

G5523

THE

"PRAYER FOR THE SICK:"

HINTS TOWARDS A SERIOUS ATTEMPT TO ESTIMATE
ITS VALUE.

*Reprinted with permission from the July No. of the
Contemporary Review.*

THE following suggestive letter has been placed in my hands, with a view to publication. It is sure, I think, to interest the thoughtful readers of the *Contemporary Review*. It deals, indeed, with a subject which interests everybody, and regarding which all manner of men, from the Prime Minister downwards, have given the public the benefit of their views.

If such be attainable, it is surely desirable to have clearer notions than we now possess of the action of "Providence" in physical affairs. Two opposing parties here confront each other—the one affirming the habitual intrusion of supernatural power, in answer to the petitions of men; the other questioning, if not denying, any such intrusion. The writer of the letter wishes to bring these opposing affirmations to an experimental test. He considers the subject to be accessible to experiment, and makes a proposal which, if faithfully carried out, would, he thinks, displace assertion by demonstration as regards the momentous point in question.

It was justly stated by the Archbishop of York at a recent meeting of the supporters of the Palestine Exploration Fund, that the progress of the human mind is from vagueness towards precision. The letter before us seems an illustration of this tendency. Instead of leaving the subject to the random assertions of half-informed sceptics on the one hand, and hazy lecturers of the Victoria Institute on the other, the writer seeks to confer quantitative precision on the action of the Supernatural in Nature. His proposal is so fair, and his mode of stating it so able and conciliatory, that I could not, when asked to do so, refuse to give it the support implied by these few lines of introduction.

JOHN TYNDALL.

Athenæum Club, June, 1872.

DEAR PROFESSOR TYNDALL,

Since our conversation the other night, when you were good enough to listen to a suggestion I made relative to a means of determining the value of prayer to the Deity, it occurred to me to put the idea into writing, and to ask you to do me the further kindness of looking at it in this shape.

It seems to me impossible at the present day to find ourselves in contact with a source of power available for human ends, or affirmed to be so on high authority, without recognising a necessity—or even that it is a duty—to estimate its value. And especially if the power be one which is effective for the production of physical results, is it desirable to examine its nature, and to measure its extent, and the conditions under which it works.

The value of prayer to the Deity has been recognised in all ages and by all nations, not merely by the ignorant and superstitious, but by the more cultivated portions of the human race. And I think it

may be said that among the great body of religious people of all denominations in this country, a belief in its efficacy is almost universally professed. As to the objects which it is believed are attainable by prayer, they are almost without limit as to kind. Taking as an authority that well-known compendium which none will dispute to be the national epitome of English religious idea on the subject, "The Book of Common Prayer,"* the legitimate objects of supplication to God may be classified as follows :—

Class A. Spiritual improvement; moral superiority; intellectual power.

„ B. National supremacy. Preservation from pestilence, famine and battles. The fertility of the soil; weather suitable for the growth and preservation of vegetable products. The health, wealth, and long life of the chief national ruler. A special share of grace and wisdom for the Nobility, and for members of the Legislature and of the Executive.

„ C. For all that are in danger; for the preservation of travellers, of sick persons, of young children, prisoners, orphans, and widows; protection against murder and sudden death.

„ D. Comprehends *special* forms for occasional use, *e.g.*, for "moderate rain and showers," &c.; that "scarcity and dearth may be turned into cheapness and plenty;" that "this plague and grievous sickness may be withdrawn;"

* Although not used by Dissenters, they do not reject it on account of its contents, since its very phraseology is often employed by them, but for the most part because all *forms* are deemed by them undesirable.

and the prayer for "sick persons," which is not precise in its requests on their behalf.

From all the foregoing it is impossible to resist the conclusion already more than hinted, that a very ample belief exists in the Christian Church, in the efficacy of prayer to God to avert dire physical evils, which without it might occur; such, for example, as disease and death. Were any one, however, hardy enough to question this, it would suffice to point out that the custom of offering prayers for the recovery of sick persons when in great danger is almost universal here. And it may be added that, in the larger and more ancient section of the Church, prayer still continues on behalf of the deceased, a custom, perhaps, not less pious and reasonable than the first-named.

