prayer to-night, as *fratres fratribus, Christiani Christianis, periclitati periclitatis, morituri morituris*. (Brothers to brothers, Christians to Christians, men on trial to men on trial, men who have to die to men who have to die.)

When I began to think of what I should say to you I soon found that prayer might well form the basis, not of one of our discussions, but of a series of discussions, and that it would be necessary to narrow our subject in every possible way in order to bring it into manageable compass. Therefore, in be-

ginning, as I suppose we are bound to do, with the position of those who object altogether to the use of prayer, I shall class them, neglecting minor shades of difference, as either Atheistical or Necessarian. The former may be dismissed at once, for in their case prayer logically falls to the ground for lack of an object: "He that cometh to God must believe *that He is.*" Of the Necessarians we must make two groups: those, on the one hand, who believe that the author of nature has bound nature down once for all by irreversible and invariable laws, and then withdrawn Himself from all concern with the machinery He has set in motion; and, on the other hand, those *religious* Necessarians who hold that God, being supremely wise, loving, and merciful, arranges everything in the best possible way, and that, therefore, if the

course of nature were altered in any particular, it could only be altered for the worse. In the eyes of the former, prayer is unavailing; in the eyes of the latter, it is mischievous. We must now, however, confine ourselves to the difficulties of those who, believing that there is a God, and a God at once omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent, fail to understand how the march of His Eternal Providence can be affected by the prayer of ignorant, capricious, and short-sighted creatures of a day. Well, whether or no Necessarianism be anything more than a barren abstract speculation,—whether that *theory* be true or false,—every human being acts, and cannot help acting,—on the hypothesis of its falsehood. He acts upon the consciousness of liberty of choice, and no argument will convince him that he had no

alternative. We act as if we were free, and it is reasonable to suppose we shall be judged as if we were free. Necessity, therefore, as a theory of life and a basis of conduct, falls to the ground and leaves us responsible for our actions, and therefore all the more in need of any help that we can get, to make our lives conformable to the Divine law and so fulfil the conditions of salvation.

Well then, the whole of mankind, or certainly the whole of the Christian world, has been taught by the accumulated testimony of millions who have tried it and recorded their experience, that prayer *is* heard and answered, and that *in prayer the worshipper is brought into contact with a source of power available for human ends*. If the verdict of human experience was that

God neither heard nor answered prayer, it would surely long since have ceased to be offered; but the whole induction is the other way, and indicates that God's dealings with us are influenced by prayer in some way which may be logically inexplicable, but is sufficient to justify its use, and commend it to the understanding as well as to the heart. "Prayer exists as a fact of human consciousness, and it is therefore arguable that it has a definite purpose in the economy of nature, since, if it had no such purpose, it would not and could not exist at all."

Let us then consider prayer in four aspects:

- Firstly, in respect of its origin;
- Secondly, of its obligations—
- Thirdly, of its manner; and
- Fourthly, of its proper subjects.

I—*Origin of Prayer*

The writer of the most fascinating book since Herodotus on Eastern travel,¹ after describing the awful solitariness and the sense of man's littleness in journeying day after day across the endless sands of the desert, exclaims: "The earth is so samely that your eye turns towards Heaven—towards Heaven, I mean, in the sense of sky"—for relief. He intends, I suppose, by this parenthesis (heaven in the sense of sky) to intimate that it is not his way to "turn to Heaven" for relief in any other sense, that he is not misled by the blind instinct which prompts most men to do so, when the burden of human destiny seems too heavy to bear alone. But I believe that the writer was deceiving himself in this Ti-

¹ *Eothen*, A. W. Kinglake.

tanic protest. I believe there has never been a man who has not felt at some time or other that he was unequal to cope with the forces of destiny without the aid of some unseen power outside himself to which he instinctively appeals. Whatever be the exact etymology of the word "*religion*," it bears evidence to the fact that man feels bound by a tie, which he acknowledges, and of which he cannot rid himself, to a being whom he cannot approach and cannot see, but of whose power he entertains no doubt.

