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PRAYER



WILLIAM WATSON

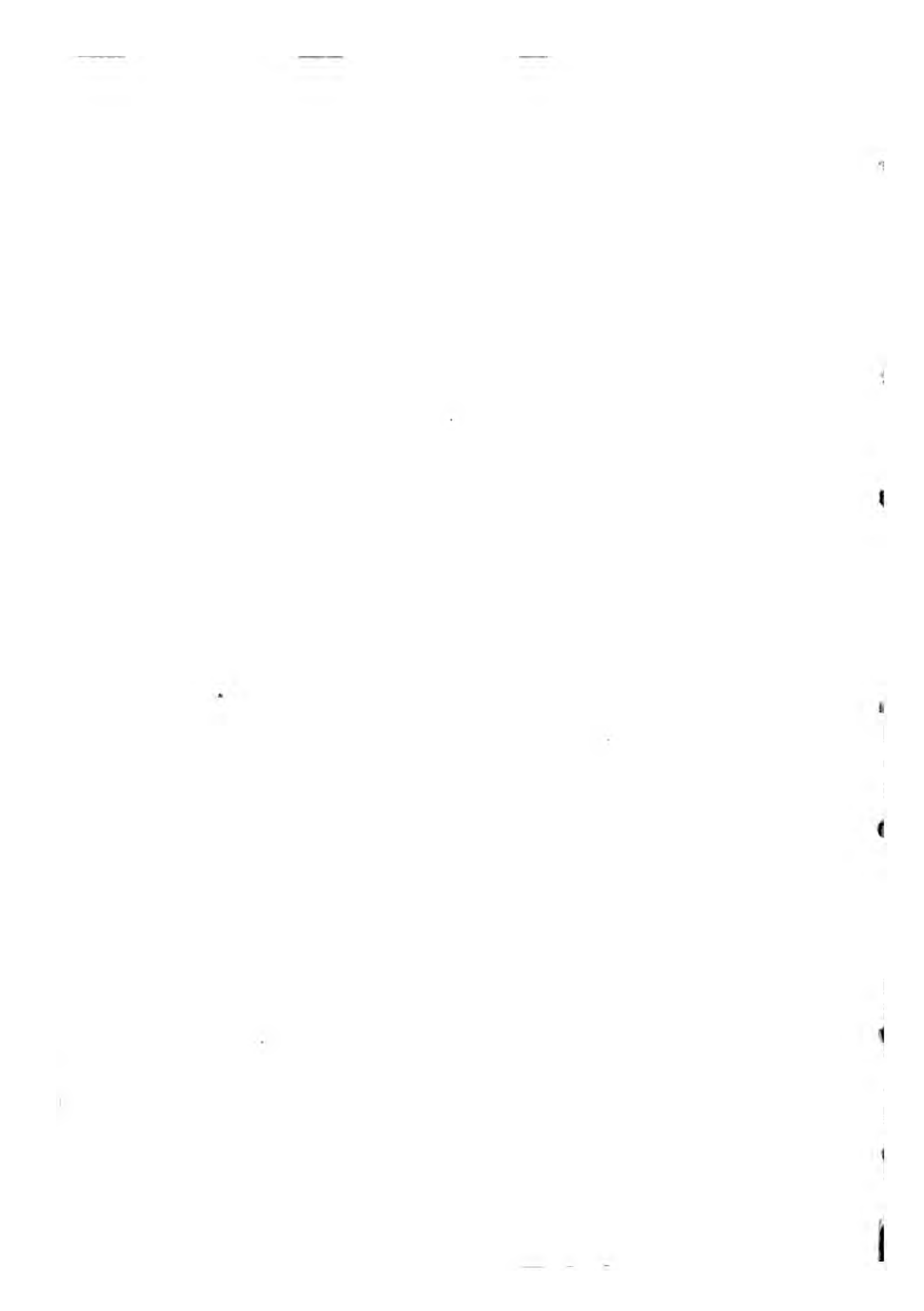
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# PRAYER



# PRAYER

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To  
MY WIFE



# CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE NATURE OF PRAYER . . . .	9
II. THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER . . . .	32
III. THE CONDITIONS OF PRAYER . . . .	52
IV. THE DIFFICULTIES OF PRAYER . . . .	74
V. THE GAIN OF PRAYER . . . .	95



## I.

### THE NATURE OF PRAYER.

IF one were to write a history of Christian prayer we should possess a record of the lives of the saintliest souls. It would indeed be a narrative of human incidents, but with very much in it that could not be readily explained in the terms of ordinary human experience. There would certainly be more of God than of man in it, but we should not be unwilling to accept it though an air of mystery hung about it all which we could neither penetrate nor raise. There would be much in it that would be kindred to our own feeling and life. A history of prayer would be the history of religion, the account of the origin and end of man's spiritual beliefs and hopes. It would be the rehearsal of God's long

intercourse with the race, at their lowest and at their best.

That history cannot yet be written. The time for it has not come. We shall only be able to read it in that far-off day when man's life has been spiritually perfected, and when God's love has subdued all things to itself, and He is all in all.

Prayer is a great necessity, as well as a great duty, an instinct, as it is an obligation. It is natural for us to pray. We are never so wise as when we pray. It is then we are completely and transparently ourselves. And we are wisest when, though it be but for a few moments, we withdraw ourselves from human intercourse, and from crowded hours, and with our personal wants and burdens, fall down alone before our Father, and tell Him all, and gain the calm and strength of His fellowship. It is then we best understand how we can become His children again. Such knowledge will not come readily to us amid the stress of ordinary toil. Solitary prayer

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is, among its other blessings, an occasion of unusual insight into God's will and our own needs. Truth and duty are disclosed to us then as in no other hour, and a man never knows God or himself except in an interview at which there is present no one but God and himself.

Besides, there are regions of emotion and experience in every human spirit where certainly no stranger dare intrude, and with which our best-loved friend may not attempt to intermeddle. We are never so safe as when we are near God. There is no possibility of disguise there. We may indeed play falsely with ourselves in such a sacred act, but our insincerity destroys our prayer, and we gain nothing but shame and self-contempt.

What is prayer? Many definitions have been given; the Bible gives us none. This silence is suggestive. The Bible never proves the reality of prayer any more than it proves the existence of



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God. It takes the one for granted as completely as the other. Its doctrine is a simple one: God exists; He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. God cannot but be; man cannot but cry to Him. And so it has no account to give of the reason why man has always prayed, or of the methods by which God has always met his prayer.

Any difficulty that may be felt by us to-day with respect to the origin and nature of prayer is as old as prayer itself is. Man still prays, though, after all these centuries of experience he remains quite ignorant of the root and scope and laws of prayer. He may have "no language but a cry," but he feels he has to utter that cry, however blindly, to some one. From the first day of his existence prayer has been one of the strongest forces in his nature. It expressed itself in his recurring sense of weakness under the pressure of his ignorance. It came with his tears when sorrow struck his heart, and loss changed his home. It

came with his joys when their very freshness made him sing his song of thankfulness. It has always been with him, a power as real as his power of sight and hearing and speech. It is his soul breathing in its effort to live. It will continue as long as mankind lasts. Prayer is man's life touching its source.

Clement of Alexandria says "the prayers God hears are the thoughts within our mind." T. H. Green defines prayer as "a wish referred to God." The Shorter Catechism says: "Prayer is the offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies." These may not be full definitions—they may rather be descriptions of prayer—but they express what is at the very basis of prayer, a sense, not only of relationship to God in virtue of a common nature, but a sense of dependence on Him as the only source of help in time of weakness and need. The very

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existence of this instinct helps to explain the coarse idolatry of the savage as truly as the happy worship of the Christian. It is not a vague force that terminates nowhere. Man is what he is, a grander being than the creatures he fears or slays, simply because of this reaching out of his nature to something, or some one, beyond himself. The most foolish judgment ever passed on prayer is that which calls it a fiction, an invention, an imagination of man. It is the divinest thing man has. It is because he is a praying being that man is a religious being. A prayerless religion is no religion. And the more spiritual the religion, the purer and loftier is the prayer, and man is never at his best and strongest as a moral creature, except in those times when prayer, "man's rational prerogative," as Wordsworth terms it, is simplest and most confidential.

Whatever may be the direction of the future development of the human race, it cannot have the comfort and hope of

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religion without the reality of prayer. As prayer lessens, the force of the unseen lessens. We are amazed at the quick progress of mankind, and never has the advance been more rapid than in our own generation, and yet with all the changes which our civilisation has wrought, our common human nature in its roots and tendencies remains quite unaltered. The increase of our goods has not satisfied our hunger. The hunger indeed is the occasion of the increase, and did we not ever cry for more we should have no gladness in any gain. The most ancient thing in human life is this inner yearning. Man is not content with tilling his fields and rounding off his daily labour with nightly sleep. He associates with his fellows, but leaves them again and again, persuaded that they are as feeble and as destitute as himself. He wants something more than the joy of labour and society. He will stretch out his hands, and lift his thoughts beyond himself and his place,

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and believe that some one unseen takes note of all the movements of his inner life.

This haunting sense of incompleteness cannot be a vain imagination, and so strong a tendency to call on God, cannot be based on a fictitious or passing sentiment. No force in him can thrive or grow unless it have its adequate environment, and the cry that breaks so often from within his heart must have its answer from without. The eye was made for light, and the sunshine falls on sea and meadow and flower, and makes man's spirit rejoice. The ear was made for sound, and the music of bird and stream and human voice lifts him upward to wide invisible realms. The human spirit in its very make justifies the reasonableness of prayer: and the prayer it prays is as much the sign of its own natural way of living, as it is the expression of its ignorance and helplessness and its need of God.

There is nothing grander than a soul

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on bended knees. Is there not some significance in the construction of our life, when we find that this natural instinct of prayer is fortified by experiences of various kinds that drive us, almost against our will, outside of and beyond ourselves? Man has ever been a seeker, a wanderer in a world too strange and cold and uncertain to be his home. If he has journeyed in strange places and stumbled painfully in the darkness, his hands have always been stretched out, if haply they might find a guide whose friendly aid would be abiding, and his ear has ever listened for a message he could trust.

“ Long, long since, undower’d yet, our spirit  
Roam’d ere birth the treasuries of God,  
Saw the gifts, the power it might inherit  
Ask’d an outfit for its earthly road.”

Man is lonely, blind, lost, until he finds  
God and speaks to Him, and God’s joy  
is not complete until He finds His child  
and hears him pray.

