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ON PRAYER.



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THE mania for Prayer-meetings has lately been largely on the increase, and the continual efforts being made to

“Move the arm that moves the world,”

naturally draw one's attention strongly to the subject of Prayer; to its reasonableness, propriety, and prospect of success. If Prayer to God be reverent as towards the Deity, if it be consistent with his immutability, with his fore-knowledge, with his wisdom, and with every kind of trust in his goodness—if it be also, as regards man, permissible by science and approved by experience, then there can be no doubt at all that it should be sedulously practised, and should be of universal obligation. But if it be at once useless and absurd, if it be forbidden by reason and frowned at by common sense, if it weaken man and be irreverent towards the Being to whom it is said to be addressed, then it will be well for all who practise it to reconsider their position, and at least to endeavour to give some solid reason for persisting in a course which is condemned by the intellect and is unneeded by the heart.

The practice of Prayer is generally founded upon the supposed position held by man—first, as a creature towards his Creator, and secondly, as a child towards his Father in heaven. In its first aspect, it is a simple act of homage from the inferior to the superior,

parallel to the courtesy shown by the subject to the monarch; it is an acknowledgment of dependence, and a sign of gratitude for the gifts which are supposed to be freely given by God to man, gifts which man has done nothing to deserve, but which come from the free bounty of the giver. Putting aside the whole question of God as Creator, which is not the point at issue, we might argue that, since he brought us into this world without our request, and even without our consent, he is in duty bound to see that we have all things necessary for our life and happiness in the world in which he has thus placed us. We might argue that the "blessings" said to be bestowed upon us, such as food, clothing, &c., can only be called "given" by a fiction, for that they are won by our own hard toil, and are never "gifts from God" in any real sense at all. Further, we might plead that we find "bestowed" upon us many things which are decidedly the reverse of blessings, and that if gratitude be due to God for some things, the contrary of gratitude is due to him for others; and that if praise be his right for the one, blame must be his desert for the second. We should be thus forced into the logical, but somewhat peculiar, frame of mind of the savage, who caresses his fetish when it hears his prayers, and belabours it heartily when it fails to help him. But, taking the position that Prayer is due from man by reason of his creaturehood, it must surely be clear that it cannot be a proper way of manifesting a sense of inferiority to degrade the Being to whom the homage is offered. Yet Prayer is essentially degrading to God, and the character ascribed to him of "a hearer and answerer of Prayer" is a most lowering conception of Deity. For God to hear and to answer Prayer means that Prayer changes his action, making him do that which he would otherwise have abstained from doing; it means that man is wiser than God, and is able to instruct him in his duty;

and it means that God is less loving than he ought to be, and will not bestow upon his creature that which is good for him, unless he be importuned into giving it. We are told that God is immutable, "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever;" "God is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man that he should repent." If this be true—and surely immutability of purpose must be a necessary characteristic of an all-wise and all-good Being—how can Prayer be anything more than a childish fretting against the inevitable? The Changeless One has planned a certain course of action, and is steadily carrying it out; in passionless serenity he goes upon his way; then man breaks in with his feeble cries and petulant upbraidings, and actually turns God from his purpose, and changes the course of his providence. If Prayer does not do this it does nothing at all; either it changes the mind of God or it does not; if it does, God is at the disposal of man's whim; if it does not, it is perfectly useless, and might just as well be left undone. The parable told by Christ about the unjust judge (Luke xviii. 1-8), is a most extraordinary representation of God: "Because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. . . . And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him?" Verily, the picture of the divine justice is not an attractive one! The judge does his duty, not because it *is* his duty, not because the widow needs his aid, not because her cause is a just one, but "lest by her continual coming she weary" him. There is only one moral to be drawn from this, namely, that God will not care for his "elect," because they are "his own;" that he will not guard them, because it is his duty; but that, if they cry day and night to him, he will attend to them, because the continual cry wearies him, and he desires to silence it. In the same way God the immutable changes at the sound of Prayer, not because the

change will be better or wiser, but because man's cry "wearies" him, and he will be quiet if he obtains his petition. Surely the idea is as degrading as it can be; it puts God on a level with the unwise human parent, who allows himself to be governed by the clamour of his children, and gives any favour to the spoilt child, if only the child be tiresome enough in its petulant persistence.