And is not this feeling the *rationale* of prayer? an attempt—an instinct, if you will—to find a link between things visible and things unseen, between earth and heaven, between God and man—an attempt to construct, as it were, an aerial bridge of communication, one extremity

of which stands on the solid earth at our feet, and the other (as we first dimly surmise, then hopefully trust, and, at last, believe and know with a certainty amounting to conviction) is based on an unseen rock beyond the void.

Prayer cannot exist without at least a rudimentary *faith*: πάσης προσευχῆς βάθρον καὶ κρηπίς ἡ πίστις (of all prayer the bed-rock and basis is faith). We read as follows in Newman's *Apologia*: "Butler teaches us that probability is the guide of life. The danger of this doctrine in many minds is its tendency to destroy in them absolute certainty, leading them to consider every conclusion as doubtful, and resolving truth into an opinion which it is safe to obey or profess, but not possible to embrace with full internal assent. If this were allowed, then the well-known prayer, 'O

God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul' would be the highest measure of devotion, but who can really pray to a being of whose existence he is in doubt?"

Scarcely in advance of this absolutely contingent and hypothetical position is that formulated, in a moment of unaccustomed despondency, by the author of *In Memoriam*:

"What am I?
An infant crying in the night—
An infant crying for the light,
And with no language but a cry!"

We cannot get beyond the barrier which separates such a mere ejaculation of helplessness as this from prayer properly so-called, unless we postulate that our cry be at least articulate, and contain a petition addressed to some one with a power to help us. In other words, prayer

must have an object as well as a subject. This, however, does not carry the argument very far, for even Fetish worship has an object, and the Athenian thief, starting in the morning for a day's thieving, could pray "Ἀναξ Ἀπολλων, δός με κλέπτειν (O King Apollo, grant to me to steal). Prayer in order to be prayer must be addressed to one whom we believe to be in sympathy, or to be capable of sympathy, with our moral aspirations; nor do I think that it can be addressed with much hope of success to "a stream of tendency" or to "a something outside of ourselves which makes for righteousness." "He that cometh to God must believe that He is": so did Lucretius believe that God is, but between the above clause of Scripture and the next, "He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him," there

is a gulf wide enough to take in the whole range of Lucretian philosophy:

“Omnis enim per se Divum natura necesse est
Immortali ævo summa cum pace fruatur,
Semota ab nostris rebus sejunctaque longè,
Ipsa suis pollens opibus, nihil indiga nostri,
Nec bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira.”

(For of necessity the whole nature of the gods
of itself enjoys an immortal life with perfect
peace.

Remote and far separate from our affairs,
Itself abounding in resources of its own, and
wanting nothing of ours,
It is neither propitiated by good deservings, nor
affected by anger.)

Remembering then the short limits
of our time, I would venture to offer a
definition, or rather a description of
prayer as, *An appeal from a less strong
to a stronger being, whom the former
believes to have the will as well as the
power to help him*; and, in that fuller
conception of prayer with which Christ-

ians are familiar, the greater strength appealed to is no less than Divine omnipotence; and the *will to help us* can be only feebly represented by the tenderness of a Father's love.

II.—*Obligation of Prayer.*

Prayer is then, as we have seen, primarily *a resource*. In this aspect, its *lowest* form perhaps is the cry forced from thoughtless or impenitent hearts in times of overwhelming distress or imminent danger—in burning houses, or sinking ships. I can hardly think of any *higher* conception of prayer, in the light of a resource, than what I once heard of in the case of a devout and simple-minded young couple who were attached to each other and were forbidden to meet or write; but who consoled themselves by the thought that they could still re-

member each other in their prayers, and so communicate with each other "round by Heaven." But prayer is not only a resource, it is also a privilege, and a privilege passing into an obligation and a duty, which it is constantly enjoined upon us in revelation not to let slumber, but to stir up and keep alive as a gift that is in us. The man without prayer is likened by S. Chrysostom to a fish out of water and gasping for life; to a city without walls, and exposed to all assaults. Prayer is, he says, the medicine expelling spiritual sicknesses. It is *that* to the soul which nerves are to the body, the *panis supersubstantialis* (supersubstantial bread), the staff of spiritual life.