Now, I propose to examine this subject from one point of view only, in the endeavour to discover a means of demonstrating, in some tangible form, the efficacy of prayer. I commence by remarking, however, that the objects of prayer in Class *A.* clearly present inordinate difficulties, and are obviously unfitted for our purpose. Class *B.* furnishes subjects which might be examined, but which are less easy of treatment than some of those to be found in classes *C.* and *D.* But even here, elements of disturbance present themselves; thus, in reference to the influence of prayer on states of the weather in limited localities, that food may be cheapened, that travellers may be preserved from accident, &c., it is certain that considerable difficulty would arise in any systematic attempt to arrive at accurate conclusions. But this leads me to remark that there appears to be one source from a study of which the absolute calculable value of prayer (I speak with the utmost reverence) can almost certainly be ascertained. I mean its influence in affecting the course of a malady, or in averting the fatal termination. For it must be admitted that such

an important influence, manifestly either does, or does not exist. If it is does, a careful investigation of diseased persons by good pathologists, working with this end seriously in view, must determine the fact. The fact determined, it is simply a matter of further careful clinical observation to estimate the extent or degree in which prayer is effective. And the next step would be to consider how far it is practicable to extend this benefit among the sick and dying. And I can conceive few inquiries which are more pregnant with good to humanity when this stage has been arrived at.

You will naturally next say, What practical shape does the method take by which you propose to attain your end ? The method has its difficulties, but I see none that are insuperable. If I may reckon on the active co-operation of those who most believe in the value of such prayer, and I think I have a right to do so, the enquiry will be easy. For few more interesting subjects of enquiry can exist for the honest believer than the extent of man's influence with Heaven, at the most momentous crisis in his personal history.

Before entering on the details demanded, it is first necessary to remark that prayer for the recovery of sick persons exists in two distinct forms, or, if I may use the term, in two orders or degrees of quality. For, first, there are the general prayers for the sick, made without distinction as to individuals, or to numbers, on most occasions of public worship. These prayers are offered by, perhaps, thirty thousand congregations every Sunday in our country, since it is no less the practice of the Dissenter than of the Churchman to remember devoutly the sick in the weekly supplication. But besides these, there are the special prayers for individual sick persons, which are by general consent deemed also necessary ; and thus it is that when the patient holds a very high place in society, a special form of petition is sometimes

ordained to be used throughout the national churches for his recovery. It is one of the advantages of rank and gentle birth in England, that special prayers are made for such every week at least, in most churches throughout the country.

The first kind, or general prayer, then, must be held to have a certain value not inconsiderable, since it is this kind which is relied on against the dangers of travel, of murder, and of sudden death, and respecting which no other or special petitions are provided. This general prayer for the recovery from sickness is constantly ascending, if I may use the term, in a broad stream to heaven. Yet its objects, "all men," being so numerous, it is not held to suffice for all individual cases. Hence the second kind, or *special prayer*; and the object sought by those who are interested in the recovery of the sick, obviously is to concentrate the special prayers of many on the recovery of one, in the belief that by this means the malady may be more certainly checked than were the patient's fate to depend only on the influence of the "general prayer." With this end it is that the special prayers of a congregation are asked for A or B, or a special prayer-meeting is held to offer the one object of petition. I have been myself present at such meetings, and have witnessed the number, the minuteness, and the length of the petitions.

Now the latter kind, or special prayer, is that which readily lends itself to the earnest enquirer in this matter, and it is by its means, if carefully and conscientiously pursued, that we may certainly arrive, if at all, at a solution of the great question I have proposed.

The following appears to me to indicate the manner of conducting the inquiry. It should be pursued on a system somewhat analogous to that which is pursued by the Faculty when a question arises as to the value of any particular mode of treating disease. For

example, a new remedy has been proposed, or is said on high authority to be efficacious, and as authority does not suffice in medicine further than to recommend a given course, and never to prescribe it, the remedy is carefully tested. Usually a hospital or a ward is assigned for the purpose. All the patients suffering from the disease to be treated are, during a certain period, divided into two classes, and all are subjected, as far as possible, to the same conditions, that single one of treatment alone excepted. The ages, sexes, and many other particulars of the patients are taken into account, and duly noted. The one class is treated by the old system, and the other by the new remedy. When a very large number—for in large number only is there truth—has been thus dealt with, the results are compared, and the value of the remedy can be definitely expressed; that is, its influence above or below that of the old treatment, as the case may be, will appear in the percentage of recovery, or of other results.