Is Prayer consistent with the *foreknowledge* of God? It is one of the attributes ascribed to God that he knows all before it happens, and that the future lies mapped out before him as clearly as does the past. If this be so, is it more reasonable to pray about things in the future than things in the past? No one is so utterly irrational as to pray to God, in so many words, to change the things that are gone, or alter the record of the past. Yet, is it more rational to ask him to change the things that are coming, and to alter the already-written chart of the future? In reality, man's own eyes being blinded, he deems his God such an one as himself, and where he cannot *see*, he can allow himself to *hope*. But there is no escape from the inexorable logic which pierces us with one horn or the other of this dilemma, however we may writhe in our efforts to escape them; either God knows the future or he knows it not; if he knows it, it cannot be altered, so it is of no use to pray about it, everything being already fixed; if he knows it not, he is not God, he is no wiser than man. But then, some Christians argue, he has pre-arranged that he will give this blessing in answer to Prayer, and he foreknows the Prayer as well as its answer. Then, after all, it is pre-determined whether we shall pray or not in any given case, and we have only to follow the course along which we are impelled by an irresistible destiny; so the matter is beyond all discussion, and the power to pray, or not to pray, does not reside in us; if there is a blessing in store for us which needs the arm of

Prayer to pluck it from the tree on which it hangs, we shall inevitably pray for it at the right moment, and thus—in his effort to escape from one difficulty—the praying Christian has landed himself in a worse one, for absolute foreknowledge implies complete determinism, and prevents all human responsibility of any kind.

Is Prayer consistent with the *wisdom* of God? After all, what does Prayer mean, boldly stated? It means that man thinks that he knows better than God, and so he tells God that which ought to happen. Is there any self-conceit so intolerable as that which pretends to bow itself in the dust before him who created and who upholds the infinite worlds which make up the universe, and which then sets itself to correct the ordering of him who traced the orbits of the planets, and who measured the rule of suns? Finite wisdom instructing infinite wisdom, mortal reason laying down the course of immortal reason; low intelligence guiding supreme intelligence; man instructing God. All this is implied in the fact of Prayer, and every man who has prayed, and who believes in God, ought to cast himself down in passionate humiliation before the wisdom he has insulted and impugned, and ask pardon for the insolent presumption which dared to lay hands on the helm of the Supreme, and to dream that man could be more wise than God. At least, those who believe in God might be humble enough to acknowledge his superiority to themselves, and if they demand that homage should be paid to him by their brethren, they should also confess him to be wiser and higher than they are themselves.

Is Prayer consistent with *trust in the goodness* of God? Surely Prayer is a distinct refusal to trust, and is a proclamation that we think that we could do better for ourselves than God will do for us. If God be “good and loving to every man,” it is mani-

fest that, without any pressure being put upon him, he will do for each the best thing that can possibly be done. The people of Madagascar are wiser, in this matter, than the people who throng our Churches and our Chapels, for they say, addressing the good Spirit, "We need not pray to thee, for thou, without our prayers, wilt give us all things that be good for us," and then they turn to the evil Spirit, saying, that they must pray to *him*, lest, if they do not, he should work them harm, and send troubles in their way. Prayer implies that God judges all good gifts, and will withhold them unless they are wrung from his reluctant hands; it denies that he loves his creatures, and is good to all. In addition to this, it also implies that we will not trust him to judge what is best for us; on the contrary, we prefer to judge for ourselves, and to have our own way. If a trouble comes, it is prayed against, and God is besought "to remove his heavy hand." What does this mean, except that when God sends sorrow, man clamours for joy, and when God deems it best that his child should weep, the child demands cause for smiles? If people trusted God, as they pretend to trust him—if the phrases of the Sunday were the practice of the week—if men believed that God's ways were higher than man's ways, and his thoughts than their thoughts—then no Prayer would ever ascend from earth to the "Throne of grace," and man would welcome joy and sorrow, peace and care, wealth and poverty, as wise men welcome nature's order, when the rain comes down to swell the seed for the harvest, and the sunshine burns down upon earth to burnish the golden grain.