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The Bible always honours and reverences this instinct of prayer. Its serious regard for man at his best is one of those notes of Scripture which are as true and deep as its picture of God's love for him at his worst. It is a book of prayers, because it is a history of human hearts. For us in these later days it is impressive to turn back the pages of Scripture and read the prayers of that earlier time, and learn how easily religion was made to fit into life, and how glad and fearless human hearts were in God. There was no hesitancy in their voice when these people spoke to their unseen Lord. In whatever darkness He might dwell, they were sure He heard. Like Faber's old labourer, their

"One thought was God :  
In that one thought they abode,  
For ever in that thought more deeply sinking."

He was their nearest Friend, and it was no more unnatural for them to call

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upon His name and to keep in fellowship with Him, than it would be for a child in his father's house to ask gifts from his father's hands.

We might expect that these prayers would read like stumbling ventures, the tentative struggles of half-awakened souls who were ignorant of the way in which they sought to go, and uncertain of the help they needed. It is not so. They are prayers that carry a strength that only confiding natures have, and are as pure as are the cries of the wiser Christian souls of our modern time. We marvel at the moral heights to which the men and women of that day rose, and the readiness with which they walked those heights with God. Life, it is true, was not so complex as it has since become, but the burdens and fears and sins of the personal soul were not less oppressive than they have ever been. People then wept and failed, hoped and despaired, as unmistakably as people do now, and felt as keenly, too,



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the pain and perplexity of existence. But they could step fearlessly where we move haltingly. They could not tell whither they went, nor altogether why they went, but they always knew to whom they went. Fearing the Lord with all the filial reverence that comes from long experience, His secret was with them, and they greatly dared and greatly believed.

Look at such a career as that of Abraham ; full of interests and duties, and not unmixed with gross faults, yet he holds himself in such terms of fellowship with the Most High that he is known distinctively as "the friend of God." The patriarch's acceptance of the divine will is not a blind obedience, but an intelligent and devout surrender. He is too sure of God's word to believe He will mislead. His prayer is trustful conversation, with all the wonder of a child in the heart of it, but all the unreserved confidence of the child as well. He builds his altars as he journeys

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from place to place, reverently worships his unseen Guide, "calls upon the name of the Lord," and quietly waits the divine direction. What the Christian mystics of the middle ages loved to call the practice of the presence of God was the continual habit of his soul. It seems to have caused him no surprise that his Divine Visitor should come and go while he is occupied with his needful work, and should talk to him of great things yet to be, and hedge his pastoral life with promises and hopes that strengthened his faith and made ordinary things sublime. "And the Lord appeared unto him as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day."

Prayer in that old time was converse,—unrestrained, devout intercourse with God about the common incidents of life: the day's wanderings, the day's labour, the cares of the family, the life of the children, the disposal of property, and all the future too of the unborn generations. And whatever criticism

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may make of these Old Testament stories it cannot destroy the reality and beauty of the filial spirit that breathes through them, the recognition of God as the closest friend, unfailing in His providence and love. Man does not make fictions out of his holiest emotions, and then fit them to the facts. Had the facts not been what they were, these emotions could not have taken the course they did. These make prayer possible. It is one thing, however, to have a sense of God, and another to believe that He is near. It was belief in His nearness that made the prayers of these men and women strong. They could write no philosophy of prayer, and only very rarely did they question either its necessity or value. They seem to have felt, what we in our day have almost failed to feel, that prayer is always a test of character. A man is never himself unless he can deliberately place himself within the light of God, and stand still while it streams into every corner of his life.

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Not a few of us dread the sight of our own hearts when it is given us in that way. Prayer, as much as conscience, is apt "to make cowards of us all," just because it is the steady confronting of self with God, when His hand unveils the concealed and shameful things of our soul. As a man prays, so a man is.

The visible life of these men and women of the Old Testament was so much touched by the invisible, that they lived always within the scrutiny of the divine judgment. That is why they put themselves so completely into their prayers. There are no confessions, or longings, or thanksgivings in any religious literature, like those in the Old Testament. Even their selfishness, as we should term it, is redeemed from sordidness by the overmastering thought of God which is in the mind of him who prays. Jacob cannot keep the bargaining spirit out of his most solemn vows, but it is his consciousness of God that saves his prayer from degenerating to the low level

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to which it might easily enough have fallen. "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God; and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that Thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto Thee."

A crude prayer, we say; narrow in its aim, with no wide horizon, no self-forgetfulness and quiet gratitude; and yet through it all there is the recognition of the relationship of the soul to the eternal, the link that binds the wanderer to the yearning heart, the conviction that after all, go where he will and do what he may, he can never be better off than when he keeps close to his God. A man who begins with that estimate of himself is certain, as experiences increase, to reach a higher view some day, and to work with a devouter idea of the Almighty. Christian people

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even in our own time, with their larger knowledge of God and more varied experience of life, have not seldom uttered more selfish prayers, and have carried a mercenary motive into what seemed their most earnest supplications. They have worked with an impoverished idea of God. But in the case of the religious souls of the early world, whose histories are written for us in the Old Testament, it was the conviction of God as brooding constantly over them, moving in their actions, and will, and affection, that dominated their life. It had woven itself inextricably into every fibre of their moral nature. It was the secret of their goodness; it explains the pain of their remorse, the hope they felt amid their sorest disappointments and sorrows, and the calm with which they died. The sunshine has no service to give for the flower that stays within the dull narrow corner of the field. These men and women lived in the open, and were ready to let God see them and

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teach them, and work His will within them. They never gave up prayer, because they did not give up God.

Petition was the least part of their prayer. Prayer was such complete submission to the authority of God as would enable them to have His will done through them. Abraham prays for a son, but it is not more for the gladness of his home than that by such a gift he may understand that incredible word that had come to him in an earlier day, that his descendants would possess the land into which he had gone as a stranger. He cannot read the future unless the facts of the present are more visible. His prayer, therefore, is the honest expression of an eager childlike soul who can trust God, but yet wishes to know His way. Do we not love this man all the more that there is hesitancy, wonder, in his prayer? His emotions are our own. He speaks not our language, he lives not in our land or time, but his surprise is our surprise and his fear our fear.

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Eliezer asks that God may give him good speed on his journey, but it is all for the sake of the master he serves. He has a simple doctrine of God. He believes that God is in life, moves and works in all its common business. He does not ask to be saved from an unpleasant task, he only wants to be helped to interpret providence and read signs and tokens of the divine will in casual occurrences. He is sending his faith and prayer to practice.

We lose more perhaps by what we leave out of our prayers than by what we wrongly place within them. The narrow survey of our own needs limits our supplications, and makes us less conscious of the wealth and willingness of God. The faith that can venture far is the faith that can carry the most to God, and where we are perplexing ourselves about the range of our petitions and the reality of God's interest in us, this serving man by the well is firmly holding the wise and helping Hand.



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If prayer reveals our thought of God it also shows us ourselves. Prayer indeed is less a beseeching of the divine Heart than a proof of our own spiritual worth. "Behold he prayeth," and a man is estimated by his prayer. Prayer indicates the measure of our faith in Him to whom we speak. It declares in what degree we are hoping in His sympathy and love, but it affirms also our thought about our own character. It discloses whether our life is attached to God because of what God is in Himself, or because of what we expect Him to give us, whether we love Him for a gain which is merely a temporal comfort, or for a godliness which is eternal life.

The simplicity and naturalness that mark the prayers of the Old Testament are found in those recorded in the New Testament, and especially in the prayers of our Lord Jesus Christ. His life was spent continually in doing good, wholly consecrated to its great spiritual purpose, but was full of prayer, finding occasions

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and hours in which it was alone with God. It is not possible for us to understand fully why it was needful He should pray. Few details are given of His lonely vigils. What He said in those hours no human pen has written. The roots of His inner life were buried far down in holy ground. Yet we can trace here and there, above the surface, small portions of these roots. We have not only the record of His actions, and the reverence and calm with which He blessed the bread before He brake it, and prayed before He healed, but the mention of an occasional word like "Abba" that showed how strongly His soul trusted God.

And once He stated the contents of one of His own prayers. "Simon, Simon, behold Satan asked to have you that He might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee that thy faith fail not." What a startling announcement to Peter, what a disclosure of the sympathetic intercession of the greatest heart in the universe! The two prayers

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whose words are preserved, the prayer of thanksgiving which He offered when His disciples returned with joy exulting in their victories over the demons, and His prayer in Gethsemane, show not merely that prayer was natural to Christ, but a great necessity and delight.

His prayers are brief, spontaneous, earnest. He sees things as they are, knows the moral perils of the world, the temptations that assault the human will and heart, and feels that God must be sought for refuge and strength. And we may well believe that such stories as He told of the friend petitioning at midnight (Luke xi., 5—8), the child asking for food (Luke xi., 11—13), and the importunate widow (Luke xviii., 1—8), were spoken out of the secrets of His own supplication, and His own experience of need. The simplicity of His prayers was not disturbed by any shadow of misgiving as to their utility and place in His own life. The faith of His soul in God, His love for holy things, His conflict in an evil

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world, the hunger of His heart for fellowship, His devotion to His friends and to the weary lost souls that followed Him, made him pray; and not once only, we may be certain, but often was it true, "He continued all night in prayer to God."

## II.

### THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER.

To pray is to speak to God. Can we tell God anything which He does not know? If, in our speaking to God, we ask Him for anything, is it possible for us by so asking to overcome some reluctance on His part to grant our request? Is He not always willing and merciful and kind, and does our crying to Him make Him more so? Can we by anything we say affect His will and work a change in His mind? If we can, does this not mean that the unchangeable God can by the importunity of man be made to alter His purposes, and if He alters them in response to our entreaty, is He not thereby finite rather than infinite? If God can listen to man's will, how can His own will be done?

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These are questions which, in more or less varying forms, occur to every mind that thinks seriously about prayer. These questions will always be asked. They arise inevitably from the very nature of prayer. It is a relationship of the finite spirit of man with the infinite Spirit whom we call God. All problems that gather round this relationship have their difficulties. On the intellectual side they are beyond our present knowledge, but there is another side where they do not press at all.

Prayer is communion with God, the inward speech of the human heart with its Creator. We have regarded prayer too much as petition, and, with this inadequate idea of it, we have limited its range and often questioned its force. It is quite true that when we pray we beg, but we are something more than suppliants, and the highest act of the soul is not asking. It would be strange all the same if we did not ask, and ask very frequently. The inevitable imperfections

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of our life make us beggars. The better we know ourselves the better we know our defects. The self-complacency that asks, "What lack I yet?" is the mark of a life that is morally dead. The soul is overburdened by its own unfinished life. Its continual movement downwards or upwards is the evidence of a great recurring need. The man who does not ask for something is scarcely a human being.

