

shining through their efforts, may be the very means of saving some from sin and despair.

Christianity has a much more extended scale of colours than any other systems of belief have. It goes further down into blackness for the tints with which it paints man as he is, and further up into flashing glories of splendour for the gleaming hues with which it paints him as he may become. They move within narrow limits of neutral tints. The gospel alone does not try to minimize man's evil, because it is triumphantly confident of its power to turn all that evil into good.¹

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The Christian Message about Prayer.

BY THE REV. FREDERICK J. RAE, M.A., ABERDEEN.

AMONG the questions that are before our common Christianity to-day few are more urgent than that which concerns the subject of prayer. What is its place in the Christian life? Does it really achieve anything? Has it definite results? Can it be said to modify or change events or affect people? Why should we pray? and why is it urgent that we should pray?

Well, to begin with, there is, I think, a new attitude to prayer in our own generation. I will give you two proofs of that. One is the way in which the subject is haunting Christian minds. Prayer used to be regarded as a characteristic act of rather pietistic people, almost a monopoly of weak-kneed religion. But to-day it is dawning upon us that prayer is in reality the most strenuous act of the soul. And whenever Christian men get together in any intimacy, and begin to talk, they inevitably drift into the subject of prayer. Prayer-groups are springing up all over the country, meeting for definite intercession. A new belief in prayer is rising in the Church, and a new and eager sense of expectancy in connexion with it. The other evidence of this new attitude is fully as remarkable. It is the change in the *intellectual* or scientific world. The other day, a commission,

composed to a considerable extent of eminent doctors, presented a report on the subject of healing by suggestion. The report is interesting in many respects, but the most interesting feature of it is this, that the commission unanimously express their belief in the efficacy of prayer as among the healing agencies to be taken into account. Alongside this fact may be placed such utterances as those of Sir Oliver Lodge, that 'a child-like attitude in prayer is in harmony with science,' and that it may quite possibly be true that prayer is one among the 'directive forces' by which the world is governed. So that when one approaches this subject to-day it is in an atmosphere that is favourable to its discussion.

What, then, is the teaching of the Bible about prayer? There are two separate and well-defined statements to be made in answer to this question which may be said to condense the teaching of the Scriptures. I will deal with them in turn, but only slightly with the first, as it may almost be taken for granted. (1) That prayer is simply fellowship with God, a spiritual exercise; and (2) that prayer is a way of getting things done, a force by which the course of events may be modified,

results which will not happen (at least in this particular way) apart from prayer.

PRAYER AS RELIGION AT WORK.

Let us take first the truth that prayer is fellowship with God. It is the act of putting ourselves in His presence, and remaining there consciously, speaking to God in confession or petition or praise, listening to Him or simply adoring Him. It is the attitude in which we lift our life into the light of His countenance, and refer everything to Him.

Of course the Bible is full of prayer in this sense. The psalms are prayers of this kind. And in this sense prayer is a characteristic of all religions, of all the saints, and especially of our Lord. Now, of this kind of prayer it is only necessary at present to say one thing, but that is a very important thing, that it is the way to all moral and spiritual blessing. And for this reason. God is pressing in on us constantly with His gifts. And when we pray we are simply opening the door to let the stream of His divine power in. Bishop Phillips Brooks somewhere speaks of the life of God as like a tide of water that surges along a wall and is everywhere held back. It strives for an opening, and only here and there finds even a slight access to our human life. But once an opening is made the flood sweeps in. And prayer is the making of such an opening. It is for this reason that *faith* grows by prayer, for we come to know God better as we live in Him and let Him get access to our hearts. We get a hold of Him, and only in this way do we get a *firm* hold of Him. It is for the same reason that *moral strength* comes to us by prayer. There is only one way to deliverance from sin. You must rise into a region where sin lies out of itself, just as a person threatened with consumption is cured by living in the fresh air and sunshine, in which the hostile microbe cannot continue to exist. We reach purity of heart by 'living on the top story.' And once more, it is for the same reason that the impulse and courage for a life of service come to us in prayer. Those who are impelled to service from the outside, by a sense of duty *e.g.*, never reach the true spirit of service, or the highest kind of service, which comes from within, from a religious experience, from life in God.

PRAYER AS A DIRECTIVE FORCE.

