

Prayers for the Dead: A Reply.

THE object of the following paper is to show that there is no prayer in the New Testament for the individual saint who has fallen asleep in Christ Jesus, nor can any such prayers be found in the Christian Church till about the year 150 A.D. Such being the case, can such prayers be lawful now? Yet there is one prayer for all saints who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus, taught by Him Who is "The Lord of the dead and the living," and is breathed all through the New Testament. It is a prayer that meets and fully satisfies the longing of the heart of the Christian mourner, and greatly helps him in his spiritual life. Indeed, it is needful for the full spiritual life of all Christians.

I.

There is no prayer in the New Testament for the individual, asleep in Christ Jesus.

Every reader of THE CHURCHMAN must have read with deep interest Dr. Plummer's paper on "Prayers for the dead" in the June number. We may be sure that whatever can be said on the subject has been said by so learned a theologian. Strange as it may seem, he is able to quote only one passage in the New Testament in favour of this practice. It is a statement that is quoted by every one who writes to uphold it. It is found in 2 Timothy i. 18 where we read of Onesiphorus "The Lord grant unto him to find mercy of the Lord in that day." There is, according to Dr. Plummer, some doubt as to the relevancy of even this one statement, as it is doubtful if Onesiphorus was living or dead at the time St. Paul made it. If alive, the statement was no connexion with the subject. We shall suppose he was dead, and show that, even on this supposition, it does not uphold the practice but, on the contrary, is totally against it. Before all else we must arrive at the grammatical meaning of the statement. First, as to the word, "*mercy*." There is much confusion in the use of this word, owing to the fact that it is used in the English Testament in two totally different senses. Dr. Davidson in his Commentary on *Hebrews* on "*Merciful and Faithful High Priest*," says, "*Merciful* means compassionate, and the shade of meaning belonging to mercy in modern English, of sparing the guilty,

forms no part of the old sense." It is in the sense of "sparing the guilty" that it is used in the prayer—"God be merciful to me the sinner." Here the word translated "mercy" has no connexion with the word in St. Paul's statement. In margin of R.V. we read, "Be propitiated." In the statement we are considering "mercy" means compassion, and so in almost every statement in the New Testament where it occurs. If we bear this in mind as we read the New Testament, much light is thrown on many passages, for example St. Matthew v. 7, and especially Hebrews iv. 14 to 16. After saying "We have not a High Priest Who cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities; but One that hath in all points been tempted like as we are, yet without sin," how appropriate is the exhortation, "Let us, therefore, draw near with boldness unto the Throne of grace, that we may receive *compassion*, and may find grace to help us in time of need." Grace includes forgiveness and all else we can need.

Let us again quote St. Paul's words as thus amended, "The Lord grant unto him to find compassion of the Lord in that day." On our supposition that Onesiphorus is dead, if the sentence had stopped at the second Lord it would be a prayer for His soul in the intermediate state; but St. Paul does not stop at Lord, but adds "*in that day*." This gives a totally different meaning to the sentence. Suppose some one did me a great kindness and it is quite impossible for me, in my present circumstances, to make any return, but I know that I shall be able to do this on some future day, and promise so to do, I could not possibly affirm my utter inability to do so *till that day*. So in the statement under consideration, St. Paul, by adding "*in that day*," the day of Christ's coming in Glory, affirms that his prayer for his friend's reward by Christ cannot be answered "*till that day*." We conclude, therefore, that St. Paul in these words declares that for some reason he cannot pray for Onesiphorus in the intermediate state, but prays that "*in that day*" the Lord will reward him for all his kindness to him and for his help in the Gospel. Thus we see that this statement of St. Paul, when rightly interpreted, not only gives no authority for prayer for those who have fallen asleep in Christ Jesus during the intermediate state, but is totally against such a practice. Now, as this is the only statement in the New Testament that Dr. Plummer is able to quote for upholding the practice, we conclude that there is no

authority from the New Testament for the practice of "prayers for the dead" as far as the individual is concerned. See 1 Corinthians iv. 5.

