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RATIONAL PIETY

AND

PRAYERS FOR FAIR WEATHER.

BY

A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.



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

Price Threepence.

TURNBULL AND SPEARS PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.

RATIONAL PIETY AND PRAYERS FOR FAIR WEATHER.

DEAR MR SCOTT,

You told me, the other day, that some Papers on Prayer, which you intended soon to publish, were in your hands. The few remarks I send, may, perhaps, seem to you too poor and scanty to appear in good company, but if you should think them worth printing, they are at your service.

The unusually large rainfall of last year caused some serious inconveniences, though there are good reasons for believing that its entire results will be far more beneficial than injurious. But many Christian people recognized chastisement, and suspected angry dealing, and so, after traditional precedent, displayed their faith in God's wisdom and goodness by calling for the use of that modest expostulation and entreaty wherein the Anglican Church deprecates "a worthily deserved plague of rain and waters."

If the distribution and intensity of wet and dry seasons were, in any conceivable manner or degree, affected by the wills and actings of mankind, such prayers as the Church was urged to offer might have received an answer somewhere within the inscrutable province of human intelligence, energy, and free will, and, at any rate, would have gratified devout instincts without crossing the dictates of reason and reverential faith. But no relationship of physical cause and effect can be imagined to exist between human power and changes of weather.

The subject of prayer generally, regarded from an

intellectual point of view, is profoundly difficult, if not utterly inexplicable, and I shall not presume to enter upon it. But, believing firmly that, *in God we live, and move, and have our being*, and that our spirits are in contact with, and inspired by, Him, I can detect nothing unreasonable in praying for spiritual blessings—for moral strength, mental enlightenment, practical wisdom. All things which are, or can be, influenced by human knowledge, zeal, and aptitude, belong to that mixed domain of created and Creative power, in relation to which, prayer may rationally find a place, and the intercourse of pleading want and dependence, legitimate and profitable exercise. Such intercourse can cite widely accumulated experience, in evidence that it is a means of opening the soul to receive accessions of light, and vigour, and love, and is thus a powerful auxiliary for the conquest of difficulties, the endurance of trial, and the more fully realized participation of the Divine Nature. But when, quitting the domain wherein finite co-operation and instrumentality blend with Infinite Might, we pass into the higher region occupied solely by superhuman wisdom and power, prayer has no defensible ground; it loses its reasonable and pious features; it asks for changes, not in ourselves, but in God, and expresses only lack of faith, of contentment, and of resignation.

To say that the aim of prayers for fine weather was 'to bend our will to God's, not His to ours,' is to misrepresent and evade the question really at issue. Prayers for resignation imply no wish that God's mode of acting should be altered, but rather, a confession that we are tempted to doubt and murmur, when we ought humbly to submit and confide. Complaints of excessive rain, and entreaties for different weather, must not be confounded with supplications for enlarged trust and readier submission. The fancy that God punishes human sins by adjustments of physical administration within a sphere into which human actions and their consequences do not penetrate, is too absurd

to merit attention. It is unspiritual as well as puerile, and suggests predominant vindictiveness too thirsty to be satiated in the line of natural connection and results. It draws no warrant from reason and observation, and does nothing but arbitrarily multiply difficulties, and undermine faith.

To acknowledge transgressions, and ill-desert, is well, but the acknowledgment ceases to be devout, when coupled with petitions that God will treat us more kindly, by amending those general methods of His action which we call laws of Nature. Can we not pray without implying indictments against Him? Piety should teach us that He always does what is best, whatever our state may be. Let us seek His presence to cleanse our consciences, to aid us in the work of self-reformation, and in meeting the calls of duty, but let us shun thoughts and words which impeach His government by craving that rain and sunshine may be dispensed with greater amiability, and a more tender consideration for our needs. The rule of His dealings may be read in the declaration: *He maketh His sun to rise on the evil, and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust,* (St Matt. v. 45.)

Among the letters published in the *Times* newspaper, on what was jocosely termed *The Dilemma of the Clergy*, was one which illustrates the mingled credulity and carelessness so frequently associated with Evangelical views. The Vicar of St. Mary's, Islington, a man respected and venerable, and (his theology excepted) not deficient in shrewdness and common sense, adduced in support of prayers for fine weather, a remarkable statement from St. James's Epistle: *Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit,* (v. 17, 18.)