Last December, in a blinding snow-storm, a lugger ran aground on one of the dangerous sand-banks at the mouth of the Mersey, and two of the sailors

took refuge in the rigging. Both were ultimately saved, and one of them told it of the other that, as the night came on, and no chance of rescue appeared, he heard him pray: "God Almighty, spare me again this turn: it's fifteen years come next Christmas since I asked anything from you." This was doubtless a true prayer, in all its wrong-headed simplicity and ignorance; God may hear and answer such prayers—often does hear and answer them—but these instinctive cries of helpless terror, even when they reach the listening ear of God, are not like the ladder set up from earth to Heaven with the angels of prayer ascending, and the angels of blessing descending from on high.

Texts might be multiplied to prove that constant prayer is a confessed duty of revealed religion. "Men ought al-

ways to pray, lifting up holy hands without wrath or doubting." God enjoins our prayers, and cares for our prayers, and expects our prayers. He loves to be importuned like the unjust judge—to be disturbed by repeated insistence like the friend at midnight, to be wrestled with like the angel at the ford, and not let go till He has bestowed a blessing—*Grata Deo hæc vis est* (This violence is pleasing to God). "The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force" of prayer. It is a talent which must be employed, a tribute which must be paid by all the citizens of Zion, a token of loyalty and allegiance to our Heavenly King. What says the saintly Hooker: "How could any kind of service we do, or can do, find greater acceptance than prayer, which showeth our concurrence with

God in desiring that wherein His very nature doth most delight. Prayer is a work common to the Church triumphant and the Church militant, to men with angels. What should we think but that so much of our lives is celestial and divine that we spend in prayer?"

III.—*Manner of Prayer.*

Next, as to the manner of prayer; and first, of Public Prayer, Liturgies, and Litanies. I believe that the sympathy of numbers is a powerful help to devotion, and that the simultaneous prayer of many minds and many voices is a "*sursum corda*" (Lift up your hearts), for the thoughts of all. We can enter into the feeling of the old Evangelical hymn—

"Lord, how delightful 't is to see
A whole assembly worship Thee;"

and there is, as we know, a special promise of Christ, that "wheresoever two or three are gathered together in His name, there is He in the midst of them." "*Multorum preces,*" says Ambrose, "*impossibile est contemni.*" (It is impossible that the prayers of a number of persons should be despised.) I think, however, that our Church has been rightly guided in discouraging public prayer "extempore," so called, but too often wanting in spontaneity, and the result of elaborate preparation to give it the appearance of spontaneity, too often not the effusion of a full and fervent heart, but an exercise largely influenced by a personal and self-conscious element, both in the speaker and the congregation. Not that I go quite as far as good Bishop Andrewes, who talks of "the irksome deformities whereby, through endless

and senseless effusions of indigested prayers, they oftentimes disgrace in insufferable manner the worthiest part of Christian duty." But extempore prayer, even at its best, is liable, as it seems to my mind, to a fatal initial defect, namely, that the silent listening worshipper, not knowing what is coming, cannot assent to the petition,—cannot make it his own,—till he who is praying has passed on to something else, so that in this way the principle of simultaneous supplication is sacrificed, and the fulfilment of the promise endangered, "that if *two of you shall agree* on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." In the case of an exposition, the hearer can agree or disagree, can exercise his judgment, and give or withhold his assent, but before

addressing a prayer to the Almighty we ought surely to have made up our minds whether the petition is one which we would ourselves put up, and put up *in that form* at the throne of grace. In the case of fixed and familiar formularies like our own, if we feel an imperfect sympathy with any portion of them, we are at liberty, I suppose, to abstain from joining in it, while recognising the fact that this very portion may be a vehicle of grace to others differently constituted; but we are saved from the inopportune-ness of exercising the critical and selective faculty at the moment when the heart should be outpouring itself to God.

