

I.

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPTION OF PRAYER.

IN Psalm lxxii. 20, we read: "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended." But they were *not* ended, as it is easy to shew. The Hebrew Psalter is divided into five books, five separate collections, made at wide intervals, each of which closes with a doxology.¹ These books contain psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes, composed during five hundred years, or, if we include the Prayer of Moses, the man of God (Psalm xc.), during a thousand years, from the time of the Exodus down to that of the Return from the Captivity in Babylon. The first book includes Psalms i.-xli., most of which were probably written by David, and was edited by Solomon, his son. The second book, or collection, includes Psalms xlii.-lxxii., and was probably arranged by "the men of Hezekiah."² It contains a series of Psalms by "the sons of Korah," written long after the time of David, and another series by David himself. The motive which led the editors of this second collection to issue it was probably this: that they had discovered certain psalms composed by "the sweet singer of Israel" which were omitted from the first collection. For these they had made diligent search, recovering them perhaps from the memories of an-

¹ See, for example, *Psa.* lxxii. 18, 19.

² *Prov.* xxv. 1; and 2 *Chron.* xxix. 30.

cient men who had often sung them in the Temple, or from the Temple manuscripts. So diligent had been their search, that when they closed it, they believed that no single psalm of David's had escaped them, that they had gleaned every ear in this large and fertile field, leaving nothing for any that should come after them. And hence they appended to their collection the note, "*The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended;*" *i. e.*, "There are no more of them anywhere to be found." In this conclusion, however, they were mistaken. Other psalms of David still lived in the memories of men whom they had not been able to consult, and more than a dozen of these psalms were afterwards recovered and inserted in the subsequent "books" of the Psalter.

But it is not to this, or to any other mere point of criticism, that I now wish to call attention. I take this editorial note, this "Finis," appended to the second book of the Psalter, simply as a point of departure for a few words on the true conception of prayer. For some years now the efficacy of prayer has been much in dispute, more especially since certain well-known professors, whose learning and devotion to the truths of Science deserve and command universal respect, publicly challenged as many as believe in the efficacy of prayer to put its efficacy to an accurate and decisive test. For themselves, however, they had forestalled the result of the experiment. From facts and figures at their command, they had proved, at least to their own satisfaction, that under the reign of fixed and invariable laws there is no room for prayer, or at least no possibility

of answers to such prayers as men commonly offer. With a strange and lamentable misapprehension of the kind of verification of which prayer admits, they sought to reduce it to a question of statistics, to tabulate the results of a spiritual communion with the Father of our spirits as men tabulate the exports and imports of commerce, or the ravages of an infectious disease. And since that challenge was published and declined—and there was no option but to decline a challenge so absurdly inappropriate—this question of the efficacy of prayer has been much and often in debate. It is well that it should be debated, well for the world, especially well for the Church. Whatever the result of the debate so far as men of science are concerned, it should, at least, have the effect of giving *us* both a larger and a truer conception of what prayer is.

And before we blame *them* for their narrow and inadequate conception of what prayer is and does, let us ask ourselves whether we are not in large measure responsible for their misconception of it? If we, we of the Church, regard, or if we have long regarded, prayer as simply, or mainly, a solicitation for certain definite and calculable gifts, a mere asking for things that we want and have not, can we wonder that those who stand aloof from the Church, even if they do not oppose themselves to it, should regard it in the same way, and propose to put it to a test which, on that conception of it, would be a very suitable and decisive one? And yet *is* not this even now the ruling conception of prayer in the Church, the conception held by a large majority of its members—that we ask certain tem-

poral and spiritual gifts of God: as health, fair weather, good harvests, children, prosperity, protection from danger; or happiness, wisdom, faith, love, joy, peace: and that, when we rightly ask, He gives us the very thing we have asked Him for? If this be the ruling conception of prayer in the mind of the Church, as I fear it still is, we should feel no surprise when men of a logical and practical turn, assuming this conception to be the true one, pronounce it to be logically absurd and self-contradictory, and challenge us to put it to the proof. On this hypothesis they gain an easy and an assured victory. For such a conception of prayer really takes the world from under the rule of God, to place it at the mercy of men's variable and conflicting desires. Such a conception involves the logical absurdity that two different men may ask that the same thing should, and should not, happen at the same moment of time, and both get what they ask. A conception so inadequate and self-opposed *ought* to be brought to a conclusive test; and even the test of statistics can hardly be said to be inappropriate to it.

