

The Objective Value of Prayer.

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PROBABLY there is less difficulty in the average mind concerning the objective value of prayer, in our day, than at any time within the last fifty years. Slowly, but surely, the mind and heart of man are stealing out from the dreary prison-house of mere law. We are beginning to see and to feel that the system and order of the universe have by no means opened to us their last secrets. There is still a place for wonder, and hope, and appeal, and that place seems to grow wider, more alluring, more surely founded. It is founding itself, not merely in the imagination of the devout, not merely as a pavilion in the darkness for them that have sorrow; but upon the wisdom, and purity, and humility of many strong and clear minds who have begun to find hints and gleams of another order shooting through the physical. More learning is making science less mad. The religious mind is no longer pitied, not even patronized; it is cheered on its way with a most pathetic directness and simplicity. Surely it is no longer necessary to attack unbelieving theories. It never was necessary to attack men. But in our time there is no unbelieving theory that is confidently held or aggressively preached by any considerable number of apostles. Science is tentative—consciously so. The immeasurable world is more with it than are its own conquests, and the sense of infinite hope has begun to kindle.

We can come back, therefore, to the affirmations of Christ and find them not alien to the age. He no longer speaks into a void, and no longer need we hesitate about plain speech as to His attitude. That attitude is accepted as among the facts to be considered, even by those who are immersed in other orders of thought. It is true His word is not received with the same conclusiveness as it finds in the Christian; but humbly, and gladly, and with some spring of hope, many profoundly scientific minds look towards Christ and would meekly learn His wisdom concerning prayer. That He believes prayer to have an objective value is beyond doubt. When we have made all possible allowance for the time, for the Oriental outlook, for the type of mind to which He addressed Himself, there remains a cheerful and most

buoyant faith that prayer is nothing less than invincible. We may sometimes find ourselves doubting concerning its largeness, its simplicity, its radiant optimism. We may wonder, and, halting upon our wonder, we may ask ourselves whether these things can be; but no man can put aside the witness that Christ bears. Most of our expositions err on the side of going about to provide limitations that are not there. We read life as it appears to us; we consult treatises or profound systems of philosophy; we immerse ourselves in ethical discussion; then, full of these things, we take up the words of Christ and wish to harmonize them with all we have discovered. The result is, we are driven to make much of phrases, of chance remarks, of mysterious limitations, and the much we make is all with the intent of staining somewhat the white radiance of His eternity. We cannot believe in our Father which is in heaven, with His invincible triumph. The wine of His confidence is too strong for us—or we think it is. We dare not drink it—new, with Him. Sometimes it happens that, after much schooling, through long years of sorrow, some pure heart will make the adventure of His chalice; and His chalice vindicates itself. But for the most part, the most devout minds must carefully discriminate and be not quite so buoyant as the Master. It is true that so many ungovernable enthusiasms have found root for wild poisonous growths in the wideness of the words of Jesus, that a modest and an anxious mind may well take thought. But from whatever point of view we approach the matter, it is abundantly plain that Jesus flung wide the gates, made most prodigious offers, called men with amazing cordiality to possess, through prayer, whatsoever they should ask in His name. And have not theologians made hedges and boundaries, divisions and impoverishments, out of 'in His name,' that would amaze His gentle heart, His wide and daring sympathy?

The whole matter is only to be determined by experience. We do well to make much of the words of Jesus and to take His attitude as conclusive. But no word is ever an end of controversy,—only the personal touch, the individual try and the individual finding. We believe when we know.

The example of Jesus is enough to push forward all loyal-hearted followers to make the adventure, on His word; but the adventure is the only finality. There may be those who have so identified their whole being with Him, who are so in Christ that their nature seems impregnate and suffused with His consciousness; and it may be that these blessed ones know from communion rather than experiment, have an instinct that follows Him whithersoever He goeth, follows His every word with no sense of risk or toil, only with an inimitable repose, that is constant confirmation; but for the rest of the world, the call is from above, and they can only stretch lame hands of faith, making sure by the grasp and the holding. No man can pray by authority; each man prays by need and instinct. Hope leans on authority; but it only lives on experience. We watch the prevailing of Christ, and our hearts tell us we are not as He is: His rights are not ours. Outlaws and broken men do not share with the king's children. Our hearts tell us this: but when the outlaws and broken men venture where the king's children are only supposed to come, and find that they are better dealt with, have mercies given that the king's children never required, have their ill desert met in a way that bewilders and dissolves the spirit—then the suspicious heart is silenced into song. It is not only by praying that men learn how to pray, but also by praying that they learn the philosophy of prayer, are rooted and grounded in the knowledge of it. It may be that the roots are hidden, that the foundations have not been recognized, that the rooted and grounded man is inarticulate, is confused and stammering before a gainsayer, but he hath the witness in himself and consciously believes. Like his Lord he prays in the shadow as in the sunlight, and in him is no darkness at all. But to the man that will not pray, and pray with a guileless heart, there must always be something lacking of the evidence. All the lines of thought come a little short. They travel from all points, from every direction, round the compass they converge upon the centre. But they do not meet—the centre is bare, and white, and open. Into the 'bare, and white, and open,' whosoever ventures in a habit of guileless prayer, shall find the 'little more,' and know 'how much it is.'