To limit prayer, however, to petition, is to limit the free movement of man's own spirit. He can be other than a beggar, other than even a seeker for divine gifts; he can prove himself a son and confess that his true life only has its hunger met when he rests in friendship with God. There is a great difference between believing in prayer because you get and believing in it whether you get or are refused.

The quality, therefore, of our prayers may be judged by the object we have in view. The man who sincerely and in-

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telligently believes in God will never be satisfied with the position of a suppliant. Prayer is intercourse with God, and such intercourse as a child may freely have with its parent. The human household is kept together, not by its giving and receiving of temporal things, but by its moral atmosphere, its common confidence and affection ; and not seldom are those homes the richest that have little or nothing of this world's goods, but are generous in their attachments, self-sacrificing and self-forgetful in their deeds, and where the inmates feel themselves not so much separate individuals as a little complete world whose every movement is regulated and inspired by unfeigned love.

The divine government of the world has, as its central principle, the education of mankind out of low conditions into high conditions ; and prayer works in the line of such a growth. It is designed to raise us nearer God, to stimulate our nature to larger achieve-



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ments, to unfold that which is holiest within us. It often happens that the best result of our prayer is the awakening of our spirit to the presence of God as the satisfaction of our deepest need.

The source of our most common misjudgments of prayer lies in our forgetfulness of that truth. People are apt to test the validity as well as the value of prayer by the answers that come to it. They very often anticipate the answers. Where the answer does not come as they expected it, they begin to doubt whether it is worth their while to pray. But it needs little proof to show that this is a mistaken view of prayer and its purpose. God has not promised to answer every prayer, nor is every prayer, even when earnestly offered to God, wise in the expression of the heart's real wants. There is no part of our life that requires more scrutiny and carefulness than the devotional side.

It is not surprising that so much is said in Scripture about prayer, because,

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easy though praying seems to be as an act of mind and soul, there is no exertion of our nature that ought to be made with more deliberation and wisdom. Jacob is said to have wrestled with a divine combatant all through the night by the lonely stream side; but he wrestled as truly with himself as with his unknown antagonist. He learned a great lesson about prayer in that encounter. No one should pass consciously and deliberately into the presence of God without realizing what must be involved in that act and the interview that follows it. It is a gathering together of the soul's powers that they may be firmly set on God. We cannot collect ourselves for an act of intercourse with our unseen Lord without remembering that He is wiser and holier than we. The misuse of prayer is the misuse of God. To confine it to petition is to belittle God in the time of the most solemn action of our soul. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss." It is a common error.

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What is necessary then to a true conception of the end of prayer? A true conception of God. Our prayers are governed and moulded and inspired by our thought of God. What thought of God is in your mind when you pray? If your prayer is wrong, it is because your thought of God is wrong. The defective supplications of Christendom spring from a false idea of God.

We marvel at times at the spacious prayers contained in some of the Psalms, and in some of the prophecies of the Old Testament. How easily, yet how grandly, these men of long ago moved among great thoughts of the Creator. The very names they gave Him — “Almighty,” “Everlasting,” “King,” “Lord of Hosts,” — reveal the magnitude of the ideas which dominated their minds. These names indicated something real and vast. They represented the supremacy of the divine control, its absoluteness in great things as in small. A man who uttered such prayers

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never felt himself lost in the unlimited largeness of the universe, but was sure that He who knew all and was everywhere could never forget the least of His creatures, or be uninterested in him. "O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me: Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine uprising. Thou understandest my thought afar off. There is not a word in my tongue but lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether. Whither shall I go from Thy spirit, or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The majesty of God and the faith of man are brought together in thoughts and words that are only made possible to him who in endeavouring to understand himself strives to come near in reverent belief to his Creator.

"O Lord, I have heard the report of

Thee, and am afraid : O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years : in the midst of the years make known ; in wrath remember mercy. The mountains saw Thee, and were troubled ; the sun and moon stood still in their habitation. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people. Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord ; I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Are we surprised that the men who thought so grandly about God should write so grandly about Him ? Had they not confided in Him so fully, could they have written of Him and of themselves so tranquilly ? "The Lord is my shepherd ; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me : Thy rod and Thy staff, they

comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Why do we love that psalm in the days of our sorrow? Is it not for its comforting thought of God? The music of its language haunts us from childhood to our dying day, but behind its words is something more beautiful and restful still: the presence of the Shepherd; the assurance of the hand that never fails to lift the wounded sheep from the thicket and carry it homeward through the dark and the loneliness.

So is it with the prayers of the New Testament. It is the thought of God in the heart of them that makes them effectual and fervent. If Paul had had no large experience of God's fellowship and grace he could not have uttered the prayers for his friends that are contained in some of his letters. There is nothing timid, hesitating, small, selfish, about these prayers. "I bow my knees unto

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the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inward man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God." Could any man pray such a prayer for his friends unless he had a clear and lofty conception of God? It is the great earnest cry of a great earnest heart.

So also is it with such prayers of our Lord as are recorded in the Gospels. We cannot explain altogether why it was that He prayed, but the fact that He did pray, and prayed frequently and alone, indicates that He attached

momentous significance to prayer. There is ample witness to that in the prayers that the Evangelists record. How simple and unwavering they are, and what far reaches they take! "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one even as we are. Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy word is truth. Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which Thou hast given Me, for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world." It is not possible to read such prayers without feeling the breath of another world upon our spirits.

And one sees how inept is that adverse criticism of prayer which is so common in our time, and which regards it for the most part as a beseeching of God for certain things which we cannot procure by our own unaided labour. A prayerless mind cannot discuss the virtue and



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place of prayer, any more than a mind untrained in geology can discuss a problem in glaciers and rocks. Experience of prayer is needed to understand what prayer is. The deeper the experience of it the more valued is its strength. He who can interpret fully the mind of psalmist and prophet, and Paul and Christ, will be able to understand something of the nature of prayer. They have prayed most simply and triumphantly who have believed God most fully. To disbelieve in prayer is very much the same thing as to have no faith in God. "He that cometh to God must believe that God is, and that God is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." Many prayers do not seem to be addressed to God at all.

What we want to make real in prayer is our thought of God's personality. People believe in prayer, but they cannot call up before their mind such a conception of God as will make them certain that they are speaking to One

who is as personal as themselves. We can understand and approach one another as individuals. We can see one another and put ourselves into one another's place, but "no man hath seen God at any time," and how are we to think of Him when we quietly pray to Him? Under what form are we to picture Him to our minds? How are we in our moments of adoration and supplication to place in the very heart of our spiritual convictions the image of One who is as much a free personal spirit as ourselves? Christian people often acknowledge that this is a distressing difficulty to them. The very effort to conceive God as always present, always listening, always interested in them, is thinned out into a hazy vision. And, as a consequence of this, there is no intense feeling of personal relationship between Him and them. It is very much the difficulty that is created by the difference between realising a particular tree and realising an atmosphere.

How is that difficulty to be met? It

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does not seem to have been felt very keenly by the people of Old Testament days. God was very personal to them. Every common bush was a fire with Him. They spoke and acted as if they saw Him. Elect souls who had trained themselves to believe in the moral attributes of God came to trust the personal God Himself. God's righteousness, mercy, loving-kindness, truth, are not so much abstract attributes of His essential nature as the forms through which He brings Himself near to man's life. By the manifestation of these in history and in the career of individuals, He reveals Himself. He cannot be separated from these attributes. They have no reality apart from Him, and this was the lesson which the prophets more particularly and the teachers of ancient Israel were continually insisting should be learned by their countrymen. A few of them learned it. They could not think of goodness and righteousness except as associated with one God, whose law as

it sought to rule men's lives was the expression of His mind.

Nothing in human records has been so splendid as the daring of their faith and the strength of their love. But it was a conception which every mind could not grasp or keep. As other ideas became influential this tended to become less and less definite and firm.

There came to be in course of time necessity for a fuller expression of the life and will of the Divine Being. That was given by Jesus Christ. He had a work to do for man in saving him, and a work to do for God in making Him truly known. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." We take our conception of God from Christ; and that conception gives us the right view of prayer. In prayer we are not speaking to an unknown God; we are holding communion with a Father. The name which Christ gives to God elevates the whole idea of prayer, and places within the reach of us all a truth about the Creator which only a

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few of the most serious minds before had reached. Christ's teaching that God is our Father supplies us with the belief about God that quickens and purifies all our entreaties and resolutions. We begin then to understand that prayer is one of our privileges as His children, and we regard it less as a means of obtaining the gratification of our personal wishes than as an occasion of confidential intercommunion by which all our cares and griefs pass from us into the divine heart, and we are made of one will with the Father.

Prayer, therefore, should be less difficult now than once it was, simply because we know more and better about God. It should be a stronger and wider outflow of our nature. It should carry with it less hesitancy, less doubt. It should be deemed a peculiarly filial act. Unless you know yourself to be God's child, you will not know how to pray. To know that, and to make that knowledge the abiding conviction of your

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mind, is to have a discernment of God's purpose which cannot be gained in any other way. Once it is gained, what is usually termed the problem of prayer becomes very much simplified, and more thought is given to it as a fact than as a problem. A man will pray because he is sure God loves him. He will pray without ceasing, because he loves and trusts without ceasing. He will ask, not as a stranger and alien, but as a son. He will not dictate to God the answer to his prayer. He will again and again ask for nothing but to lie gladly and restfully in his Father's presence. And even when a refusal comes he will interpret it so as to recognise it as a blessing. Love is never blind, such love as this at least; it sees, and sees far and steadily. It can bear up under the strain of the longest silence, and not be surprised even at the quick response of God that seems to wound. It will find the healing long ere the wound goes deep.

“ God answers sharp and sudden on some  
prayers,  
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in  
our face,  
A gauntlet with a gift in it.”

Love finds the gift and prizes it, where  
other eyes see neglect and forgetfulness.

The purpose of prayer then is not to  
change the will of God, but to make us  
fulfil it. The more intimate our friend-  
ship with Him the more wisely shall we  
pray. We shall discern something of  
the design God is working out in us,  
and we shall pray not because we want  
something, but because we are eager to  
take the full profit of our heritage and  
cultivate that spiritual kinship with God  
which the world tempts us to forget.