But, say the praying Christians, even if Prayer be not defensible as homage from the creature to the Creator, in that it lowers our idea of God, it must surely yet be natural as the instinctive cry from the child to the Father in heaven; and then follow argu-

ments drawn from the family and the home, and the need of communion between parent and child. As a matter of fact,—taking the analogy, imperfect as it is—do we find much Prayer, as from child to parent, in the best and the happiest homes; *is not the amount of asking the exact measure of the imperfection of the relationship?* The wiser and the kinder the parent, the less will the child ask for; rather, it learns from experience to trust the older wisdom, and to be contented with the love which is ever giving, unsolicited, all good things. At the most, the simple expression of the child's wish is all that is needed, if the child desire anything of which the parent have not thought; and even this mere statement of a wish is still the result of *imperfection, i.e.*, the want of knowledge on the parent's part of the child's mind and heart. In this case there is no pleading, no urging; the single request and single answer suffice; there is nothing which corresponds with the idea of the prophet to pray to God and to "give him no rest" until he grant the petition. In a well-ordered home, the child who persisted in pressing his request would receive a rebuke for his want of trust, and for his conceited self-sufficiency; and yet *this* is the analogy on which Prayer to God is built up, and in this fashion "natural instincts" are dragged in, in order to support supernatural and artificial cravings.

Leaving Prayer, as it affects man's relationship to God, let us look at it as it regards man's relationship to things around him, and ask if it be permitted by our scientific knowledge, and approved by experience and by history. The chief lesson of science is that all things work by law, that we dwell in a realm of law, and that *nothing* goes by chance. All science is built up upon this idea; science is not possible unless this primary rule be correct; science is only the codified experience of the race, the observed sequence of to-day marked down for the guidance of to-morrow,

the teaching of the past hived up for the improvement of the future. But all this accumulation and correlation of facts becomes useless if laws can be broken—*i.e.*, if this observed sequence of phenomena can be suddenly broken by the interposition of an unknown and incalculable force, acting spasmodically and guided by no discoverable order of action. Science is impossible if these “providential occurrences” may take place at any moment. A physician, in writing his prescription, selects the drugs which experience has pointed out as the suitable remedy for the disease under which his patient is labouring. These drugs have a certain effect upon the tissues of the human frame, and the physician calculates on this effect being produced; but if Prayer is to come in as a factor, of what use the physician’s science? Here is suddenly introduced—to speak figuratively—a new drug of unknown power, and the effect of medicine *plus* Prayer can in no way be calculated upon. The prescription is either efficient or non-efficient; if it be efficient, Prayer is unnecessary, as the cure would take place without it; if it be non-efficient, and Prayer makes up the deficiency, then medical science is not needed, for the impotency of the drugs can always be balanced by the potency of the Prayer. This argument may be used as regards every science. Prayer is put up for a ship which goes to sea. The ship is fitted for the perils it encounters, or it is unfit. If fitted, it arrives safely without Prayer; if, though unfit, it arrives, being guarded by Prayer, then Prayer becomes a factor in the ship-builder’s calculations, and sound timbers and strong rivets sink into minor importance. If it be argued that to speak thus is to use Prayer unfairly, because it is our duty to take every proper means to ensure safety, what is this except to say that, after all, Prayer is only a fiction, and that while we bow our knees to God, and pretend to look to *him* for safety, we are really look-

ing to the strong timbers of the ship-builder, and to the skill of the captain ?

Science teaches, also, that all phenomena are the results of preceding phenomena, and that an unbroken sequence of cause and effect stretches back further than our poor thoughts can reach. In stately harmony all Nature moves, evolving link after link of the endless chain, each link bound firmly to its predecessor, and affording, in its turn, the same support to its successor. Prayer is put up in the churches for fair weather; but rain and sunshine do not follow each other by chance, they obey a changeless law. To alter the weather of to-day means to alter the weather of countless yesterdays, which have faded away, one after another, "into the infinite azure of the past." The weather of to-day is the result of all those long-past phases of temperature, and, unless they were altered, no change is possible to-day. The Prayer that goes up in English churches should really run:—"O God, we pray thee to change all that thou hast wrought in the past; we, to-day, in this petty corner of thy world, are discontented with thy ordering; we desire of thee, then, that, to pleasure our fancy, thou wilt unroll the record of the past, and change all its order, remoulding its history to suit our convenience here to-day." It is difficult to say which is the worse, the self-conceit which deems its own petty needs worthy of such complaisance of Deity, or the ignorance which forgets the absurdities implied in the request it makes. But, after all, it is the ignorance which is to blame: these Prayers were written when science was scarcely born; in those days God was the immediate cause of each phenomena, sending rain from heaven when it pleased him, thundering from heaven against his enemies, pouring hailstones from heaven to slay his foes, opening and closing the windows of heaven to punish a wicked king or to pleasure an angry prophet. In those days