As to the value of evidence, the same rules obtain here as everywhere. We have had wild and exaggerated testimonies, without discipline

and without intelligence. The mind that lacks balance and control is sure to be exuberant and to give forth more smoke than burning or illumination, when it is deeply moved and has its wonders. How can it be otherwise? But even these are not without their value. Evidently there is some generous stimulant behind it all, some spark at the heart of the turbulent clouds tossed from the fuel. If we leave them in their untamed audacity, it is not because they are to be despised. We should rather be grateful that this experience and this power is not a monopoly of the schools, that it is frankly human, that God gives with a splendid disregard of all things but vitality. The world is a world in process of discipline, and wayfaring men and foolish ones have yet their rights in the eternal, their claims to pity, to help, and to benedictions, though all may be rankly misjudged. But when thoughtful men must needs put these cases quietly apart, there remains enough for all our powers of investigation, for all our reasonable desire of evidence. Have we not all known quiet and sober people who could find no way of life but this one way of living by things for which they asked? There was nothing they could win, nothing that man gives or procures that could equip them for the tasks that had to be done daily. They prayed very simply, and very surely the necessary things came home to them and prevailed. Their prayer was not an agony, it was rather a kind of piety; it was not a fierce struggle, but an habitual repose; not a crisis, but a dying daily, out of self-will and self-desire; and behold, always they did live. The best evidences are always hidden deep; and these conquering spirits do not come into the open with banners. They are doing the will of God with content, and wishing for nothing else but to go on doing God's will in peace. In the presence of doubt and inquiry there is something of the reticence and shrinking of their Master. As He, after His resurrection, they can only show themselves to chosen witnesses, and even then they do not show *themselves*. They are worth all the arguments, all the theories, all the demonstrations that ever have been, or ever shall be—and a great deal more. If any man could see them as they are, he would steal away, softly, saying he had had a vision of angels—*any* man would say this, so long as his manhood remained. They are there: but they are not to be produced in the face of the world; not because

the world is not worthy, but because the beauty of the morning and the solemnity of the evening are both impossible in the light of common day.

It is in these characters that the strength of the argument from experience lies. Prayer is but one function of the spiritual life, and it is not to be taken apart from the totality of the character of the Christian. No man can specialize in prayer and leave the other aspects of life in Christ to be as they may be, or not to be at all. The power of prayer is the power of the whole man and all his history; and never is it so strong as when it rises in its strength through deeps and over heights, every one of which is the tabernacle of the Spirit of God. But there are crises. Now it is beyond controversy that the general view of prayer is fashioned too much on its capacity for a crisis. Prayer is regarded as a good thing for an emergency. This is not Christ's way of regarding it; and, moreover, it is not the rational way of regarding it. Such a view is founded on mean thoughts of God, on mean estimates of life, and on the meanest of all estimates of man. If the test of the crisis is to be the test of prayer, then any fair consideration of a proper test must take account of the man in whose history the crisis supervenes—what manner of man is he? How does he know to handle his plea? Is he a master in the holy art, or only a stranger and an alien, an encroacher on the prerogatives of the kingdom? To the man who lives by prayer the crises of life are apt to be few. When they do come, he has small conception of any possible tragedy. He knows whom he has believed, and is persuaded that He is able to keep. The more a man is conscious of crises and breaks, the less is his habit and power of trust. When all this is borne in mind, the less we shall be disposed to look for our evidence in single instances and in the possibility of sudden Divine intervention. But this is not to deny the possibility of sudden Divine interventions; it is not to say that there is no necessity for them, or that they are not to be expected by the man who would have all his paths ordered of the Lord, even when he falters in his desire, or is wayward in his impulses. If it were within the scope of this paper to give instances, many lie to hand, instances in which this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and delivered him. But when a beginning is made with instances, the result is interminable. Let any unbiassed reader take up the biographies of the saints