Enlargement of spirit will come from  
our discovery of the real function of  
prayer. With that enlargement we  
shall think more of the great things  
than of the little things of life. It is  
said that when Emerson visited Carlyle  
in his Scottish home these two great

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minds spent a whole night talking earnestly about God. Great hopes make the soul great, and he who believes that God is his Father should always pray with a strong spiritual hope beating beneath his prayer, and lifting him up to heights among the great everlasting peaks of truth. He will then best understand how the little things of life need not harass him, for God works in these as really as in great outstanding occurrences.

“ And when in silent awe we wait,  
And word and sign forbear,  
The hinges of the golden gate  
Move soundless to our prayer.”



### III.

#### THE CONDITIONS OF PRAYER.

PRAYER is confidential communion between the heavenly Father and His child. The laws of the soul's well-being are as real as those that regulate our physical life. When prayer becomes mechanical it ceases to be prayer. The more natural and personal it is, the more profoundly is its benediction felt. Prayer is essentially a personal solitary act of the human spirit. Occasions should not be few when we are absolutely alone with God. May it not be because we have so largely fallen out of the cultivation of spiritual solitariness that we have so much lost our faith in prayer? When we are afraid of the company of our own hearts we scarcely care to talk to God.

We are not always in the crowd. In the most engrossed life there are breaks and intervals that ought to be wisely utilised, when, as Jeremy Taylor quaintly advises us to do, "every man can build a chapel in his breast, himself the priest, his heart the sacrifice, and the earth he treads on the altar." For prayer is something more than the pious exercise of our hearts in the morning and evening moments. It is conversation, fellowship with God. The reason, we may say, why our Lord spoke frequently of withdrawal from the duties and interests of the busy days, was that it was not possible to maintain the filial spirit otherwise. The door must be shut, and prayer must be offered in secret to the Father. In His own history too He gave the illustration of its necessity. "And it came to pass in those days that He went into the mountain to pray, and He continued all night in prayer to God." He was always laying emphasis on the closeness of the

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relationship between the soul and God. And He made people feel that, while they would shrink from allowing their dearest friends to be the sharers of their sorrows, they could be sure of the attentive ear of One who was willing to wait long and unweariedly by the door of every human life.

Is it not one of the permanent conditions of prayer that it be offered with a clear apprehension of the personal relationship which we occupy to God? In the measure in which we realise that relationship are we able to pray with an intelligent faith. We are not driftwood on an uncontrolled sea, but souls in a moral world ever watched by a Fatherly providence. As the years pass do we not find that this is more and more impressively true? The little child in some hour of its misfortune, with its troubled heart, comes close up to its mother, and taking her aside, stammers out amidst its tears the tale of its unhappiness. You have seen the gentle motherly hand stroke

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the weeping face, and you have heard the comforting words that sent it to its play again bright and happy as before. Have you ever seen a prodigal creep homeward from the far country, and halt at the old doorway wondering and afraid, and then, when received within, wait until all had left the room except the old glad father ere he told the story of his shame? Have you seen the look of forgiveness in the father's face, and heard the affectionate welcome back to the grace and peace and the clean changed life? How natural, spontaneous, informal, it all is. One has a glimpse then of the deep places of the soul. And as the mother comforts the child, as the father restores the son, so are we consoled and received when we turn from the rough highways of the world to the secret place of the Most High. The heart can be content with no lesser good than God.

It is so with other experiences in our history: the loss of friends by death,

and, what is sometimes worse, the alienation of friends through misunderstanding, and those private and half sacred events that make up large sections of our personal history, and which our nearest neighbour never hears of or sees. God's one purpose is to get us by ourselves, to make us stand alone and feel that He loves us with a surpassing personal love. Have we Christian folk of this later day grown afraid of the spiritual solitudes where no voice speaks but God's voice, still, small, whispering? Have we gone down from the great heights of faith which our forefathers trod with so calm and sure a foot? They were strong in prayer, because they were never afraid of the society of their own hearts.

Is the devotional side of our life becoming the feeblest side? We say our prayers, but do we pray? We maintain a pious custom, but do we stay a long time alone with God?

Modern ways throw us so much into

the crowd, that we run the risk of losing sight of the claims of our own personality. From the religious point of view, it certainly is serious that the privacy of life to-day is invaded by so many kinds of interests that leave little leisure for prayer. "We have no time to pray" is a complaint one hears too often, and from the lips of people who ought not to make it. It means that they have no time to think of God, and no care for the real requirements of their life. As Newman was wont to say, the only two facts in the universe are God and the soul. The prayerless life ignores both.

It is not simply that there is a decay of family worship, but of private personal spiritual culture. What is taking its place? Nothing indeed that is its equivalent. "For what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Is there any substitute for God, and any satisfaction for the hunger of the inner nature apart from Him? We are multiplying our engagements and duties; we are shortening our

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times of private prayer. The best claims are being crowded out. We are so much with one another, we have little or no liking to be with ourselves and God. They who never doubt the worth of prayer are the people who are much in solitary intercourse with God. Turn to the biographies of the great men and women of Christian times, and you will discover the secret of their goodness and influence in their prolonged hours of spiritual communion. They knew themselves only when they were in the still light of God. They found their strength in His presence.

It is told of the late General Gordon that each morning during his journey in the Soudan country for half an hour there lay outside his tent a white handkerchief. The whole camp well knew what it meant, and looked upon the little signal with the utmost respect. No foot dared to pass the threshold of that tent while the white guard lay there. No message, however pressing, was to be

delivered. Matters of life and death must wait until that slight signal was taken away. Every one in that camp knew that God and Gordon were communing together. No strength will come to us for the battle of life, no enthusiasm, or calm, or assurance will fill our soul, unless we have such high and solitary interviews with God. "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret will reward thee openly."

Another condition of prayer is unreserved trust.

All prayer is based on faith. It is the utterance of the soul's confidence. It is the acknowledgment that weakness must rest on infinite strength, and that that strength will never fail. Do we always understand the force of our own faith as we pray? Do we remember that it implies we are quite sure that God, being truth, cannot lie, that He will keep His word; that, being a faithful Creator, He



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will not mock or deceive the creature whom He has made ; that, being the only wise God, it will be absolutely impossible for Him to err ; that, having infinite power, He will never fail to accomplish His will ; and that, being perfectly holy, He will not be neglectful of the trustful pleadings of the most sinful child who seeks His face ? It costs us something to surrender ourselves completely to the guidance of God. We believe that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, but what if His reward comes to us in some unexpected and painful form ? Shall we continue to trust ? Is our confidence in God almost always at the breaking point when we do not get what we ask ? Faith in any case is not for the clear noontide, but for the midnight of the soul. It is when we cannot see that we grasp the strong leading hand. Do we not too often test both our prayer and our faith by the answer God gives, and continue both to believe and pray so long as we receive what we expect ?

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The confusion which exists in the minds of many Christian people with respect to prayer arises very largely from apparent inconsistencies in the teaching of Scripture on the subject. These inconsistencies, or rather divergences, are not always observed by them. We read in many passages of the Bible, for example, that prayer to God is absolutely certain to be answered: "Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." "If ye ask anything in My name, I will give it you." "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer believing ye shall receive." We find other passages which indicate that prayer is limited, and that the promises that underlie it are conditional. Only as we comply with certain requirements can our prayer be answered. "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 whensoever ye stand praying, forgive if ye have aught against any one,

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that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Now, whatever may be the apparent teaching of isolated verses, the general drift of Scripture is in the direction of showing that the answering of our prayers is made conditional, first, on our character as suppliants, and, second, on the nature of our prayer itself. There is nothing unreasonable in this. Clearly enough, God cannot answer all prayers. He is not a capricious unthinking Ruler. He is more concerned with the man who prays than with his prayer. It is only in our foolishness and haste we ourselves give indiscriminately to all who beg. Often a refusal is the best boon. The broad principle on which we estimate the worth of prayer is that, since God is eager to secure our highest good, He will, if He deems it necessary, deny our request or accede to it. Trust has naturally a drawing power upon the heart of God, and He will honour the simplicity of our trust. He will not violate the nature of

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man. He made that nature, and made it that it might be completely possessed and controlled by Himself, but He wishes that His method of training shall be accepted by us as the best method. The mother will not make herself unmotherly by thrusting from her the weak clinging hand of her child. She will hold it all the more firmly that she cannot put within his fingers the things the little mouth has pleaded for. Her refusal is educating the child to believe in a love wiser, larger, than his own wishes. Our prayers to God are part of the discipline to which He is pleased to subject our faith. Often those who have hoped most in Him have been those whom He has kept waiting long in the silence.

Our prayers, therefore, will move within the limits of God's promises and with a wise appreciation of our real worth to God. We shall learn to ask those things that are best for our spiritual equipment as His children. We shall recognise that all His promises have

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conditions attached to them. Prayer will never be used by us as a talisman, a secret charm which is thought to win for us what we wish, but a gateway into God's heart, and thereby into our own. We shall be more eager to find Him than to enjoy His benefits. Our prayer will be, as Augustine says it is, "our conversation with God. When we read, God speaks to us ; when we pray, we speak to God." If we trusted less in the virtue of our own prayer, and more in the Father whose love encompasses our lives, both our trust and our prayer would be a richer joy to us than probably they are.

It is the overloaded hearts that are apt to pray the least. Life can easily be made to go down ; our soul readily cleaveth unto the dust. We cannot keep ourselves up except by stretching out to the unseen infinite Father. Prayer therefore is the energy of the soul, a passion of desire, an agony of entreaty, a wrestling with God. Until we learn that we are on His side, and our will is

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completely His. The prayer of faith saves by its very persistence, its unwearied and unrelaxing confidence in God's willingness and love. It is that prayer that has cleansed and renewed the weakest and the worst of the children of men. In this wise did the saints and martyrs call on God in the hour of their calamity. So mothers have pleaded for their children when the world was tempting their innocent feet to stray into perilous ways. So men and women everywhere have cried for God's light and pity for the wanderer; and friends far away from the old home for the hearts they have left behind. So have repentant, shamed souls cried for the Good Shepherd to come to their bleak wilderness and lead them to rest and God. So prayed the Holy Christ when the pressure of the world's woe lay painfully upon Him in Gethsemane. So not infrequently must we call on God, "battering the gates of Heaven with storms of prayer."

