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# COMMUNION WITH GOD.

BY

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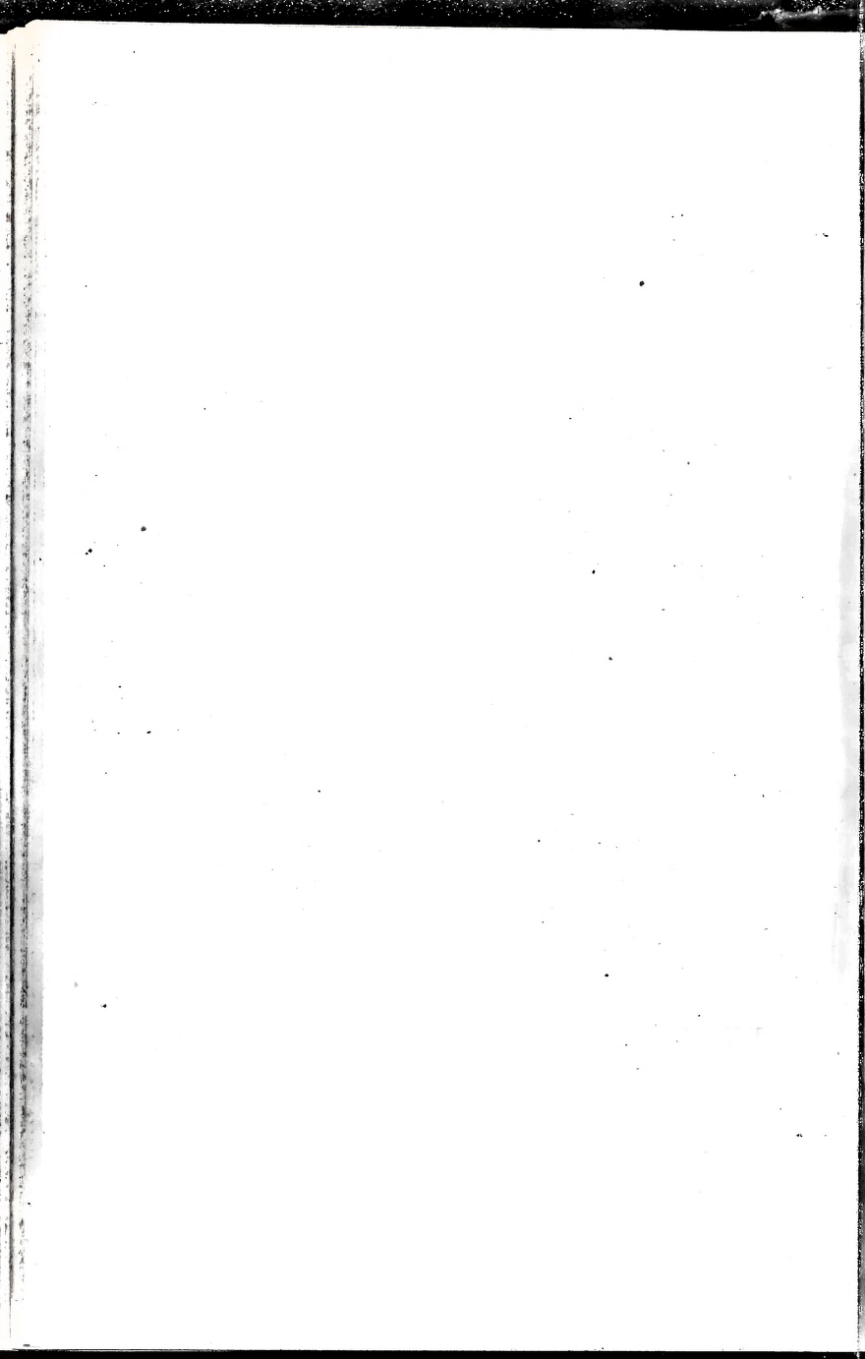
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PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,  
NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,  
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

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*Price Threepence.*



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THE philosophers have of late trenched upon ground whereupon they are ill fitted to lead the way. Their studies, and the habits of their minds, induce them to govern themselves by conclusions formed upon what may be presented to their material senses, but of any field of knowledge that may be cultivated out of sources for which the physical perceptions afford insufficient medium, they are practically unconscious. No one need quarrel with their pursuits. They are most useful and legitimate. What is questionable is the assumption on their parts that there lies nothing beyond the experiences they thus acquire. Their want of personal comprehension of acquisitions belonging to a sphere unapproached by them, is assuredly no evidence that there is no such sphere to be resorted to.