Another great advantage of our familiar Prayer Book liturgy seems to me to be that, by what we may surely venture to call inspiration from on high, it is so framed as to supply a model for all prayer,

whether public or private. Take for example the order of Morning Prayer. It begins with a Scripture motto giving the key to the sacred season—an exhortation to repentance followed by confession of sins, and declaration of their forgiveness through Christ, enabling contrite and absolved hearts to join with all saints in the blessed filial confidence of the Lord's Prayer, and then in the universal hymn of praise of a redeemed and rejoicing people. Then follow the Psalms and the selected studies from the Bible, and the repetition of the Creed of the Apostles and of all true servants of Christ since them. Then follows the Litany, in which the Church undoubtedly sanctions prayers for temporal objects (see below), and winding up with the General Thanksgiving for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings

of this life,—thanksgiving, the flower and crown of all human access to the Presence Chamber of God.

It would, of course, be undesirable that private prayer should be of this formal, or, indeed, of any formal character at all, but it is most important to bear in mind that whenever we approach the obvious and inevitable Christian duty of saying our prayers, they should appropriately begin with confession, ascend through the Lord's Prayer to joyful adoration; then might follow our meditation on the teachings of Scripture—the declaration of our faith, our petitions for particular needs, and intercessions for the Church and for individuals, and our thanksgivings for mercies received. Thanksgiving and praise are two distinct duties, or perhaps one duty regarded from two opposite points of

view, the subjective and the objective. We give God thanks for His mercies to ourselves, but we also give Him thanks as our Heavenly King, for His "own great glory."

IV.—*Subjects of Prayer.*

Up to this point I may venture to hope that my brethren have not seriously dissented from any of the common and well-known views to which I have called attention, but we now come to a question upon which very different opinions have been expressed. The old orthodox belief that the prayer of Faith can prevail with the Almighty to alter the details of His temporal Providence in His dealings with each of us from day to day, is still held by some of the best and holiest amongst us, and it may indeed be held

unblamably by all, originating as it does in a deep sense of our own personal relations with God, of His tender Fatherhood, His daily discipline, and unceasing care. It is, in fact, something more than a pious opinion; for prayer is undoubtedly the attitude of the soul in which we do receive blessings of all kinds, temporal no less than spiritual, at the hands of God. But the whole theory of Divine interpositions, and of special Providences, when regarded from the point of view of the individual, presents grave difficulties to modern thought. It comes into collision (1) with the fact that we are members of a community, the individuals composing which have often different, and even conflicting, interests, so that what would be to the benefit of one, would be to the detriment of another; and (2) with the growing belief that God,

in His government of the external world, acts by fixed laws, which it is our duty to investigate, and our highest wisdom to obey. In His temporal dealings with His children, it is said, we must rely upon His gracious promise that all things shall work together for our good; and if, instead of submitting our wills to His will, we supplicate our Heavenly Father for this or that modification in the circumstances of our lives, or pray like Rachel, for that which He, in loving wisdom withholds, we make our sorrows an answer to our prayers. But in the spiritual world the case is wholly different,—there we can be dealt with individually; to each one of us, as we Protestants believe, is committed the care of his own soul, each of us is, in his spiritual relations, alone with God; and when we pray to Him—and we need not

surely be on our knees to pray—when we pray to Him to make us holier, gentler, purer, more submissive, more heavenly-minded, we cannot go wrong, we cannot ask amiss, for we are “desiring that which He doth promise.” And what we pray for ourselves we may pray in Intercession for others also,—for all who are near, and dear to us, and for all, far off or near, for whom Christ died, that they may be kept from temptation or carried safely through it; that they may not fall into sin, or having fallen, may mercifully be restored; that they may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ; that they may love Him and be loved of Him, and daily becoming more and more like Him, may be admitted to dwell in His presence for ever. And if this is the proper sphere of prayer, and these its legitimate objects, prayer may be-

come, as the Apostle says, "unceasing"; or, as Origen writes in his beautiful tract on this subject, πᾶς ὁ βίος ἂν εἴη μία μεγάλη καὶ συναπτομένη προσευχή (the whole life might be one great and continuous prayer): or, as Tennyson, in unconscious imitation:

"Thrice blest, whose *lives* are faithful prayers."