When we reflect that a prayer is great in proportion as its faith is simple, we begin to suspect that we have not always spoken to God with undoubting soul. If this is not an age of much prayer, it is because it is not an age of much faith. We hurry and toil and fret, and are overborne by our burdens. We think we can live by bread alone, and we care not to hear God's word. We lose in those qualities most needed for living well, calmness, depth and force. We grow shallow in our thoughts about the great truths of life; we grow distracted in our aims; our labour is done half-heartedly; there is no ring in our message to our fellows, and no victorious power within our life. Cultivate the confiding mood. Look out of yourself, for your heart makes but a small world. Keep yourself in the love of God by building up yourself on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost. Much lies within your own power. You can make yourself trustful or unbelieving, prayerful or prayerless.

Your faith will inspire your prayer, and your prayer will vitalise your faith.

“When I feel,” says Luther, “that I am become cold and indisposed to prayer by reason of other business and thought, I take my psalter and run into my chamber, or if day and season serve, into the Church to the multitude, and begin to repeat to myself—just as children use—the ten Commandments, the Creed, and, according as I have time, some sayings of Christ, or of Paul, or some Psalms. Therefore it is well to let prayer be the first employment in the early morning and the last in the evening. Avoid diligently those false and deceptive thoughts which say, ‘Wait a little, and I will pray an hour hence; I must perform this, or that.’ For with such thoughts a man quits prayer for business, which lays hold of and entangles him, so that he comes not to pray the whole day long.”

The completeness and vigour of our surrender to God will pass into our briefest



prayer. Our whole self will be in our cry. What our prayers need is intensity of conviction; steadiness of belief in God our Father, not only as the hearer of prayer, but as the rewarder of it. "God fails not," says Jeremy Taylor, "to sow blessings in the long furrows." Let us go deep and far into our life, and our prayers will never be lacking in strong confidence. We shall remember we are speaking to God, and we shall speak to Him with all our heart.

"An arrow," says Bishop Hall, "if it be drawn up but a little way goes not far, but if it be pulled up to the head flies swiftly and pierces deep. Thus prayer, if it be only dribbled forth from careless lips, falls at our feet. It is not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they be; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they be; nor the music of our prayers, how sweet our voice may be; nor the logic of our prayers, how argu-

mentative they may be ; nor the method of our prayers, how orderly they may be ; nor even the divinity of our prayers, how good the doctrine may be—which God cares for. He looks not for the horny knees which James is said to have had through the assiduity of prayer. We might be like Bartholomew, who is said to have had a hundred prayers for the morning and as many for the evening, and all might be of no avail. Fervency of spirit is that which availeth much.”

There are other conditions which cannot be neglected. Humility is an accompaniment of all believing prayer, that wholesome self-abasement which carries with it not merely a strong sense of individual unworthiness and penitence, but a recognition of God’s surpassing holiness, and hatred of all in human character that wastes and degrades life. Sincerity too is part of the life of prayer. We put no more into our words than they mean, and we put no less. Truth in the inward parts will show itself

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in truth in the outward expression. We cannot pretend to pray and think we pray acceptably. Nowhere more than at the throne of grace ought a man to be his real self. "Surely God will not hear vanity; neither will the Almighty regard it. If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me." We must exercise keen mental vigilance while we pray. It is so easy to become distracted. Prayer is so much a customary act, a thing of times and seasons, that it can quickly degenerate into routine. Devout words and phrases fall from our lips mechanically; our petitions take set forms; we ask for the same blessings day after day. We have no wide spiritual outlook. Our daily prayer is not much more than "the sad mechanic exercise" of our lips. We give little or no room for the play of fresh faith and hope. We see no wide expanse of promises. We drift about the gate of heaven, moored indeed, but by a loose and lengthening cable. We are not fixed in a fast anchorage.

Our prayer aims at nothing and so gains nothing. Our lack of spiritual self-control destroys zest and faith in acts of fellowship with God.

The truth is, prayer should not be an isolated periodic act of the soul, but its constant habit and way. Christ never asks us to attempt the impossible. To pray without ceasing simply means to have God in all our thoughts, to remember His watchful, fatherly care: to believe that He works in the minutest events of our daily life, as in our great outstanding joys and full hours of prosperity. To spiritualise commonplace incidents, to see the wisdom of His mind in the directions He gives to our careers, is to feel that all about our life there is a bracing, vital atmosphere of holiness. A place and a time for shutting out the world, and shutting ourselves in with God, will constantly and increasingly summon us to perform this necessary work, and even compel us to do it. Are we not often strangers to ourselves, simply

because we have made no stated appointments with our own minds and hearts?

And if prayer is to be effectual, our interviews with ourselves should be characterised by simplicity and courage—simplicity, that our minds may not throw a dust of generalities over our thinking, in the midst of which we retreat from close encounters; and courage, that we may know the worst about ourselves and place our finger on our weaknesses, and say, “thou ailest here, and here.” The truth is always sufficient to unmask us, and disarm us, and give us humility and growth in grace, if we will but give it a chance. Hold yourself, while you meditate, to simple questions about yourself. Do not confuse the real issue of your life in the multitude or obscurity of your own thoughts. You have gained much—more indeed than you can at once measure—when you have learned to deal honestly with your own heart, and to hold it firmly to simple facts which admit of no argument and

no evasion. To whom am I, as a sinner, speaking? What is the unaffected and genuine wish of my soul? What value does God place on my life? How do I myself value it? Why am I praying at all?

## IV.

### DIFFICULTIES OF PRAYER.

THE difficulties of prayer are such as belong to the relationship which the finite holds to the infinite. It would be surprising if, in his intercourse with God questions did not arise in man's mind regarding the significance and value of it. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" The very circumstance that he can speak to the Unseen suggests problems which he cannot solve. What is the Unseen? Who is God? How does He act with reference to the needs of the human spirit? Can He answer conflicting prayers? Does He so control all things that nature and providence become the servants of man?

Notwithstanding his difficulties man continues to pray. The instinct of

prayer cannot be repressed even by its embarrassments. When we are most perplexed about prayer we still believe prayer to be a power. The disciples saw the force of prayer when they asked their Master to teach them to pray. We may be sure they were not without their misgivings at times. The world and life burdened them, so also did the long silence of God.

The more personal difficulties that gather round the subject of prayer spring from our sense of doubt, and the feeling that we are of so little account that it is scarcely possible the Almighty can take any interest in us. This difficulty is very common and will reappear with every generation. But it may be said in answer to it, that it is our own littleness that makes us pray. If we knew more, we should seek less. It is because we are ignorant that we want to know. It is because we are poor and needy that we are sure the Lord thinketh upon us.



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Some one has said that the theology of the Old Testament lies in its personal pronouns. When we lose the recognition of our own individual value, we lose the sense of our kinship with God. A child is unnatural who never asks his father for anything. The father is unnatural who never attends to his child. If man's prayer is the irrepressible utterance of his soul, has God no heart to listen to it? Where should the physician be but by the bedside of the weak? Where should the lifeboat be but where men are struggling for safety? Where should the shepherd be but in the dangerous place where the lost lamb is? Where should God be but beside His own in the hour of danger?

Were He an impassive king, apathetic and remote, you might well doubt both the reality of His care for you and the efficacy of your own prayer; but that is not your conception of God, nor is it the highest conception. God is your Father, and if you believe this you will

understand that the relationship between Him and you makes it impossible that He should turn your prayer from Himself or His mercy from you. Whether He answers your prayer or not, should not, after all, be your main anxiety, but whether you are keeping firmly and clearly in your mind the truth that He loves you as much as if there were no others in His world to love. You cannot exaggerate that love. It is special, immediate, unsleeping, strong. If He gave His best gift for your personal salvation, He will with that gift also freely give you all things. Trust His knowledge: you will get from Him not what you want but what you need. You can never see through what divine mysteries of refusal and compensation and pain the great Father of us all may be carrying out His vast plan: but the words "God is love" ought to contain to every doubting soul the solution of all hard questions.

The difficulty most prominent in our

time is that which is founded on the scientific conception of law. We can scarcely estimate the injurious influence of this conception. It has made people narrow the range of prayer. It has made them hesitate to pray. It has restrained their liberty in prayer. It has beclouded their vision of God. It has materialised their faith and spiritual outlook. "Nature," it is said, "is uniform in its working. Everything in the universe is arranged in accordance with fixed, unvarying laws. Effect follows cause in regular, unbroken order. That order cannot be violated at the wish of man. To suppose that it can, is to say that caprice rules all things. It is absurd to think that God will alter the constitution of the universe at the request of any man or woman. The sun rises and sets, the tides ebb and flow, disease results invariably from certain specific physical conditions, the seasons come in unchanging order, the great machine of the universe moves on in

steady, undeviating course, and no human power can avail to change it. Prayer therefore is of no value beyond the result which it produces in the thought and feeling of him who prays." This is an argument which will have no weight with many people. Their faith is so massive and so simple that they will never limit their requests. They are quite sure that to him that believeth all things are possible. But the argument disturbs the peace of other minds. And yet, is it so very hurtful as it looks? Does it leave no room for prayer? Does it even limit the scope of our prayer?

It is to beg the question to say that we know that God governs this world by fixed laws. That is just the truth our science is endeavouring to discover, and it is very far from having thoroughly explored the universe. What we have found out is that there is a regular recurrence of cause and effect in the material phenomena of the world; but it cannot be said that in the higher life

of mind and feeling there is the same rigid procedure and manifestation of law. What is law? It is not, as some almost seem to imagine, very much like a cast-iron rod running straight through material and moral things and holding them together in definite and fixed places; something that you cannot bend or break or in the least degree alter. A law is the expression of the thought and will of God. It is only a particular method of working, not a power. Our modern scientific belief in the unity of nature and the reign of law is only another way of stating the truth that we recognise that this world is maintained and controlled, as it was created, by a Being who is all-powerful and everywhere present. In the last resort science is only possible on the assumption that God is constantly in touch with Nature; and although, as Jowett once said, "we cannot see where the hand or finger may be inserted as in a cracked jar," yet our inability to perceive how

God can and does act, does not warrant us in believing that He does not act.

As a matter of experience, nothing is so variable as natural law. No scientific man would sign his name to a weather forecast and affirm that it would be absolutely verified ere the day was done. He can only conjecture and state what is probable. We do not know all about God's laws and His processes of working, and we may be silent until we know. There is still large room for faith. We can, and do, change these laws as we wish. We use them for our good. Our commerce, our industry, our civilisation, are made to depend on the service which these laws render to us. We touch the clouds and bring the lightning down and "put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes." We make the laws of heat and light and electric force obey us and do our will. We combine and manipulate and so direct these laws that they may minister to our happiness and comfort. We can divert

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a river from its course and cause a barren wilderness to rejoice and blossom as the rose. We can desolate a fertile land and alter a thousand landscapes. We can, by planting forests, bring down clouds and rain, and so change a climate. Human achievements now have almost a supernatural look.