Now, after much thought and examination of the various questions and objections which may possibly be urged, I do not hesitate to propose an analogous arrangement, in order *to estimate and rightly appreciate the influence of special prayer to check disease, or to avert death.*

We possess unquestionable data in reference to certain well-known maladies, particularly the fevers, of eruptive type; such as small-pox, typhoid, scarlet fever, &c. Of some local acute disorders, such as pneumonia, we know what is termed their natural history pretty well, their duration and probable termination at different ages, &c. The mortality which follows the great surgical operations at different ages is a matter known and determined; for example, after lithotomy and lithotrity, amputations of the limbs, hernia, &c. The very large records of past cases which exist, and the very wide and careful researches which

have been made, have had for their result the production of known numerical mortality-rates per cent., and applicable to future patients of different ages and conditions. Indeed, the whole system of life assurance is, all the world over, based solely on the accuracy of such data, and on the certainty with which they will reproduce themselves. Whatever these numerical results have been—whether the mortality rates deduced belong to healthy lives or to diseased lives—all have been necessarily made, subject to the conditions of human life as it now exists, and including, among a thousand other influences, that most important one of "general prayer" by the whole Christian Church for "all men" as it has been already described, and influencing as it does, whatever may be its extent, the sick, the suffering, those exposed to murder and sudden death, &c., throughout the whole world. Subject to this influence is that of every drug prescribed. Influenced by this is the result of every surgical operation.

Now, for the purpose of our inquiry, I do not propose to ask that one single child of man should be deprived of his participation in all that belongs to him of this vast influence. But I ask that one single ward or hospital, under the care of first-rate physicians and surgeons, containing certain numbers of patients afflicted with those diseases which have been best studied, and of which the mortality rates are best known, whether the diseases are those which are treated by medical or by surgical remedies, should be, during a period of not less, say, than three or five years, made the object of special prayer by the whole body of the faithful, and that, at the end of that time, the mortality rates should be compared with the past rates, and also with that of other leading hospitals, similarly well managed, during the same period. Granting that time is given, and numbers are sufficiently large, so as to ensure a minimum of error from

which may be promoted or impeded by the disposition of the petitioner, as when men pray for strength against temptation, or for restoration to health, for the welfare of those associated with them, or for their own success in temporal affairs. Prayer of this sort is often followed not that they may produce effects upon themselves, but that God may do so, and if they ceased to believe in His interposition they would probably cease to appeal to Him.

A still more serious objection to a view which accepts as a sufficient account of answer to prayer the subjective effects upon the individual is that it leaves out of sight all those cases before referred to in which prayer is made for objects in no way related to or affected by the condition of the suppliant's mind. I hear that a friend is ill. The circumstances are such that I cannot communicate with him or with those about him. If I pray for his recovery, that end cannot be promoted through the medium of the salutary influences exercised upon my mind. Is then the act of prayer inoperative as regards the sick person? If inoperative, is it rational?

Y.

I am, &c.,

Faint, illegible text, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

ВЪДЪЛЪ

accidental disturbing causes, the experiment will be exhaustive and complete.

I might have proposed to treat two sides of the same hospital, managed by the same men; one side to be the object of special prayer, the other to be exempted from all prayer. It would have been the most rigidly logical and philosophical method. But I shrink from depriving any of—I had almost said—his natural inheritance in the prayers of Christendom. Practically, too, it would have been impossible; the unprayed-for ward would have attracted the prayers of believers as surely as the lofty tower attracts electric fluid. The experiment would be frustrated. But the opposite character of my proposal will commend it to those who are naturally the most interested in its success; those, namely, who conscientiously and devoutly believe in the efficiency against disease and death of special prayer. I open a field for the exercise of their devotion. I offer an occasion of demonstrating to the faithless an imperishable record of the real power of prayer.

*Athenæum Club, Pall Mall,
June, 1872.*