The silent longing for a closer walk with God, the *sursum corda* of an habitual contentment, the labour which is itself a prayer; all these are as acceptable in the sight of God as bended knees and suppliant hands, and the incense of morning and evening sacrifices.

But some one may ask with the Roman poet, "Nil ergo potabunt homines?" Are men to ask *no* gifts of heaven? I would answer in his own words (of course, *mutatis mutandis*);

"Si consilium vis,

Permittas ipsis expendere numinibus quid
Conveniat nobis, rebusque sit utile nostris.

Carior est illis homo quam sibi,"

(If you ask for advice, let the gods themselves deal out to us what is most suitable for us, and useful for our affairs. To them man is dearer than to himself.—*Juvenal.*)

which last clause I may remark in passing, always strikes me as one of the most wonderful utterances of heathen antiquity. I confess I myself shrink from directly asking specific temporal gifts from God, but I know I am in a minority, and have no doubt that those who "can receive" the doctrine of special interventions in answer to prayer have greater happiness in their prayers; but I have always thought that Socrates was right in saying "εὔχεσθε τοὺς θεοῦς ἀπλῶς τὰ ἀγαθὰ διδόναι; (Pray to the gods simply to give us what is good;)" and Origen, when he says, quoting the

words which the Apocryphal gospel of the Nazarenes treats as a lost saying of Christ, "αἰτεῖτε τὰ μεγάλα, καὶ τὰ μικρὰ ὑμῖν προστεθήσεται. αἰτεῖτε τὰ ἐπουράνια, καὶ τὰ ἐπιγεία ὑμῖν προστεθήσεται," (Ask for the great things and the small shall be added unto you; ask for the heavenly things and the earthly things shall be added unto you). If we make mention of specific temporal wishes to God in prayer, must it not always be with an expressed or implicit condition, "Thy will not mine be done"? and does it not seem even more dutiful and natural simply to lay our case before Him, and ask Him to deal with it "in the way His wisdom sees the best"? When Hezekiah read the threatening letter of Sennacherib, he went up into the House of God "*and spread it before the Lord.*" When he was told he must die, "he

turned his face to the wall and prayed," and what was his prayer? "'Lord, remember how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart;' and Hezekiah wept sore." This was his "*case*."

Let me once more illustrate my meaning by a very homely parable—almost Socratic in its homeliness—from real life. The Archdeacon of Umtata told us in a lecture at Bishop Sumner's house that once, being at a distance from home, he received his customary report from the head native boy in training to be a Missionary; which wound up by saying that his trousers had a hole in them which would cost $4\frac{1}{2}d.$ to mend; "But mind, dear sir," he added, "I am not begging, I am only reporting."

I said a little while ago that prayer is the attitude of the soul in which we re-

ceive blessings of all kinds, temporal as well as spiritual, at the hands of God. I firmly believe that no humble, faithful prayer falls to the ground, but that it always receives an answer, though not always the direct or expected answer. For example, we may pray against a disappointment, and the answer may come in the shape of unexpected strength to bear it. We may pray for the prolongation of an ebbing life, and the answer may be, not an arrestation of the fatal disease, but the gift of "a long life, even for ever and ever."

"An answer, not what you long for,
But diviner—will come some day.
Your eyes are too dim to see it,
But strive and wait and pray."¹

You have borne with my prose parable
—may I conclude with a little parable

¹ Adelaide Procter. *Strive and wait and pray.*

in verse which I cut out from an old
American magazine?

“Years ago, 'way up in heaven
 Bloomed a shining star,
And to it there came an Angel
 Flying from afar,

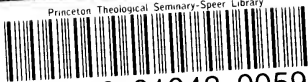
“For she heard the star complaining
 Of its bitter fate,—
'T was so small, and O! its Maker
 Made so many great.

“‘Hasten quickly,’ said the Angel,
 ‘To Jerusalem;
God hath made thee, thankless spirit,
 Star of Bethlehem.’”





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