and examine for himself, and he will find a new testimony equal in every way to that of ancient days; men and women who, through prayer, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens. So desperate and so urgent and sudden was the need that there was nothing for it but a 'cry'—just the leaping out of all the man in one wild appeal—nothing for it, nothing possible but that, and *that* was not in vain. Whilst they were yet calling, the answer shone. But here is not the strength. Such interventions are dramatic; they appeal with most power and poignancy to the common intelligence, but they do not show the power of prayer in all its splendour and richness. If you want to know the glory and the strength of the firmament of waters you must not look to the sudden plunge of rain, but to 'the multitudinous seas.'

When we consider the characters of these men who affirm the Divine help, when we realize their simplicity and purity, their lover-like loyalty to truth, their humility, their daily service, their awe of God, their distrust of themselves, their wonder before the mystery, their great tenderness of heart, and their boundless anxiety to guide their brethren into the ways of peace, is there not much credulity in putting them lightly aside, as deceived and deceivers? If these men be false witnesses, where shall we turn for the true? Surely humility and patience and some degree of submission is only seemly, some spring of hope and gladness is only rational, some gentle and tender entreaty that we too may come into the blessed secret of their great faith, though 'passion on passion deeply is redoubled.'

But it is undoubtedly true that we must be prepared with something more than authority, even though the authority be the authority of experience. It is not enough to say that men have found it so, and then to close the windows and refuse those who look out for light rather than testimony, for a line along which the intelligence can move rather than solemn assertion. Unless we can say at least a little about the method, the fact will always miss of something that satisfies and inspires. Now, in our time, we are coming to see, as perhaps never before, that every will is a cause. Our philosophers are finding the original conception of a

cause in the action of the will. It is not simply in the observation of sequence, and the following of the effect, invariably, upon the same previous conditions, but in the individual sense of the power to originate motion, to produce change, that the original conception of causation takes its rise. We believe in causation because we know ourselves to have the power to initiate. Such phenomena as tend to the belief in the freedom of the will, owes itself to the will's capacity to interfere and modify. The very idea of will lodges in this power. If we are right in thinking of the will as a cause, is it not possible, in this direction, to find an opening along which our minds may travel, in trying to discover a little of the rationale of prayer?

It is plain that it has pleased God to limit Himself in and by His creation of this universe. It has pleased Him to give life and power and opportunity to other free agents than Himself. An intelligence that is driven is dealt with as an intelligence no longer. An intelligence can no more be compelled than sunbeams can be scalded. A will that does not voluntarily follow cannot be brought to heel, as a dog. It must either be allowed to stray or be destroyed. Warmth of heart and deep emotion only come when the mind sees, and the will yields up the whole man to the dominance of terror or beauty. However we regard ourselves, it is plain that there are some things that the Deity cannot do without our co-operation. The universe is His and ours. He has been pleased to share the dominion. Full as it is of riches and joy, neither the riches nor the joy come to us unless we put out our hand and take; and what is more to the point, God has so made us that even He cannot give them to us, unless we put out our hand and take. The higher we go in the scale of possessions, the stronger and the more discerning must we be, if we are to take hold and have. Heavenly wisdom waits, helpless, until earthly folly has been to school. One form of the Divine self-expression, then, must be recognized in the Divine self-limitation. If Personality be the wonder of the universe, the wonder of that wonder surely is that something went out of God that must tarry for man, when He said, Let us make man in our own image. But this self-limitation of the Deity is a form of self-expression—a very gracious form, a form that is the fountain of all grace. That God could so limit Himself is the surest of all evidences of His

calm strength; that He was not dismayed by the possibilities wrapped up in the dower of creatures such as we are is the sign and expression of His magnanimity, that God is greater than our hearts.