heaven was very close to earth; so near that when it opened, the dying Stephen could see and recognise the form and features of the Son of Man; so near that, lest man should build a tower which should reach it, God had himself to descend and discomfit the builders. All these things were true to the writers whose words are repeated in English churches in the nineteenth century, and they naturally believed that what God wrought in days of old he could work also among themselves. But knowledge has shattered the fairy fabric which fancy had raised up; astronomy built towers—not of Babel—from which men could gauge the heaven, and find that through illimitable ether worlds innumerable rolled, and that where the throne of God should have been seen, suns and planets sped on their ceaseless rounds. Further and further back, the ancient God who dwelt among men was pressed back, till now, at last, no room is found for spasmodic divine solutions, but Nature's mighty order rolls on uninterrupted, in a silence unbroken by voice and undisturbed by miraculous volitions, bound by a golden chain of inviolable law. The most learned and the most thoughtful Christian people now acknowledge that Prayer is out of place in dealing with "natural order;" but surely it is time that they should make their voices heard plainly, so as to erase from the Prayer-book these obsolete notions, born of an ignorance which the world has now outgrown. Few really *believe* in the power of Prayer over the weather, but people go on from the sheer force of habit, repeating, parrot-like, phrases which have lost their meaning, because they are too indolent to exert thought, or too fettered by habit to test the Prayer of the Sunday by the standard of the week. When people begin to *think* of what they repeat so glibly, the battle of Free Thought will have been won.

Many earnest people, however, while recognising the fact that Prayer ought not to be used for rain,

fine weather, and the like, yet think that it may be rightly employed to obtain "spiritual benefits." Is not this idea also the product of ignorance? When men knew nothing of natural laws they thought they could gain natural benefits by Prayer; now that people know nothing of "spiritual" laws, they think they can gain "spiritual" benefits by Prayer. In each case the Prayer springs from ignorance. Is it really more reasonable to expect to gain miraculous spiritual strength from Prayer, than to expect to give vigour, by Prayer, to arms enfeebled by fever? Growth, slow and steady, is Nature's law; no sudden leaps are possible; and no Prayer will give that spiritual stature which only develops by continual effort, and by "patient continuance in well-doing." The mind—which is probably what is generally meant by the word "spirit"—has its own laws, according to which it grows and strengthens; it is moulded, formed, developed, as the body is, by the play of the circumstances around it, and by the organisation with which it comes into the world, and which it has inherited from a long race of ancestors. Here, too, inexorable law surrounds all, and in mind, as in matter, the "reign of law" is all-embracing, all-compelling.

Is Prayer approved by experience? It seems necessary here to refer to the experience of some, who say that they have found Prayer strengthen them to meet a trouble which they had dreaded, or to accomplish a duty for which their own ability was insufficient. This appears to be very probable, but the reason is not far to seek, and as the explanation of the increased strength may be purely natural, it seems unnecessary to search for a supernatural cause. Prayer, when earnest and heartfelt, appears to exert a kind of reflex action on the person praying, the petition not piercing heaven, but falling back upon earth. A duty has to be done or a trouble has to be

faced ; the person affected prays for help, and by the intense concentration of his thoughts, and by the passion of his desire, he naturally gains a strength he had not, when he was less deeply and thoroughly in earnest. Again, the interior conviction that a divine strength is on his side, nerves his heart and braces his courage : the soldier fights with a ten-fold courage when he is sure that endurance will make victory a certainty. But all this is no proof that God hears and answers Prayer ; if it were so, it would prove also that the Virgin Mother, and all the saints, and Buddha, and Brahma, and Vishnu were alike hearers and answerers of Prayer. In all cases the sincere worshipper gains strength and comfort, and finds the same "answer" to his Prayer. Yet surely no one will contend that *all* these are "Prayer-hearing and Prayer-answering" Gods ? This fancied answer is not a proof of the truth of the worshipper's belief, but is only a proof of *his conviction of its truth* ; not the soundness of the belief, but the sincerity of the conviction, is proved by the glow and ardour which succeed the act of Prayer. All the dormant energies are aroused ; the soul's whole strength is put forth ; the worshipper is warmed by the fire struck from his own heart, and is thrilled with the electricity which resides in his own frame. So far, Prayer is found to be answered, just as every strong conviction, however erroneous, is found to confer increased strength and vigour on him who possesses it. But, excepting this, Prayer is *not* proved to be efficacious when tested by experience. How many Prayers have gone up to the Father in heaven from his children overwhelmed in the sea, and drowning in floods, and encircled by fire ? How many passionate appeals of patriots and martyrs, of exiles and of slaves ? How many cries of anguish from beside the beds of the dying, and the fresh graves of the newly-dead ? In vain the wife's wail