The exponent, whose observations, offered in his paper in the *Fortnightly Review* of August last, on the efficacy of prayer, I have now particularly in view, is Mr Francis Galton. The parties marshalled before him are his fellow creatures in their various grades and conditions in life, and their Almighty Creator; and he presumes to pass judgment on the possibilities of intercourse between the two, in view of a statistical inquiry pursued by him on this and kindred subjects. The method is one that would commend itself to the mere philosopher. If prayer is heard and answered by the Almighty, instances will abound, and proofs be manifest, and the conduct of human affairs will be materially influenced by the existence of so potent an agency.

Sovereigns are prayed for, but they are not longer lived than their subjects. This nation, I may observe, has had of late years notable instances of prayer exercised in this direction. The Prince Consort was publicly prayed for, but died. His son, the Prince of Wales, was prayed for, and recovered. What conclusion, Mr Galton might have asked, is to be drawn from this conflict of result? Prayer, he goes on to notice, is not, as a rule, called in by physicians for the advantage of their patients. Professor Tyndall, whether seriously or otherwise, has suggested the singling out one ward of an hospital and praying for its inmates, watching what might be the consequences. The nobility, Mr Galton observes, are prayed for, but without apparent benefit. The clergy and the missionaries, who devote themselves to the divine service, are not endowed with longer years than their fellows, or specially protected. The vessels of devout sailors, or those engaged for missionary expeditions, are not less subject to the perils of the sea than other vessels. The insurance offices make no account of prayerful constituents. The conclusion arrived at by Mr Galton is, that however soothing and fortifying it may be to the mind of man to suppose himself capable of communion with his maker, evidences of such intercourse, as traceable through effects, are not to be observed by such an enquirer as himself.

Are the tests that have been applied of a fairly sufficient nature? and is a bystander competent to judge of the question? Certainly, as tried by the standard of the creed everywhere surrounding him, Mr Galton has been amply justified in his method of investigation, and in the results to which he comes. If material consequences are the evidence of communion with God, then the adequate demonstration of such communion, it must be confessed, is commonly wanting.

Let us study the Christian instructions on this subject.

Is prayer to be depended upon for renovation of

health? Certainly this is explicitly taught. "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Then follows the instance of Elias shutting up the heavens for three years and a-half, and subsequently withdrawing the bonds placed by him over nature and bringing down the rain, prayer being his instrument on both occasions (Jam. v. 14-18). Sickness, it will be observed, is here represented to be a special visitation for sin. It is so put elsewhere. When Jesus healed the palsied man, he coupled the act with the forgiveness of his sins; and when he cured the impotent man lying at the pool of Bethesda, he said to him, "Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." Death itself, we are assured, only came in by sin (Rom. v. 12), and with this change in the constitution of man, all other physical sufferings were, it would appear, introduced. The pains of child-birth, for example, were a direct consequence of the first transgression (Gen. iii. 16), and "the whole creation," tainted and smitten at the fall of man, is described as "groaning and travailing in pain together," waiting for deliverance (Rom. viii. 20-22). But there is a sin for which there is no remedy. This is the "blasphemy against the Holy Ghost," in whatever form the offence may possibly be perpetrated. For such sin there is no forgiveness (Matt. xii. 31, 32; Heb. vi. 4-6; x. 26, 27). Prayer then, against the consequences of this sin, is unavailing. "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death." But should he have committed the unpardonable blasphemy, the

resort to prayer in his behalf will be a vain exercise. "There is a sin unto death : I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin ; and there is a sin not unto death" (1 John v. 16, 17).