Now, is not prayer the return to God of that power which went from Him at our creation? God is no longer the sum of the forces of the universe. When we talk of His almightiness, we need carefully to guard our words, and still more carefully to be clear in our ideas. Is it not becoming plainer, every day, that the intellectual exigencies of our time demand that we should lay less stress upon the Divine Omnipotence and more upon the Divine Omniscience? We may be so fond of the ancient and familiar conception of omnipotence—of power, at His will, to do anything—that we are found bearing most grievous false witness, and putting burdens upon the unsophisticated that they are entirely unable to bear. Let it be repeated—God is no longer the personal sum of all the forces of the universe. He has created creatures in His own image and likeness. In some small way, but effectually enough, these creatures can defy their maker to His face, can stand up against the very thunder of His power and still abide His coming. We must not shrink from this. It is the ground and cause of human freedom, in the matter of its own destiny; it is there that we find the vindication of the awful necessity of what the Scriptures call hell. We have a gift—an awful gift. When we come with our prayers and put all at His feet, we return that gift; and now God can work His gracious will. The force that is in our will has brought itself back to the depleted centre, and all things are possible. Is not our return, our prayer, our free energy of will linking itself to God, and becoming one with Him, a new Divine opportunity, a reinforcement of His possibilities, an enlarging of His sphere? Under such conditions is it not possible for us to conceive that, when we pray and vehemently desire, God can do things for us not possible to be done under other conditions?

It is a striking fact that the Scriptures always give most power with God to those who are in sympathy with God. It is not merely that being in sympathy with the Divine purposes they most readily acquiesce, that they have lost their will in the Divine will. It is much more significant than that. It would appear that when a man has a simple kinship of will and hope with the Divine, then God will respect that man's will, will consider

and, one might almost say, consult. Perhaps the most significant instance is found in the life of Abraham. Of the Patriarch it was said—'I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment.' And when the Lord would arise in judgment upon the men of Sodom, because of these things—'The Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham that which I do?' When the purpose was unveiled, and the doom was made known to the faithful follower, 'Abraham drew near and said, Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked?' That prayer offered over the sorry cities by the brave friend of God has a world of meaning; but amid its riches does not this pearl of truth shine with a quiet power all its own—the man of God has, somehow, a power with God, and without his assent God will not arise to judgment. We may say what we will of the record as it has come down to us, and we may explain away the character and history of Abraham, but this ethical fact remains, that it has never been the wisdom of God to outrage the moral sense of those who were close and special in their fellowship with Him. Whether this story stands for that or not, we can see that to shock, to do violence and wrong to such moral perceptions as have been matured in any mind through communion with Himself, would be for God to defeat His own purposes. Abraham must be carried with Him or the judgment cannot go forth. More precious than judgment upon many sinners is the confidence and faith of one man who has talked with God face to face. Here Divine righteousness waits upon the enlightenment of one seeking soul; here Divine government will take no retributive action until the confident faith of the follower has argued the matter out with God, and, tremulous at its own hardihood, has at last in sorrow to acquiesce, sure that the Judge of all the earth will do right. At first it appears a strange scene, a childish conception of the relations between the Creator and the creature; but as we ponder the laws of moral progress, as we see the necessities of human education, the story reads with a new and touching beauty, as full of wisdom as it is of tenderness. God cannot go forward with the race unless He carries the race with Him. His power and glory wait upon our poor intelligence, upon the deep and mature assent of our instructed will.

The bearing of this upon the exposition of the place of prayer in the universe, it is not necessary to draw out at any length. If we do not see so striking instances of this principle in the New Testament, it is because there the Light and Truth have clearly shone, have so clearly shone that men of right mind, men who have been in communion with the eternal, can only say—Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ. It is likely that in the elementary beginnings of the Divine revelation there will be more serious clash, that at such a stage there will be more frequent and dramatic conflict, than at a following period, when men have followed 'the gleam' through long generations and learned the way of the Spirit. But we may see something of the same necessary law of Divine self-expression, even in the life of Christ. Mankind was ready for the revelation of love as the supreme law of conduct; and though it appeared, perhaps, a trifle adventurous, this new law, even to the purest souls, just a little wild in its heavenly innocence, yet the heart felt the glory of it, knew it was of God. The difficulty was not a difficulty of spiritual assent, it was a difficulty of the price that had to be paid for the pearl. About the treasure there was no doubt, about the cost of it there was, here and there, a pardonable hesitancy. When it came, however, to the central act of the life of Jesus, there was the same tragic possibility as had to be met in the life of Abraham. Abraham stood in horror before the judgment of sin upon the plain and its cities: the twelve stood in horror of the judgment of sin as it flamed, in the most lurid light of all, upon the hill called Calvary. And as Jesus prepares His followers for the appalling manifestation, may we not see something of the delicacy and tenderness, something of the withholding and the leading that marked the Divine dealing with Abraham, hard by the oaks of Mamre? Let any reader consider the moments at which Jesus introduces the tragic possibility; let him mark the deliberate choice of occasions when their enthusiasm was at the highest; let him see how, after the first vague hint, the prophecy becomes more definite, is expanded with new detail; let him consider the eager scrutiny of Jesus as he would read their very hearts on this matter; and, above all, let due weight be given to the fact that, when the Lord is quite sure that He holds them deeply enough and surely enough for their faith and hope to survive the catastrophe,