But let us go on to the other statement about prayer, of which I shall need to say a great deal

more. Beyond question, prayer is continually spoken of in the Bible as a means of getting things done which would not be done without it, at least in the particular way. Prayer is a way of preventing evil and of effecting good, for others as well as for ourselves. It is, *e.g.*, a way of bringing healing to the sick, and therefore of saving life. It is a way of rescuing men and women from moral evil. It is a way of bringing light and salvation to others. In other words, it liberates forces of divine grace which would otherwise be locked up.

That is the general truth. But it is important to be particular here; and therefore it should be pointed out that there are two distinct forms of this general statement. (1) First of all this assertion about prayer holds of each soul separately. 'Ask, and it shall be given you. . . . Your heavenly Father will give good things to those that ask him.' You remember the parables of the Importunate Widow and the Friend at Midnight. You recall also our Lord's own habits. He prayed for Peter. He prayed His great intercessory prayer. And, finally, you will find the same thing to be true of St. Paul. There is nothing in the New Testament clearer than this. We have each of us in our hands a power for getting things *done*. (2) But there is a second form of this general truth. This power is specially promised to *concerted* prayer, to prayer that rises from a body of people. Jesus said: '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.' And in this same connexion (*i.e.* in connexion with prayer) He uttered His famous promise: 'For when two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' We know also that the great blessing of the new life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, came to a company of people who were praying for it; and we know that the early Church had this habit of corporate prayer, for when St. Peter was imprisoned we read that the Church prayed for his release 'without ceasing.' There is therefore a special power for getting things done in united prayer, when hearts are in real agreement.

That, then, is the clear teaching of the New Testament about prayer as a force for achieving results. It is very remarkable, and if it is true we have put into our hands a tremendous power. But there are many people who have difficulties

about it. And I am going to deal with some of these, not in order to argue the whole subject at length, but simply to tell you how the hardest difficulties have been met in my own mind.

(1) One form of perplexity that assails some people is this. If God has ordained everything, if it is His purpose that is being realized everywhere, how can we modify the course of events by praying? Well, the answer to that question is for practical purposes very simple. Put the matter in this way. Are we free to *act*? and to influence the course of events by acting? We all believe we are. We act on that belief a hundred times a day. But the plain truth is that *the same place exists for prayer as for action within the purpose of God*. If we freely modify circumstances by our actions, we have exactly the same freedom to modify them by our prayers. So far as God's decrees are concerned, the two things are in exactly the same position. Does this difficulty prevent us *acting*? Not in the least. Why then should it prevent us *praying*? I admit that the region in which we are free at all is a small region. But *within that region*, small or big, we are as free to pray, and to produce results by praying, as we are to act and to produce results by acting.

(2) The difficulty may appeal to us in another way, however. It may be said: 'Do not events happen according to the laws of nature? Is it not always cause and effect? Do not results flow from causes whatever prayers are offered? And if so, where does prayer come in? where is there room for it?' The answer to this also is very simple. Apart altogether from the fact that nature is no longer being regarded in the way it used to be as a fixed enclosed system of iron laws,—apart from that the Christian assertion about prayer is that it is a *cause*. It is one among the other causes that are followed by effects. So that when we speak of the course of events being modified by prayer, we mean that it is one of the causes that have to be taken into account. Take the case of a sick person. Among the causes that may lead to his recovery we may reckon the doctor, the nurse, the treatment, and medicine. But if the New Testament is right, we must add another—prayer. And if we neglect to use this force we may be depriving the patient of one of the healing agencies by which God may be able to act.

(3) Some other points may be added to make the Christian message clearer. Prayer in this

sense, *e.g.*, is simply a special case of what is common all over human life, co-operation between God and man. The harvest is one example of this, medical science is another. We put into God's hands a force which He can use to benefit others. I have heard this point illustrated by the situation in a campaign, where the general in the field draws upon the resources and the counsel of the war minister at home who has all the power of a great country at his back. Prayer is co-operation with God.