for the husband, the mother's pleading for the only child; no voice has answered "Weep not;" no command has replied, "Rise up;" the Prayers have fallen back on the breaking heart, poor white-winged birds that have tried to fly towards heaven, but have only sunk back to earth, their breasts bruised and bleeding from striking against the iron bars of a pitiless and relentless fate. So continually has Prayer failed to win an answer, that, in spite of the clearness and the force of the Bible promises in regard to it, Christians have found themselves obliged to limit their extent, and to say that God judges whether or no it will be beneficial for the worshipper to grant the petition, and if the Prayer be a mistaken one he will, in mercy, withhold the implored-for boon. Of course, this prevents Prayer from being ever tested by experience at all, because whenever a Prayer remains unanswered the reply is ready, that "it was not according to the will of God." This means, that we cannot test the value of Prayer in any way, we must accept its worth wholly as a matter of faith; we must pray because we are bidden to do so, and fulfil an useless form which affords no tangible results. In this melancholy position are we landed, by an appeal to experience by which we are challenged to test the value of Prayer.

The answer of history is even yet more emphatic. The Ages of Prayer are the Dark Ages of the world. When learning was crushed out, and superstition was rampant, when wisdom was called witchcraft, and priests ruled Europe, then Prayer was always rising up to God, from the countless monasteries where men dwarfed themselves into monks, and from the convents where women shrivelled up into nuns. The sound of the bell that called to Prayer was never silent, and the time that was needed for work was wasted in Prayer, and in the straining to serve God the service of man was neglected and despised.

There is one obvious fact that throws into bright relief the absurdity of Prayer. Two people pray for exactly opposite things; whose Prayers are to be answered? Two armies ask for victory; which is to be crowned? Amongst ourselves, now, the Church is divided into two opposing camps, and while the Ritualists appeal to God for protection, the Evangelicals clamour also for his aid. To which is he to bend his ear? which Prayer is he to answer? Both appeal to his promises; both urge that his honour is pledged to them by the word he has given; yet it is simply impossible that he should grant the Prayer of both, because the Prayer of the one is the direct contradiction of the Prayer of the other.

Again, none of the believers in Prayer appear to consider, that, if it were true that Prayer is so powerful a weapon—if it were true that by Prayer man can prevail with God—it would then be madness ever to pray at all. To pray would be as dangerous a thing as to put a cavalry sword into the hands of a child just strong enough to lift it, but unable to control it, or to understand the danger of its blows. Who can tell all the results to himself and to others which might flow from a granted Prayer, a Prayer made in all honesty of purpose, but in ignorance and short-sightedness? If Prayers really brought answers it would be most wickedly reckless ever to pray at all, as wickedly reckless as if a man, to quench a moment's thirst, pierced a hole in a reservoir of water which overhung a town.

But, in spite of all arguments, in spite of all that reason can urge and that logic can prove, it is probable that many will still cling to the practice of Prayer, craving for the relief it gives to the feelings of the heart, however much it may be condemned by the judgment of the intellect. They seem to think that they will lose a great inspiration to work if they give up "communion with God," and that they will

miss the glow of ardour which they deem they have caught from Prayer. But surely it may fairly be urged on them that no real good can arise from continuing a practice which it is impossible to defend when it is carefully analysed. Prayer is as the artificial stimulant which excites, but does not strengthen, and lends a factitious brightness, which is followed by deeper depression. Those who have prayed most have often stated that "seasons of special blessing" are generally followed by "special temptations of Satan." The reaction follows on the unreal excitation, and the soul that has been flying in heaven grovels upon earth. To the patient who is weak and depressed from long illness, the bright air of the morning seems chill and cold, and he yearns for the warmth of the artificial stimulants to which he has grown accustomed; yet better for him is it to gain health from the morning breezes, and stimulus from the glad clear sunshine, than to yield to the craving which is a relic of his disease. If they who find in communion with God a sweetness which is lacking when they commune with their brethren—if they who cultivate dependence on God would learn the true dependence of man on man—if they who yearn for the invisible would concentrate their energies on the visible—then they would soon find a sweetness in labour which would compensate for the languor of Prayer, and they would learn to draw from the joy of serving men, and from the serene strength of an earnest life, a warmth of inspiration, a passion of fervour, an exhaustless fount of energy, beside which all Prayer-given ardour would seem dull and nerveless, in the glow of which the fancied warmth of God-communion would seem as the pale cold moonshine in the glory of the rising-sun.