If we can do so much, can God do less or more? Is He the prisoner of His own laws, held fast by the forces He has made? Is the world a vast machine which its Maker cannot control? Science cannot explain what force is, nor how its changes of form are brought about, and is there any reason against our supposing that God may employ the forces of Nature to meet the changing requirements of His moral government? May the divine mind not have other purposes to fulfil than those that are expressed in the works we see? May there not be laws higher than the laws which we have discovered, and may not the will of God, which is before and

beyond all things, make these, by processes we cannot imagine, serve the great ends of His providence? He is a living God and Nature is ever evolving, and we may surely believe that His relation to the thing He has made is close and operative and constant. For aught that we know to the contrary God may employ the forces of Nature to carry forward and complete the purposes He has in view in His moral government of His children. We know so little of them that we dare not say He does not so use them, and we are so sure of His goodness and power that we shall hesitate to disbelieve that He can do all things.

“Religious people,” says Sir Oliver Lodge, “seem to be losing some of their faith in prayer: they think it scientific not to pray in the sense of simple petition. They may be right: it may be the highest attitude never to ask for anything specific, only for acquiescence. If saints feel it so they are doubtless right, but so far as ordinary science has



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anything to say to the contrary a more childlike attitude might turn out truer, more in accordance with the total scheme. Prayer for a fancied good that might really be an injury would be foolish; prayer for breach of law would be not foolish only but profane: but who are we to dogmatise too positively concerning law? A martyr may have prayed that he should not feel the fire. Can it be doubted that, whether through what we call hypnotic suggestion or by some other name, the granting of it was at least possible? Prayer, we have been told, is a mighty engine of achievement, but we have ceased to believe it. Why should we be so incredulous? Even in medicine, for instance, it is not really absurd to suggest that drugs and no prayer may be almost as foolish as prayer and no drugs. The whole truth may be completer and saner than the sectaries dream: more things may be

“Wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of.”

On any hypothesis it must be to the Lord that we pray—to the highest we know or can conceive; but the answer shall come in ways we do not know, and there must always be a far higher than ever we can conceive.”\*

It is inspiring to hear from this distinguished man of science the assurance that we may still continue to pray, notwithstanding all we have learned about the laws of Nature. The Law-giver must needs be greater than His laws, and in this case He is not only the hearer of prayer but our Father in heaven; and our prayer is intended as much to enable us to act with Him in our life, as to make us sure that He listens.

The difficulty which gathers round this idea of fixed natural law was probably accentuated by the well-known suggestion which the late Professor Tyndall made in connection with the value of prayer. He proposed that the efficacy of prayer

\* *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1903.

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should be scientifically tested in a hospital. The test was to take this form. Two wards were to be chosen and placed under the care of able and known physicians. The patients in these wards were to be sufferers from those diseases which are most thoroughly understood, and the mortality rates of which are best ascertained : the treatment in both wards was to be precisely the same, and to continue so during a period of not less than three to five years. For the inmates of one ward prayers were to be offered, for those of the other no prayers were to be offered, and the rate of mortality in both was to be compared at the close of the fixed period. This scientific experiment, it was declared, would conclusively prove whether prayer was of use or not. The challenge was thought by many to be a fair one, and the experiment was regarded as offering a final settlement of much of the difficulty about prayer.

And in some form, more or less like

this, it is thought by many that the true test of the utility of prayer must lie. To begin with, is such an experiment possible? Is it within the power of the most competent medical men to make such a diagnosis of the condition of certain sufferers as to say absolutely that two sets of patients in a hospital have precisely the same chances of recovery or death? Would it even be possible to select out of a great multitude of people a number of sufferers whose environment, career, constitutional peculiarities, hereditary tendencies, moral conduct, physical sensitiveness, would in the case of each be exactly similar? Could absolute accuracy with respect to atmosphere, drugs, food, nursing, rest, sleep, be secured during the whole process of such an experiment? It is beyond the resources of the best organised hospital.

And there is another fact to be considered.

How would it be possible to prevent

prayer being offered for all these patients? Can we think of any sincere Christian who was made aware of this proposed experiment refusing to make intercession for a certain number of these sufferers, but not for others? Would this not be treacherous to his own feeling of brotherly love, not to say anything of his loyalty to God? How could any earnest-minded man submit to have his faith so basely degraded, or his prayers forbidden?

Further, these patients would have to be told of the experiment and the reason for it. Think of the effect of the announcement made to one of these patients: "For three years you are not to pray for yourself, nor any of your fellow sufferers in this ward, and you are not to ask anyone to pray for you." If there was any devout heart in that unprayed-for ward, one earnest word of his to God would spoil the whole plan. And knowing that he was not prayed for, the very fact that another ward was

of set purpose within the scope of some people's prayers would revive his own longing, and he would be unable to stifle his own desire for health and life.

The proposal from first to last was absurd, and it is surprising that it should ever have been entertained. It showed not merely a wrong notion of prayer, but also of God, and of the life of faith in the heart of man. It was the old temptation, Make these stones bread. It implied that people would only believe God when He did what they insisted He should do: that they had no faith in prayer or God now, but were quite willing to leave it an open question for five years at the most. Its assumption that the power and truth of God could be proved by experiment, and that prayer could be made a subject of materialistic law, only showed how completely the whole problem had been misunderstood, and what a defective idea its supporters had of spiritual life, and the relationship between a trustful

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soul and God. Yet the influence of this suggestion went very far at the time that it was made, and its effect can be seen in the suspicion that is in many people's minds still, that we can only estimate the efficacy of prayer by its visible and material results.

The mere fact that one has difficulties with respect to prayer in no way invalidates the truthfulness or efficacy of prayer. One can easily raise objections against prayer, but be quite unable to explain why that mother asks so eagerly that God would save her fever-stricken child. It is no soothing knowledge to her to inform her that the life of her little one depends on the action of fixed laws, when she knows that her child's recovery is within the power of God, and it is worth her while to pray. Explain her agony and you will find out why she prays. There is not much indeed in our knowledge and experience, that we cannot at some time or other call in question. And so far as the utility of prayer is

concerned the main objections to it have arisen from an inadequate apprehension of its nature and an incomplete induction of facts.

That there are mysteries in prayer is not an exceptional thing. All life is a mystery. The ways of the human soul are a mystery. Turn where we will we find the universe more baffling than it looks. For

“ All experience is an arch wherethro’  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin  
fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.”

Our knowledge has its boundaries, our ignorance has none. What we know of any subject may be said to be very much less than what we do not know. Our minds do not carry us far through this universe. There are roads yet unmade and untrodden. The horizon is still as distant as before.

To say that prayer is useless because it seems to make no difference in our life—it does not bring us health, or



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prosperity, when we ask for these, and they who never ask at all get on as well without praying as we do who pray—is a short and unsatisfactory way of solving the problem of prayer. No person, as we have seen, who knows God and seeks agreement with God's will, will ever make prayer a test by which personal success and comfort are to be measured. Besides, there may be results which we cannot see, and in saying that we have prayed and failed, we may be confessing that we have gone through a form that had neither spiritual faith nor hope in the heart of it. And farther, while you cannot prove the worth or worthlessness of prayer by statistics, it remains true that the Christian nations are the great nations, and the people who live in communion with Christ and pray in His name are the people who have done most for the world. The fact that Christianity has infused a new life into the world is just another way of saying that prayer has changed and elevated

character, and made men and women do things in the strength of God they could never have done without it.

The world is being blessed every day in answer to human prayers. These prayers are like the rain-clouds lying across the sky, that we cannot well see until the rain falls. There is abundant moisture in that great cloudland above us, but it is not visible until condensed. The earnest, trustful supplications of the million hearts all over the world that love the Father and continually call upon Him, break into showers of blessing now, to-morrow, here, there, we know not where or when. We toil and suffer, we disbelieve and hope; but all the while, though we may not be conscious of it, our lives are helped in answer to the pleadings of God's praying folk, and a blessing we never asked or sought has come.

No true and honest prayer is ever lost. For the wise Father of us all has woven natural forces and human prayers into

the long web of His purpose so skilfully, and makes the outcome of blessing so habitual, that we forget to be grateful. The response comes like the dawn or the dew. We are not startled by sudden displays of the work He is doing for us ; but only guarded, fed, guided, sheltered, comforted by means of a far-reaching, gracious plan, a thousand times more wonderful than any mere miracle. Yet we so often forget to pray and so seldom think of the Father !

## V.

### THE GAIN OF PRAYER.

It must always be impossible to recount the blessings that are derived from private or public prayer. For clearly enough the only real test of the worth of prayer is that which tests the character of our prayers themselves—their sincerity, hopefulness, faith, or their lack of these elements. The mood makes the suppliant. If the essential to all true prayer be our unconditional surrender to the Father's will, then the richest gain we reap from prayer will be a closer agreement with the great loving heart that wants to hear us speak. This is the consummation of the earnest life. We pray to be, not to get. Your prayer has its richest satisfaction in bringing you close to God. It is not so

much gifts you seek, as Him. You pray for very desirable things, for money, success, health, ease, and there is scarcely a supplication you make that has not its personal ambition, but the moment these wants become the dominant forces in your prayer, His will fades from your desire, and you must expect to be sent empty away.

There is another common mistake. Most of us have a very comfortable but not very well sustained idea that our prayers go straight to God, and that with respect to the subject of our prayer He takes into consideration nothing beyond our own desires and petitions. We seldom give room to the thought that something in ourselves may be actually operating against the virtue of our own requests. We may be hindering the fulfilment of our own prayers. Augustine's example has been repeated frequently in prayer. "Lord, convert me, but not yet." It was said of some in the later days of the Old Testament that

“they feared the Lord, but served other gods.” We may join in asking for spiritual revival and enlightenment in the Church, for fuller consecration of ourselves to Christian duty among the children, in our own homes, in our congregation, and all the while may allow to lie within us a reluctance which says, “Not yet: to grant this petition means self-denial, and I am not prepared for it; it means earnest effort to equip ourselves for harder service; it means a strenuous watchful culture of the soul, and I prefer to keep on at the present rate, though I am far from satisfied with it.” Perhaps we should often be surprised and pained if God took us always at our word, and answered our prayers in the exactness of their own terms.

“ We, ignorant of ourselves,  
Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers  
Deny us for our good ; so find we profit  
By losing of our prayers.”