then He goes forward with a joyous abandon, with an almost reckless disregard of consequences, rejoicing as a strong man to run a race, as an appointed conscious victim, yet glorying in His adorning for the sacrifice. He tarried; He withdrew Himself; He hid; He made journeys, and put all the enmity to confusion, until His work upon the twelve was complete, until they were sure to find the horror transfigured; then He steadfastly set His face to go up to Jerusalem. It was the same law—God is bound until we have some freedom of His vast purpose. In His grace He will save us, but the grace must wait for our acceptance. There is something in us that can limit and confine the Deity, and our praying spirit, with all that prayer involves of communion and aspiration, sets God free, joins us to Him, and Him to us, so that in this holy exercise the schism of the universe passes away, and in the possibilities of the newly emerged unity, God can move as He was not able heretofore.

In this view of the operation of prayer we find the reconciliation of the conflicting theories. It is sometimes said that the only opportunity and effectual working of the praying spirit is that, in its exercises, it subdues itself to God; by the Divine Communion the human desire is chastened and purified until it ceases to become desire for any particular thing, and resolves itself into a worshipful acquiescence in the Heavenly Father's purpose. When this stage is attained, prayer is answered in the only way possible—particular desire is extinguished in worship. On the other hand, it is affirmed that prayer is nothing, unless the thing asked for is received. Unless it does something, outside the heart that prays, unless it moves God to intervention, it is not prayer, as the common heart understands and practises prayer. Then the instinct of intercession is only a false lure, leading us in a direction that may be good for us, but in which we do not want to go. The one theory affirms that prayer only changes us, is only answered by recoil; the other affirms, boldly, that prayer changes God, and is as directly answered as when a child asks for bread, and bread is lovingly given. It generally happens that when two crisp philosophies stand one over against the other, the flower of truth is found in the valley that lies between. Either hill is too dry and hard and sunless for the blossoming there. Probably it is so in this case. Anyhow, the view taken in this paper excludes

neither point, if the point be not made too aggressively sharp. It is beyond doubt that the praying man finds his vehemence chastened, that, if there is a long wrestle, more and more the heart settles into repose, comes to trust in the loving Father's care. In the sudden fiery dart, in the passionate cry of a momentary need, this is hardly possible. Neither is it true that a prayer that has to be urged through many days, and, it may be, through many years, inevitably loses its identity and persistence. It may be chastened, but it is not always cast down. Through long periods and in the growth of the person the prayer grows, strengthening with his strength and deepening with his depth, daily and hourly gaining fresh accessions of power, if also it is, at the same time, purified so as by fire. But the repose and the settling do not extinguish the desire; they may shed away some of the fringes and the insatiable hunger we seem to have for dramatic accompaniments; but the prayer still rises, like a fountain, night and day; and still the body of it is resolute after the fulfilment, unwavering and passionate in its glow. So much sanctifying always happens in prayer. But when this has happened, and still the will throbs and wrestles; being delivered from all the mere carnal concomitants, still the will streams forth to heaven and cries aloud, now entirely on the line of Divine purpose of sanctifying and service,—God is liberated. It is a bold word; but does not the word stand for actual things? Do we not shut out the Deity daily, keep Him from coming where He would? Yes, God is liberated. We are now on His lines, willing strongly at His side; and He can go forth with us and for us, doing things not for His own glory only, but for our deliverance and for the deliverance of all that are oppressed. So that it is not necessary to say that there can be no intervention; rather, it is true that prayer produces the opportunity for intervention. We have not changed God's mind, by our prayer, neither have we changed His will, but we have produced the element in which He can achieve; we have so altered the human conditions that the barriers are down and the eternal love can enter in and enrich and comfort and espouse. The barriers are down. God has helped us to cast them down as we have come near to Him in prayer, helped by His purifying of desire and hope. But our rising spirit, our will, throbbing one with His, has helped also.