(4) Another point that deserves emphasis is that prayer is a way of getting the *will of God* done. It is not in any sense a means of winning something from God which He does not wish to give. I have asserted clearly that it is a force for achieving definite results in life. But what we want done is God's will always, and prayer is a power to be put into God's hands for Him to use *in any way He sees best*. This does not in the least make prayer any less necessary or any less a real force. Because if we withhold this agency from God we deprive Him of one way of getting His will done. We deprive Him of our co-operation which is necessary to Him. If the farmer did not do his part there would be no harvest. And if we deprive God of our co-operation in prayer, His will may possibly be done in other ways, but not in this way and through us. Our prayer would not be any the less needful as a force for getting things done, because it is God's will that is done through it. Prayer may well be, as Sir Oliver Lodge says, one of the 'directive forces' in the universe which in God's hands and for God's ends are used by Him. Prayer, therefore, is not a way of changing God. It is a way of allowing Him to do what He wishes to do and cannot do without prayer.

(5) But there is still a point to be explained in regard to this Christian message. You will notice that over and over again, as in our text, conditions are laid down without the fulfilment of which prayer is of little avail. 'If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' And again, prayer is to be 'in the name' of Jesus, and 'according to the will of God.' Undoubtedly these expressions have a damping effect on us. They seem to take back with one hand what is so freely promised in the great words of Jesus, 'Ask, and it shall be given you,' and elsewhere. But when you think of them in the light of what has been said, it is plain that

what they mean is this, that if prayer is a force for getting things done, a great deal depends on what the force is like, what is in it, what is behind it. If prayer is a power which we put into God's hands to use, a great deal of its result must depend on what is behind it. We can well understand that in God's hands prayer that rises from a heart entirely at one with Him may be of far more use to Him than prayer that rises from a heart that is not in a state of grace at all. There is a certain moral and spiritual fitness for prayer that must surely enter into the power of prevailing intercession.

So far as I know I have not omitted any of the essential points in stating the Christian message, except perhaps the practical difficulty of unanswered prayers. But that is a subject so large and important that I cannot treat it as an aside. But now, when we have the whole subject before us, let us really face what it means. If this great statement of the New Testament is true, if we are as free to pray as to act, if prayer is a real cause among the causes that produce results, if it is a real and necessary co-operation with God, if it is one of the ways by which His will is done, if it is a real force that may modify the course of events, then what a tremendous power we have in our hands. *Do we use it?* If this is the way of liberating the resources of God and directing them on persons and events, then a very great ministry is open to us. Do we use it? Do we believe in prayer? If these promises of Jesus mean anything, then we should look on prayer as the service best worth rendering to the world, far more worth rendering than anything we can *do*, or anything we can *give*. God can more easily dispense with our labour and our money than with our prayers. The thing is so big, so urgent, so staggering, so challenging, that

you cannot help asking how far the ordinary believing man has any conception of what God asks of us and makes possible for us. May I, as I close, make this more practical by putting the matter to the test. What, *e.g.*, are the prayers of the Church service really worth? are they meant? do people expect them to be followed by results? or again, how many people out of a congregation go to the weekly service for prayer? or to special prayer meetings held for a special object? That is to say, how many Christian people believe in corporate prayer, such as our Lord definitely made promises to, and practise it? or, to come to our personal habits, what amount of time do we spend in intercession of a definite kind? and how largely do we use the opportunity of prayer to bring certain persons or causes before God habitually? Do not let us evade the point of such questions by objecting that we are not heard for our much speaking. It is not a question of much speaking. It is the having in our hands a power of blessing others which we neglect, a way of co-operating with God which we decline. If we believe Jesus, there is a way by which we may obtain blessing for individuals. Do we use it? If Jesus is right, then the thing that is *urgent* for us is to pray, in this definite sense of asking for others what they need. *That* is what God cannot do without from us. And therefore I appeal to you to face the real situation. I am sure that great masses of religious people do not believe in prayer in the sense in which Jesus encouraged it. If we are to accept His words and act on them we must make time for prayer, we must test God in definite ways, we must seize or make opportunities for corporate prayer, we must put all that is best in us into our praying, we must live in God, and always and fervently we must join the disciples in their request: 'Lord, teach us to pray.'

Literature.

ROBERT BOYLE.

THE best short biography of the season has been written by Miss Flora Masson. It is the biography of *Robert Boyle* (Constable; 7s. 6d. net). Although the book begins with Robert Boyle's

father, the great Earl of Cork, and that in his youth, and describes his rise to greatness and the steady increase of his family and power; although it touches upon the great events in the history of this country, and especially of Ireland, from Elizabeth to Anne; although the domestic life