The case of the sick has been thus instanced as a proper subject for the intercession of prayer ; but the fact is, this power may be successfully exerted, according to the Christian tenets, in respect of whatever object, of an innocent sort, the desires may be directed to. Anything, and everything, may be prayed for, with assurance of its acquisition, provided the request is made in the name of Jesus, and with faith. "If two of you shall agree upon earth, as touching *any thing* that they shall ask, *it* shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 19). "*All things, whatsoever* ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. xxi. 22). "*Whatsoever* ye shall ask in my name, *that* will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask *any thing* in my name, I will do *it*" (John xiv. 13, 14. See also Matt. vii. 7 ; Mark xi. 24 ; John xv. 7, 16 ; xvi. 23, 24 ; 1 John iii. 22). Nor is a refusal to be put up with. The Almighty, seemingly against his proper judgment, is to be forced into compliance through the wearying application of constant entreaty, as in the instance given of the widow with the unjust judge (Luke xviii. 1-7).

It is easy to pledge the Almighty to a given course ; but if he takes it not, the assertion of the pledge becomes demonstrably presumptuous. Either Christians, as a body, have put themselves out of the pale of the influence of prayer, by sins that may not be forgiven, by want of faith, or want of persistence ; or the allegation that God is on all occasions to be controlled by prayer, has been made without warrant. All sicknesses should, by this time, have disappeared ; death itself should have been held in abeyance ; poverty should be unknown ; wars should be impos-

sible ; the whole world should have been brought to the faith of Jesus, if the bold promises held out in his name had been founded on a true estimate of the divine appointment. Mr Galton amply proves the inadequacy of prayer in the several channels examined by him. The economy of the world is not carried on upon the idea that such governing power rests absolutely with man. If prayer may be offered acceptably to the Almighty, it must be in some method, in some direction, and under some conditions, other than we have been contemplating.

The error of both parties, the physicists and the Christians, is the materiality with which they associate the subject. The physicists can do no otherwise than confine themselves to tangible evidences, consistently with the limitations they impose upon themselves in the exercise of thought. The Christians will be little disposed to admit the justice of my imputation as concerns their tenets, and I must explain myself further.

We have had before us the Christian view of sickness and death. These, with them, are the consequences of moral transgression. The body suffers for the sin of the soul. The fact itself is a challengeable one. The exhibition is too frequent of sturdy reprobates, and suffering saints, to support the idea that the presence of sickness is the token of active transgression. And it is at the period of dissolution, that moment when sin is said to be so expressly judged, that the saintly virtues ordinarily shine out the brightest. It is the materiality inherent to the system that has led to this mistaken representation. The eye of the Christian, in his scriptures, is ever directed to tangible objects. The visible sickness is to him the expression of the invisible moral guilt. Then he is taught to fly, naturally, to physical remedies for the removal of the spiritual stains. The waters of baptism have their efficacy, whatever that may be ; and above all, the blood of the

actual sacrifice poured out for sinners, however applied, washes away every sin. The spiritual life, moreover, is built up, in some inscrutable manner, with bread and wine.

The whole scheme is of this complexion, based upon what is material. A peculiar people are adopted as the channel of the divine operations. God communicates his mind through the medium of inscribed writings committed to them. The teaching through that medium is assigned to the Spirit of God, which for that end is presented as a distinctive being, with a descriptive appellation, and capable of exhibition in material forms,—at one time descending on earth as a dove, at another as “cloven tongues like as of fire.” Out of the peculiar people, one particular family is selected through whom to pass the blessing. A virgin is chosen as its special vehicle. The Almighty subjects her to an over-shadowing of himself, whatever this may express, on which she conceives, as if coupled with a human associate, and gives birth to an incarnate god. “Mine eyes,” exclaims the devout Simeon, on receiving the babe in the temple, “have *seen* thy salvation.” He had before him, consciously, “God *manifest* in the flesh” (1 Tim. iii. 16). “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, *which we have seen with our eyes*, which we have *looked upon*, and our hands have *handled*, of the word of life; for the life was *manifested*, and we have *seen it*” (1 John i. 1, 2), was thus brought into physical being. “The Word” (Plato’s Logos) “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John i. 14.) He was recognisable as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. i. 15), “the express image of his person” (Heb. i. 3). “We know,” it was alleged, “that the Son of God is come.” “This is the true God, and eternal life;” it being, nevertheless, here strangely added, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John v. 20, 21). The heathen of old longed for the actual exhibition of the Almighty. Drawing upon their fancies, they personified the powers