Now, there can be no dispute what the writer of these words meant. He meant to affirm that three and

a half years of drought, said to have been inflicted on the land of Israel, were begun, and ended, at Elijah's request. The case is cited as a clinching confirmation of verse 16. *The prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working*, as the great prophet's successful supplication proved. Before rashly quoting a passage of this nature, Mr. D. Wilson ought, surely, to have turned to the pages of the Old Testament, to see what ground exists there for so startling an announcement. The narrative of the drought and famine in Elijah's days is the same both in the Hebrew and Septuagint Texts, and conveys no sort of intimation that prayer on the prophet's part either obtained, or removed, the heavy visitation. On the contrary, the statement made in St James's Epistle seems to be not merely baseless, but forbidden. The prophet declares,—*As Jehovah the God of Israel liveth, before Whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word*,—the sense quite plainly being, that he had received a revelation, and was commissioned to proclaim, first the withholding, and then the granting of rain. *In the third year, the word of Jehovah came to Elijah, saying, go shew thyself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.* Soon afterwards, *Elijah said unto Ahab; get thee up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of abundance of rain,* (1 Kings xvii. 1; xviii. 1 and 41.) How the idea of much-availing prayer, averting and procuring rain, can be grafted upon, or reconciled with, these records, no rational mind can discover.

After the prophet knew, by *the word of Jehovah*, that rain was at hand, he went up to the top of Mount Carmel, and bending himself toward the earth, put his face between his knees, and desired his servant to go seven times and look towards the sea, and when he heard that a little cloud was rising, he sent to Ahab the message, *prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not.* (1 Kings xviii. 43, 44.) The inaccuracy of haste, or imperfect memory, might confuse this proceeding on the top of Carmel, with

prayer, and, aided by a lively imagination, might give birth to such a representation as that which stands in St James's Epistle. But defects and blunders of this kind must not be ascribed to a plenarily inspired Apostle. If he, while contributing to the second great division of God's Infallible Word, could make erroneous inferences from the first, we cannot be sure that other New Testament writers enjoyed absolute freedom from error, and so are deprived of what is at once the greatest bulwark to our faith, and the greatest barrier to our thought.

In the judgment of the Vicar of St Mary's, Islington, the infallibly guided (and we must also presume infallibly preserved) words of St James, are an end of all controversy; 'The Holy Ghost has spoken,' and therefore, no matter what has been said, the saying *must* be true. And the assumption that no single line of the Canonical Books can be unfaithful or untrustworthy, is not confined to dogmatists of the Evangelical School. An Anglo-Catholic Divine of the strictest sect, distinguished for his learning, modesty, and Christian courtesy, Mr. J. W. Burgon, Fellow of Oriel College, has assured all 'who have ears to hear,' that the Holy Spirit has inspired every sentence, word, and syllable of the Bible. And yet,—since the Sacred Writings nowhere claim for themselves an universal Inspiration covering every statement, and exempting particular passages from criticism,—this unreserved, easy confidence, when indulged by Protestants, betrays a faculty of believing without evidence, and requires, in order to rational consistency, the intrusion of assumptions and theories hardly compatible with Mr. D. Wilson's well-known opinions. Not to go beyond the instance under consideration:—the existence of a third and finally authoritative Inspiration, within the Church, is manifestly needed to harmonize the inspired record of the Old Testament Scriptures, with the inspired deductions of St James. Rational interpretation must be shut out,

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and how can it be shut out otherwise than by the voice of the Holy Ghost speaking decisively in, and through, the organization of the Church?

Rationalizing critics, at the suggestion of the Devil, or of their own depraved hearts, would get rid of difficulty, by the plausible supposition that St James made a mistake, or that the obnoxious paragraph is not his writing at all, but the interpolation of an early transcriber. If against this view, the absolute truth and genuineness of the verses should be maintained, the innate corruption of intelligent but 'unregenerate' minds will probably (for is not Satan himself transformed into an angel of light?) assume the garb of reverence for the All-wise Ruler of Heaven and earth, and protest that He is debased and slandered, when He is said to have sent forth and recalled frightful national calamity, at the instigation of one of His own creatures, a man of like passions with ourselves. And, if still the marvellous assertion of St James's Epistle should be upheld as among the veritable words of God, and utterances of His Spirit, then, reflecting men in their perverse malignity and self-reliant rebellion, will say, "so much the worse for faith in the Bible, and in the God the Bible thus exhibits."

Had some notorious sceptic written in the *Times*, as the Rev. Daniel Wilson did, on the 4th of January 1873, the design of drawing attention to a weak point in the Sacred Volume would have been obvious. But no one will imagine that Mr Wilson acted in guile.

Is there not room to suspect, notwithstanding our eager professions, that Christian trust in the Great Creator and Preserver of all mankind, falls short of the standard attained by the Frenchman who remarked, that 'he did not believe he could himself manage the universe better than God does?'

I am, dear Mr. Scott,

Yours, &c., &c.

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