Our weaknesses and selfishness, our negligences and our half-heartedness,

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have a voice as truly as have our serious longings, and God hears these and sometimes shows us how they contradict our spoken prayers. We pray our doubts as much as our beliefs.

But are not some prayers unheard? No, but there are some that are unanswered. Why should we faint and doubt because it is so? "No" is as much an answer as "Yes." There are occasions in our life when God's best gift to us is His silence. The only practical difficulty is to know how to interpret a refusal. You do not give your watch to your child simply because he cries for it, and your refusal is not prompted by the feeling that your child is less precious to you than your watch, but because he is not capable of enjoying its use. When he is ready to know its purpose, his request will have a meaning. The virtue of any prayer is seen in the patience that underlies it, and that intelligent hopefulness that through the long and

often silent years is sure that God's wisdom is unerring.

Probably, however, the objection to the advantage of prayer which is most felt is one which is so individual that it cannot be met in any uniform way. It is that which is grounded on the circumstance that many prayers earnestly offered never seem to be answered. A mother in the quiet night cries to God to spare her sick child's life, and in the morning she is looking through her tears on her little sweet treasure, beautiful in death. A father yearning for his long absent son calls anxiously to God to save him, but dies and neither sees him nor has any knowledge of the fruit of all his praying. A ship founders, and all on board perish, though they call to Heaven with a more piercing wail than the wind makes in the rigging of their doomed vessel. When the story is told us the question at once arises : Is there a God who sees, and hears, and rules ? Has He any pity ? Does His pity grow to a



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sovereign power in the desperate moments of human need? Such cases as these are among the oppressive facts of human history, and are made all the more perplexing to us by our ignorance both of the nature and the extent of God's designs. If we only knew God's will, and the methods by which He carries it out, and the range it covers, "the burden of the mystery" would be less severe upon our spirits. We can but cling in a difficulty like this to the principle on which we all more or less consciously act, that if all our prayers were answered precisely as we wished, this world would not be a place of moral discipline, but merely a playground for the ruinous game of self-satisfaction. People would pray, not because they wished to be close to God's heart, but because they wished an easy comfort.

God will not grant us everything we ask, but all the same in nothing are we to be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving we are

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to let our requests be made known unto God. He has not put His omnipotence into the hands of every man who prays to Him. The Bible is full of promises, but it tells us of many unanswered prayers. To listen to a promise is one thing ; to see how it is to be fulfilled is another. The one act requires faith, the other patience ; and underneath and through our prayer should be as much patience as faith. The answer to your prayer may come as certainly through failure as through success, and bad fortune may be as real a blessing to you as good fortune. David fasted and prayed, but his little child died. Paul wished freedom from his thorn in the flesh, and eagerly asked God to remove it, but it was not removed. Our Lord Himself prayed in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might be taken from Him undrained, but it was not ; He had to drink it to the dregs. Our prayer has reached its fullest strength when we prefer the Father's will to the most imperious demand of our

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wild desires. Parents seek that their children should have those things that build up their characters in goodness, and purity, and honourable service. They like to be asked to give them these. Our homes are ruled and administered on the principle that their right government has a twofold end, one which is seen and the other which is not seen. One recognises present and immediate gratification, the other a future and permanent good. And so we give and refuse in accordance with that principle.

If a human analogy can help us to explain the divine method we may reverently say that in some such way as this does God deal with us when we pray. Our little children in their ignorance make many a foolish request, but we do not insist they shall ask for nothing again. We simply by our refusal train them to ask better, and to confide in a larger wisdom than their own. We sometimes ask God to deliver us from things that do not necessarily injure the

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soul, however unpleasant and dangerous they look, such as illness, poverty, bad business, loss, and death. And God does not hear our prayer. It takes us long to see that our prayer is best answered, not by what it does for us externally, but by what it effects in our mind and heart, in the way we look at life, and the way we trust God. We can never fail, however, to have the answer to our prayer when we ask to be delivered from sin, and callousness of spirit, and pride, and unbelief, for these touch us in our divinest part and imperil the soul's beauty and security. God loves our good more than our happiness, and works more for the sake of securing in us a childlike disposition than comfortable circumstances. Some of us may have said with Jean Ingelow: "I have lived to thank God that all my prayers have not been answered."

The more we wait on Him and persuade ourselves of His unerring goodness the more clearly will it appear to us that He

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denies us nothing but with the view of giving us something better. We cannot say why in this particular instance and in that He has not been pleased to answer our earnest believing prayer, but there is a significance in His refusal which, at least, must be concerned with the spiritual well-being of the heart that prayed. Much goes to the education of the children who trust Him, and not all of them are apt disciples in His school. As saintly Thomas Erskine says, "if it has taken God untold ages to make a piece of old red sandstone, how long will it take Him to perfect a human soul." With every true prayer God has more to do than the person who prays, and therefore every true prayer carries part of its own answer. "God," as the old mystics loved to say, "is an unutterable sigh in the innermost depth of the soul." What God prompts within us He knows how to meet. We learn slowly to put away childish things from our mind when we pray, and our main desire is that He

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will, in ways that He Himself deems best, give us that which will more deeply and visibly impress on our character the strength and calm of Christ, and arm us for the battle and make us more than conquerors in it.

Besides, we do not always think when we pray of the largeness of God's moral kingdom and the variety and complicated nature of the purposes that underlie His education of the human race. The answer to our prayer may lie beyond the sphere of time, and may be concerned as vitally with others' good as with our own. I cannot prescribe the direction in which God's response to my entreaty is to come, and yet remain faithfully acquiescent in His will. What I ask for myself may be given in the case of another whose necessity is greater than mine, and whose spirit, for aught I know, needs larger discipline than mine. Who made us to differ but the God who will not fail to meet our different wants, and so work out His design in the ultimate

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good of all the earth? If my neighbour's prayer seems to contradict my prayer, he and I, if we sincerely love God, will willingly rest in His unseen goodness, though one request is denied while the other is granted. It is those who think greatly about God who pray greatly, quite sure that never has God forgotten to love, and He is too wise not to know. For your faith in God, more especially in your hours of prayer, is not something for the daylight, when the weather is sunny and clear, but for the dismal night, when the fogs are out, and the rain drips heavily, and you cannot see and have to pause to make sure of your way. That soul has risen to a great height of confidence who through all the years never doubts God's power and knowledge and love, and who recognises the difference between believing there is no solution of his difficulties and believing that in the mind of God there is a thought for each child of His, and a purpose, and a blessedness.

“ The man who learns what life can teach  
Shall see beyond his soul at last,  
Shall mix with all that is, and reach  
A secret hidden from the past.

“ For more than all we ask we find,  
And more than triumph ends our strife ;  
Seek on, for there are worlds behind,  
Seek on, and reach the source of life.

“ At one with earth and heaven, turn  
In widening circles, human soul ;  
Forget the Here and Now, and learn  
At last to contemplate the whole.”

And if we only remembered that even a spiritual virtue for which we have prayed grows but slowly in our life, we should not be so ready to give up the Christian struggle. The soul of man is hard soil. The best things of God—the fruits of the Spirit—grow in it fitfully. You ask for peace, and likeness to Christ, and love to your neighbour, and meekness of speech and disposition, and patience ; but do you ever think of the long road that lies between your prayer and its answer, and how great the distance must needs be between the thing



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you sow and the reaping of it? Such a prayer means that you are prepared for conflict with a world which at every point resists you and will not let God's things grow within you; that you are watchful against sudden uprootings, and gusts of temptation, and drowsy hours, and besetting sins. It means that you have in large part to answer your own prayer, to see that your character is not adverse to its spirit; that your private devotions are not contradicted by your public habits; that your secular life is not killing your spiritual life; that, in short, you are not praying one way and living another. You must work out your own salvation in partnership with God, and as the growth in you of any Christian virtue is a complex unfolding, you must constantly watch as well as unceasingly pray.

Can we ever go wrong if, sitting at Christ's feet, we learn of Him our lesson of prayer? Prayer constituted the most impressive incident in His career. It

was the atmosphere of all His life. He went up into a mountain apart to pray. He prayed and healed; He prayed and taught; He prayed and wept. Prayer was the first and last act of every day. Surely what was a necessity and joy to Him can never be less than that to us. All arguments against the utility of prayer are dissipated by these two indisputable facts: God is our Father; Jesus Christ prayed. It almost looks as if our Lord's quietest times were when He was busy among the crowd, teaching them, healing them, comforting them, and that the times of agony and wrestling came when the day's work was done, and men had gone to rest, and He was wakeful in the energy of supplication and intercession "with strong cries and tears." He was never so calm as when He stood before Pilate and the priests. He had gained that calmness in solitary fellowship with God.

The servant in this regard is not greater than his Lord. Christ has

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shown us the way to pray as much as the way to live. Prayer with Him was an absolute and loving surrender to God's will. He knows that hesitancy we so often feel that shrinks from accepting the cup. He knows how painful looks the will of God when we are hoping for happy things. He knows the burden and perplexity of unanswered prayers. He is touched in all points as we are, and certainly in this point of persistent and hopeful prayer. Have you lost your faith in prayer? Watch with Christ one hour in Gethsemane. His is a conflict of soul not less exhausting than yours. He too has a fear that makes Him almost step back from the sorrow He has long foreseen. The victory He gained in prayer He will share with you.

Our affection for our friend is not shown by having confidence in him when all appearances are in his favour. We trust him when all suspect him. We vindicate him when he is calumniated. Can it be otherwise with our feeling and

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attitude to God? To be true to Him when we never see Him; through all the slow years to trust Him strongly when His ways seem strange; to accept His will when it lies athwart our fondest wishes; to speak to Him much in a long distress though He seems only to listen, and hardly that, and never a hand is raised to help; to confide in Him though it looks as if He were slaying us, and no explanation given of our pain—that is the noblest heroism of the soul. It brings out that which is the root of the highest character and experience. “The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace,” said one man to another in a day of sore fatigue and loneliness. “Thank you, my friend, for your prayer,” was the reply. “I hope I have learned always to think and speak kindly of Him behind His back.” They indeed have a great reward who can hold to Him in loving constancy though they see not the shining of His face.

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As the spirit of Christ's life passes into our life our prayers come from our heart with a steadier joy. Likeness to Him must in the end make our weakest prayer more like His will. We shall learn to pray according to His mind. "Thy will be done" will be in the heart of every prayer. The closer our correspondence with Him the less irksome will grow the tasks of the soul. To pray His prayer, that which has in all the Christian ages been repeated and loved as the Lord's prayer, will be to pray our own. The limits it imposes on selfish asking we shall place upon our own desires, and the first things of God's mind will be accepted as the first things of ours. We shall discover how true it is, as Maurice says, "the Lord's prayer is not, as some fancy, the easiest and most natural of all devout utterances. It may be committed to memory quickly, but it is slowly learned by heart."