of nature as representing him ; and in process of time, they advanced to place him before themselves in sculptured imagery, and with ideal action. The Jews, bolder in their assertions, declared that he was repeatedly seen seated upon a heavenly throne, surrounded by attendants, and with every adjunct of material splendour, such as any earthly potentate might seek to surround himself with (Exod. xxiv. 9-11 ; 1 Kings xxii. 19 ; Job i. 6 ; ii. 1 ; Isa. vi. 1-5 ; Ezek. i. 26-28 ; x. 1 ; Dan. vii. 9. See also Gen. xxxii. 24-30 ; Exod. iii. 6 ; xxxiii. 18-23). But it was for the Christians to debase him to their own image, and have him visibly dwelling with them. They introduce him as procreated on a female, and passed out of her womb. He is carried through the stages of infancy, adolescence, and manhood (Luke ii. 40), is subjected to the invasions of every description of human infirmity and temptation (Heb. ii. 17, 18 ; iv. 15), and suffers ordinary death at the hands of those hostile to him. When in life, he made his exhibitions according to the materiality belonging to him. By visible action he sought to render apparent his divinity. His appeal was to the physical senses, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and even life to the dead. Then, desiring to have "eye witnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter i. 16), he gave some of his select followers an exhibition of himself in glory, associated with the ancient and departed Moses and Elias. Finally, he inspired his people with the sense of his godhead by manifestations of himself after death. "I," he had asserted while in life, "am the resurrection and the life ; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live : and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die" (John xi. 25, 26). "I am the way, the truth, and the life : no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John xiv. 6). Accordingly, after death, having power in himself to resume his place in life (John x. 18), he reappeared to his disciples and "showed him-

self alive after his passion by many infallible proofs" (Acts i. 3), among which he called upon them to "handle" him, "and see" that he was no "spirit," but was constituted as they were, with "flesh and bones," illustrating his bodily condition by partaking of food with them. "Reach hither thy finger," he said to the incredulous Thomas, "and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless but believing;" on which the convinced sceptic acknowledges him, as what he himself professed to be, "his Lord and his God" (Luke xxiv. 36-43; John xx. 26, 27.) The end to be expected is the return to earth of this incarnate divinity, to triumph over all his enemies. He comes "in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory," attended by his risen saints and angelic hosts. The concluding triumph is at a great battle at Armageddon. Then he reigns on earth for a thousand years, ruling his enemies with a rod of iron. The picture is materialistic from the beginning to the end.

Such being the character of the Christian dispensation, it is but in keeping therewith that the elements of nature are conceived to be at the disposition of their prayers, and the name of Jesus capable of magically securing them all they ask for. The projectors of the scheme little knew that their allegations would be subjected to the ordeal of the centuries which have intervened. They persuaded themselves, in the fervour of their imaginations, that the Almighty had summed up his operations in the production of Jesus, and that the existing generation would see the close of his dealings with mankind (Matt. x. 23; xvi. 27, 28; xxiv. 34). They could boldly declare that every prayer made in the name of Jesus should be effectual, and furthermore, that his power of working miracles had been conferred upon his followers, to be freely used by them in visible demonstration of the truth of what they believed in (Mark xvi. 17, 18, 20; John xiv. 12; Acts v. 12-16;

viii. 6, 7 ; xiv. 3 ; 1 Cor. xii. 4-28 ; Heb. ii. 3, 4). The inexorable testimony of facts has refuted the whole of these allegations. The return of the triumphant mediator remains still in abeyance. The prayers for the governance, or rather disturbance, of the operations of nature, offered in his name, are found without avail. The believers in him are as destitute of miraculous powers as the most open sceptics.