As for the statement that the practice was unknown in the Christian Church for the first 150 years, Dr. Plummer, as all scholars, agree to this. Is it possible, therefore, to suppose a practice to be lawful that is unknown in the New Testament and not found for the first 150 years in the history of the Christian era; and yet, strange to say, impossible as it may seem, such prayers are advocated by Dr. Plummer and many others!

II.

The Prayer for all Saints that are fallen asleep in Christ Jesus.

There is one prayer for "the dead in Christ," taught us by Christ Himself, implied all through the Epistles and the Revelation and which must have been the constant prayer of the primitive Christians. It is a prayer that meets and satisfies our love and longing concerning those taken from us. It is a prayer that brings us into real fellowship with the departed, keeping us ever in living touch with them till we meet again. It is a prayer, finally, needful for us to pray with ever-increasing reality, if we would live the full Christian life. That these words are not too strong concerning this prayer will soon be evident; but before stating what it is, I will make a few remarks that will lead up to it.

(1) All must acknowledge that all we can possibly know regarding the present state of the spirits of the departed, whether those dying in Christ or not, must be a matter of revelation from God Himself. Also, we may be perfectly sure that God has revealed to us all that it is good for us to know. To desire to know more than God has graciously revealed is no sign of faith, but implies doubt in the goodness and wisdom of God.

(2) What, then, is revealed as to the present state of those who have departed "in Christ"? (a) All true Christians on earth are in a real sense "with Christ and Christ with us." This fellowship with God in Christ is the source of all spiritual joy in God; but St. Paul says that the spirits of the departed are "with Christ in a state very far better" than anything we can have here (Phil. i. 23). How great, therefore, their "joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and constant spiritual refreshment! (b) We are not sur-

prised, therefore, that those who "die in the Lord" are "Blessed," that is, truly happy, and at "rest" (Rev. xiv. 13). (c) These rejoicing, happy spirits are called "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. xii. 23). (d) And yet, with all this, we know that their present state is not that of full salvation, for the Salvation won for us by Christ is for the whole man, spirit, soul and body. Bodiless spirits; therefore, must ever be looking eagerly forward "to that day"—"the Day of Christ," the day of full Salvation—"the redemption of the body."

(3) We now come to the only prayer taught us in Scripture for "the dead in Christ." When we think with wonder and thankfulness of their being "with Christ" in a state "very far better" than that of the holiest on earth, of their being "blessed" and at "rest," and as "perfect," it is quite impossible for us to conceive, or to put into words any request but one, the one that is taught us by the Lord Himself—"Thy Kingdom Come." This prayer is breathed in all the epistles and is the last prayer in the Bible—"Even so, come, Lord Jesus." This is beautifully expressed in our Burial Service—"Beseeching Thee, that it may please Thee, of Thy gracious goodness, shortly to accomplish the number of Thine elect, and to hasten Thy kingdom; that we, with all those who have departed in the faith of Thy Holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in Thy eternal and everlasting Glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

(4) All this is corroborated by a special revelation to St. Paul. The Thessalonians, in their sorrow at the death of loved ones and in their distress as to their condition, sent to St. Paul for instruction, and, as he could not know anything on such a subject, except in so far as revealed to him by God, he writes—"This we say unto you *by the Word of the Lord*, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from Heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we that are alive, that are left, shall, together with them, be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. iv. 15-17).

And now what follows? If anywhere in the New Testament we might expect to find authority for "Prayers for the dead," in the

sense that these words are so often used now—prayers for their “rest,” “refreshment” and even “purification,” all of which, as we have seen, they have in perfection, it will be here. But, no! there is no such injunction here. St. Paul concludes—“Wherefore comfort (or exhort) one another with these words,” or, as Dr. Moffat renders it, “Now then, encourage one another with these words.” That is we are to seek to realize and to be ever ready for the “Blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus ii. 13; see also Phil. iii. 20, 21). What makes all this the stronger is the words that precede what has been quoted—“We would not have you ignorant brethren, concerning them that fall asleep, that ye sorrow not, as the rest that have no hope.” Most writers now-a-days on the subject would here add you can pray for them; but not so the Holy Spirit by St. Paul; for some reason, which must be for our good, no such exhortation is given here or anywhere else in the New Testament. Everywhere there is absolute silence.