The early Christian evangelists of Scotland, on their long missionary

voyages from Iona, found their burdens grow lighter, and their fears become less dismal, and their hopes break into a warm enthusiasm, when they reached the most difficult part of the way, and they said to one another, "The secret prayers of our aged master, Columba, meet us here at the points where we need them most." If we were but unchangeably confident in God we should be conscious again and again in our neediest hours of the in-breathing into our feeble life of the strength of Jesus Christ. Our faith would fail not, because He prayed for us when events seemed conspiring to make it fail. Our life, hid with Him in God, would be subdued, assured, devoted, adding to its faith in Him a knowledge of Him that would make all our way a friendly walk with God.

It is told of Abraham Lincoln that during the severest crisis of the civil war in America a poor desolate widow came to him to beg that she might have restored to her a son out of the army

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whom she needed. She pleaded her sorrows, her fear, her poverty, the help this son would be to her, and the good President listened tenderly and patiently. Then in a low gentle voice he said to her, "My dear madam, it is true you suffer; you never suffered so much. I suffer; I never suffered so much. We all suffer, and have got to suffer until this nation is brought through. We must all bear our part." Then more privately he put into her hand aid from his own purse, and sent her away denied yet comforted. She felt that there was no want of sympathy, and she was roused by his generous words to enter into the large fellowship of suffering for a whole nation's cause. Do we ever think that through our ungranted prayers we sometimes are being brought more into the conflicts and painful advancement of the world? "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God"; and if we pray to the suffering Saviour for personal

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benefit we must sometimes receive this sympathetic acquiescence, this uplift into the fellowship of His sufferings, and look forward to the more perfect day when He shall have subdued all things to Himself.

Christ Himself has described the ideal life of prayer: "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." Union to Him will give us the rule of prayer. What is not in agreement with His love of us cannot be for us. That is what is meant by praying in Christ's name. We rise for the moment to His spiritual level, we kneel by His side, we put ourselves in His place, and we so try to think His thoughts that we, in reverence and humility, may imagine what His prayer would be. This too is the Christian ideal of prayer, and it is perhaps because we have but seldom risen to it that our prayers have been so often feeble and ineffective. To pray in our own name would be to state our



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own feelings and base our wants upon them ; to pray in Christ's name is to say that we seek just what He seeks and wish our life kept free from all that He does not approve.

It is on the heights we see farthest, and are freshened by the bracing winds. Labour as we will, we cannot brush the mists away that gather in the valleys. By climbing upward we look over them altogether. We struggle long and vigorously with some wrong tendency in our nature, some habit that is fettering us, and we do not see that it would quickly lose its hold upon us if we ascended into a purer, stronger air.

It is a free life we must needs live if we are to live worthily at all. We have not so much as we ought to have of the liberty of the children of God in praying. There are chains about our feet. We move slowly and often with a painful halt. Our religious progress is fitful and unsteady. We forecast too much, and we trust too little. The promises

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of God, remember, are not addressed to our reason, but to our hope and affection. They are not responses to our technical definition of prayer, but are designed to produce in us that filial spirit which will enable us to approach God as children without misgiving and disappointment. He interprets our most halting prayer aright. He never misreads our ignorance, or is impatient at our importunity. But the more intimately we know Him, the more wisely shall we speak to Him. Our danger to-day is, that we are doing too much and praying too little. We are tempted even to make our good works a substitute for prayer. Some people are so much occupied in serving Christ, in teaching in Sunday-schools, in labouring among the careless, in combating the open evils of society, that they have no time to pray, or very little. Work, even religious work, is no substitute for prayer. The omission injures our best efforts. It is quite true we can pray in a minute, and be sure of

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God's answer, but there is a power that we acquire by unhurried prolonged intercourse with God which comes to us in no other way, and in proportion as we fail to secure that do we fail to do our best work.

“ We bow to the man who kneels,” says Victor Hugo. Where is the holy ground in our home, in our leisure, in our work? Once in a week doubtless we earnestly ask God's forgiveness, and are perhaps conscious of a rising within us towards a better life and a desire to be more spiritual and serious in our thoughts and ways; but we give God the moments, and the world takes the hours. We exculpate ourselves, we think, by saying work is pressing, and the day is short, and engrossing duties fill it, and engagements must be met, and letters written, and journeys taken, and friends visited, and in the necessary labour of life there is no margin for devotion. Even our family worship is curtailed, and our public worship of God is more fitful than we can justify.

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But in answer to such excuses may we not ask if there is not a life which is life indeed? Can we live for the day by means of bread alone? Busy, say we; but are we rather beasts of burden than children of God? The dross we toil for often stains the soul, and poisons it to its undoing. The wealth we get can be no equivalent for the unsearchable riches of Christ. The pleasures of a season are not the same as those at the right hand of God. The two most devotional men in the Old Testament — David and Daniel — were men constantly employed in business and the cares of this world; and the two greatest hearts of the New Testament, our Lord and Paul, were burdened with the unremitting service of man; but they gave themselves wholly to prayer. Bernard of Clairvaux was wont to say that on those days in which he spent most time in prayer, waiting long upon God in meditation and supplication and the study of Scripture, his letters were most quickly written and were most

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persuasive, his work among his converts and scholars most successfully done, and his own schemes, about which he often had his forebodings, were widened or lost in the greater purposes of God. And there is more in that mediæval example than we dream. We should be better men and women in public were we more with God in private. "A gift," says Goethe, "shapes itself in stillness, but a character in the tumult of the world." The gift which we all need most is spiritual power for living, enduring, suffering, achieving, and that gift is the child of solitude. Christ was alone praying. We ought not to be forgetful to keep our spiritual capacities fresh and strong. Whatever gives us higher motives for living gives us higher spiritual power. Our unrest, our sin, our grief, send us to God, and again and again the feeling is awakened within us by we know not what that life without God is lost. "I have been drawn many times," said Abraham Lincoln, "to my knees by the over-

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whelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go but God. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day." Surely there is nothing incompatible between a life of hard needful work and a life of habitual prayer, and while it may be difficult to harmonise these two sides of the religious character, the contemplative and active, there is no reason in the nature of the case why a man should not be a diligent merchant, or a woman a busy housekeeper and servant, and at the same time live constantly in God's presence, and pray to Him without ceasing. "To hem the day with prayer will keep it from ravelling out into many a folly or sin."

"Pray for us." We may sometimes feel more hopeful in God when we plead with Him for others than when we ask anything for ourselves. Paul's marvellous greatness of heart was as much due to the fact that he always bore so many upon

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his spirit in intercession, as to any native genius he may have had for friendship. His letters have interesting catalogues of names of people quite unknown for the most part to the world of their time, but very dear to him. Some he mentions by way of remembrance, and some by way of supplicating blessings upon them. There are indications that he was accustomed to pass in review before his mind in prayer different communities and men and women he knew, and a large part of his time was spent, not in asking a good for himself, but in imploring divine grace for them, "praying with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. vi. 18), "ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf."

What intercession did for him it does for us all. It saves us from spiritual

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selfishness, and keeps us childlike and humble, and lifts us into the wide interests of God's family and kingdom. The state of our own heart is revealed in our efforts to think of the needs of other hearts. And as prayer is love at work, our intercessions are the evidence we offer of our true devotion to Christ, our common Lord and Saviour. "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John xiii. 35). We cannot intercede for others unless our heart has been given to God, and part of the spiritual gain of intercessory prayer is found in this, that it becomes a mark of inward grace; it is a stimulus to a larger and more Christlike love, and makes firmer our union with Him who intercedes for us all.

Prayer is both our duty and our privilege. To be in conscious contact with God our Father is our highest blessedness. None of us can do without Him. Our weakness needs His strength, our



evil His forgiveness, our fears His assurance, our hopes His fulfilments. He seeks to draw us nearer to Himself, and the forces of the soul, love and hope and faith, work their strongest when we pray.

In his last picture Raphael represents our Lord at the time of His transfiguration. Moses and Elias are reverently looking on, and the astonished disciples have just been roused from sleep by the brightness of the light. Down the mountain slope stands the pitiful victim of Satanic possession whom the unbelieving disciples were unable to heal. But the artist, with a devout insight into the meaning of the incident, represents our Lord as having ascended a little distance from the ground. The Evangelists say nothing of this ; it is a stroke of imagination ; but is the moral meaning of it not significant and true ? The transfiguration took place during prayer, and the painter's pious lesson for us is that prayer raises us above the cares and anxieties and sins

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of the world. "Wait on the Lord, and He shall strengthen thine heart." "They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint." We need this spiritual elevation. "The world is too much with us."

We may not always be able to speak. Prayer is often inarticulate, but He who inspires it can always interpret it. When we call He will answer. When we confide in Him He will honour our faith.

Pray, therefore, what you feel, what you think, what you need, and let your prayer end when it ceases to be the real expression of your need or thought and feeling. Pray with Christ's idea of God within your mind. Believe that He is your Father; that no law can limit Him, for law is merely the manner of His working; that His unwillingness to give is never the cause why you do not receive; that the purpose of His holy

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love in granting or denying your wishes is to make you perfect; that it is impossible so wise and loving a heart will ever be heedless of your prayer, and be mistaken when He gives or withholds. The measure in which you trust Christ is the measure in which He helps you, and your trust in Christ will give tone and spirit to your prayer. He will trust you with His blessing as you trust Him for it.

The important thing is not the judgment, but the will, with which you pray. That will asserts itself in quiet asking, in earnest and prolonged seeking, in vigorous knocking, when the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force; but, in whatever way you are obliged to pray, let your will be unconditionally surrendered to God. "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him."

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- “ Three doors there are in the temple  
Where men go up to pray,  
And they that wait at the outer gate  
May enter by either way.
- “ There are some that pray by asking ;  
They lie on the Master’s breast,  
And shunning the strife of the lower life,  
They utter their cry for rest.
- “ There are some that pray by seeking ;  
They doubt where their reason fails,  
But their mind’s despair is the ancient prayer  
To touch the print of the nails.
- “ There are some that pray by knocking ;  
They put their strength to the wheel,  
For they have not time for thoughts sublime,  
They can only *act* what they feel.
- “ Father, give each his answer,  
Each in his kindred way ;  
Adapt Thy light to his form of night,  
And grant him his needed day.”



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