We must turn away from fables if we would seek a true acquaintance with our associations with the Almighty, and equally must we over-pass the restricted limits of knowledge, in the contemplation of material phenomena merely, to which the physicists would confine us. In such a field each must follow his own experiences, and I desire to approach so deep a subject with becoming reverence and humility.

Happily, there are few who question the existence of the unseen Creator, or doubt that he has given evidence of himself in his works. It is a fair question to raise, even in view of the posture of the physicists,—Can he have launched into being a living and ever-working creation, and have divided himself from all active contact therewith? Has he so perfectionised the governing laws, as to dispense with the need of his own presence operating in them? Have his productions, in continuing themselves and repeating their various forms, the power of evolving the first motive energy, or pulsation of life, without causation from him? It seems to me irrational to suppose that such can be the case—that the work can ever remain independent of the workman. If the Almighty has relinquished the control over what he has brought into existence, he makes void, henceforth, as respects them, the purposes of his own being; his laws supersede and supplant himself; he avows the finiteness of his resources in his impotence to undertake more for the abandoned objects of his creation,—conclusions which one and all contradict every estimate we can make of the Omnipotent Creator.

I accept, then, the alternative that God is acting evermore in what he has produced. The physicists have never been able to detect the essence of that energy or life, which is at the root of all active operations, in organized and unorganized matter. There is something here then which exists that is beyond their methods of research. The limits to be assigned to knowledge, as dependent on what may be known by such means as they pursue, cannot be marked out even by themselves. We may overstep all their ascertainments by pointing to what lies confessedly still beyond the reach of their capacity of observation. And in this essential ethereal property of life or energy, may possibly exist the point of contact between the Creator and what he has projected from himself in the visible objects of the creation.

We atoms in this universe he has made, have necessarily to conform ourselves to the established laws prevailing around us. Fire must needs burn, water drown, rocks crush what they are thrown down upon. But though we presume not that the laws of the creation are to be subverted for our sakes, or indeed on any account whatsoever, yet we may believe in the infinitude of the resources of the Creator, known and unknown, to deliver us, if he pleases, in every peril, and to satisfy every need. Nature itself, whereby I mean God's appointed method, drives us, when in extremities, to look for help beyond and above ourselves to him. He has the direction of everything, and can guide it by his will. He can influence matter, and mind, and bring about any purposes he may decide on. To deny this is to set up something that is outside of, or greater than the creator. The how and the when, if ever, are with him. Whatever happens, he steers a rightful course, and is the unceasing controller of our destinies. Once having committed ourselves to him, sooner or later, should life endure, we shall feel that we have been heard and cared for.

Then there are the deeper wants of the soul. A con-

sciousness of God should lead to the desire to be conscious of his presence, so as to benefit sensibly and instructively by his guidance. When evil thoughts spring up within us, his restraining power, on being asked for, is indubitably conferred, and ordinarily with a promptitude that is expressive of a direct answer to the appeal made. This is an experience which each must acquire for himself. And there is the silent admonition of the conscience which never fails those who give ear thereto. There is also the great discipline of life, the progress of which none can have watched without perceiving how consistently, intelligently, and constantly, it has been conducted for our moral and spiritual advancement. Above all, there is the sense of God's perpetual goodness flowing round us, and embracing the whole created universe; the assurance of our own happy portion in the scheme of his beneficence; the feeling of the perfection of his ways; the knowledge that all is working to some consummate ends worthy of himself. The mathematically adjusted bolts of the mere external intelligence, must be withdrawn to admit of the experience of this inner and truer life. If the Creator has linked himself to his creation in the outflow and the continued processes of life, it is irrational to suppose that he has divided himself from the fruition of his work,—that the cultivated soul has no access to him who has so carefully educated and matured it to an ever-improving comprehension of himself.

GREAT MALVERN,  
*September 1872.*

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