It is such a “comfort”—“The comfort wherewith we are comforted of God” to think that our blessed dead and we have one and the same hope and prayer. We pray with them and, in this sense, for them. They pray with us and for us. Thus, indeed, we have fellowship with them and they with us. This is what the words of St. Paul with reference to the Holy Communion suggest, “*We proclaim the Lord’s death till He come.*”

“See, the feast of Love is spread,
 Drink the wine and break the bread
 Sweet memorials, till the Lord
 Call us round His Heavenly Board,
 Some from earth, from glory some
 Sevr’d only till He come.”

(5) The Advent of Christ for “The redemption of our body,” throws light on every portion of the revelation of God. If neglected, we are sure to fall into many errors. One great, we may say, the chief reason that is urged for “prayers for the dead” is the undeniable fact that some find repentance and salvation in Christ at the end of life, it may be a life of flagrant sin, like the thief on the cross. Surely, it is urged, for such there must be needed a time for further repentance than was possible here on earth, yea, for cleansing from life-long sin. Hence the doctrine of “Purgatory” and purification in any form.

Well, what light does the second Advent of Christ throw on this ? On that glorious day there will be many millions all over the world to whom the words of St. Paul will be blessedly applicable, " We that are alive, that are left till the coming of the Lord." Oh ! what a variety of Christian experiences ! Some have known and served Christ from childhood to old age ; some, for a few years ; some, for a few weeks ; some, for a few days ; some for a few minutes ; some even for a few moments, and yet all, without exception, will be " changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and be caught up to meet the Lord in the air,"—" glorified together with Christ." All with wondering joy will join in the triumphant song " Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And why is it that all will be glorified on that day, although their spiritual experiences will be so varied ? Because each one had " washed his robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb "—" The blood that cleanseth from all sin." It is true that they will begin the eternal state at different levels of spiritual experience, and each one will have much to learn throughout the eternity of bliss, but one thing they all have in common, or they would not be in the glory with Christ, they will be free from sin and, therefore, in soul-harmony with God.

(6) The Lord Jesus not only teaches us to pray—" Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come." But adds—" Thy will be done, as in Heaven so on earth," thus fixing our thoughts on Heaven and its inhabitants. Who are they who are doing perfectly the will of God in Heaven ? We are apt to think only of the Holy Angels, but this is to limit the range of the prayer. Scripture is so written that one part throws light on another, so in Hebrews xii. 22 we read " Ye are come unto Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels," but we do not stop there, the writer goes on—" to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in Heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel." In this is summed up all sinless beings. Thus, we see, as we pray the Lord's Prayer we not only pray for the day of full salvation, but are also led to think, not only of the holy angels, but of all who have believed in Christ as their Lord and

Saviour whether Old Testament saints, who believed in Him as their promised Saviour, or those who believed in Him as the crucified, risen and glorified Saviour, each and all are doing perfectly the will of God, and each and all the saints have one hope and one prayer in which we join—“*Thy Kingdom come.*”

(7) It may be said :—Well, after all, what harm can there be in praying for our loved ones with Christ even although the New Testament is silent on the subject and primitive Christians knew nothing of the practice ? It is strange that anyone who knows anything of the sad history of Christianity can ask such a question, for this addition to the Word of God by degrees developed into the awful doctrine of the figment of Purgatory and masses for the dead. When we deviate, however little at the first, from the revealed will of God, thinking ourselves wiser than God, we can never tell into what paths of error we may be led. What God has graciously revealed concerning our loved ones, who died in Christ, is amply sufficient to call forth our deepest thanksgivings and intensest praise, but it has left us nothing to pray for except the prayer the Lord Himself has taught us—“*Thy Kingdom come.*”—“*Almighty God, with Whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord, and with Whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity ; we give Thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world ; beseeching Thee, that it may please Thee, of thy gracious goodness, shortly to accomplish the number of Thine elect, and to hasten Thy Kingdom ; that we, with all those who are departed in the true faith of Thy holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in Thy eternal and everlasting glory ; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*”

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