We cannot fairly blame men of science, therefore, for exposing the absurdity of such a conception. If we venture to blame them at all, it is that they should ever have been content to accept as true a conception of prayer so unscriptural, since they of all men should be the first to verify the facts and conceptions submitted to them, and should either decline to speak of prayer at all, or satisfy themselves that they are dealing with the sacred reality itself, and not with some dark and distorted shadow of it. And some at least of their followers may be open to this further

censure, that they strike the staff of prayer from feeble hands long accustomed to lean on it with a somewhat inhumane air of eagerness and triumph. When the editors of the second book of the Psalter wrote "The prayers of David are ended," I can well believe they wrote it sadly, though all they meant was, "No more of these exquisite strains will be given to the world." But, at least among the camp-followers of science, there are some who now cry, "The prayers of the Church are ended," not sorrowfully, but as exultingly as prematurely, though *they* mean, "We have shewn prayer to be so absurd that no sane man can any longer lean upon God." It would almost seem, in fact, that these gentlemen cherish an ungentle grudge against whatever is too fine, too ethereal, too spiritual to be seen and handled, weighed in their balance, decomposed by their analysis, and tabulated in their records. Such a spirit, however, is at the farthest remove from the truly scientific spirit, as it is also from the Christian spirit, which indeed are closely akin the one to the other. Instead, therefore, of meeting scorn with scorn, and boast with boast, we shall do well (1) to seek a true and lofty conception of prayer, and (2) to assure ourselves of the "sweet reasonableness" of our conception.

Now, that the current conception of prayer is too colourless, too limited, too unspiritual, may be shewn quite as clearly from a devout study of Scripture as by the most rigorous use of logic. The Psalms of David are called "the *prayers*" of the son of Jesse. The Song of Hannah,¹ a song as blithe and glad as that of a bird, is introduced by the phrase, "And

¹ 1 Sam ii. 1-10.

Hannah *prayed*, and said." The ode of Habakkuk,¹ than which there is no more sublime poem in the whole range of Hebrew literature, is expressly entitled, "A *prayer* of Habakkuk the Prophet." And these psalms, songs, odes, are by no means limited to the forms and tones of supplication; in some of them there is not so much as a single petition or request. They sweep the whole gamut of human thought and emotion. They contain profound meditations on human life, and on the varying spiritual moods of the human heart. They depict the grandest and the sweetest scenes in Nature, and even busy themselves with the products of Art. They record the most momentous events in the history of man. They seek to track the course and penetrate the mysteries of the Divine Administration. They enter, with priestly foot, into the innermost recesses of the Sanctuary not made with hands, and engage in an informal but intimate communion with the unseen God, offering before Him the sacrifices of a contrite spirit, vows of dedication to his service, and songs of sustained and various praise. They are heavy with sighs; they glow with rapture. They are overcast with nights of weeping; they are bright and calm with fruitful days of peace. They are steeped in the kindling hues of imagination; they ring with poetic cadences that chime like sweet bells in tune. As we study them, and remember that they are *prayers*, prayers uttered by the most spiritual of men, nay, in some sense, prayers inspired by God Himself, we cannot but feel that *our* prayers are hardly worthy of the name, so much do they

¹ Hab. iii.

lack colour, motion, variety, breadth, fire. We learn from them that prayer is by no means only the utterance of desire in the simplest words that human lips can use; that it is not always even a direct appeal to the almighty Father and Lover of souls; that it is never a mere asking for gifts, and still less a resolute and importunate insistence that what we ask shall be given us. It is other, and more, and better than all this. It is often mainly a devout meditation on God, on the wonders He has wrought, on the heavens which declare his glory, on the earth which is full of his goodness, on the large principles on which He conducts his providence and the illustrious deeds by which He has revealed his saving and perfect will, on the constitution, needs, infirmities, capacities, and aspirations of men and their manifold relations to Him who made and redeems them. Prayer, when at least it is formed on the model of the Psalms, is meditation—a meditation on natural and moral verities conducted under a reverent and stimulating sense of that Divine Presence which works in and through them all, the Shekinah of the inner temple, the Divine Fire which shines through the cloud of our imperfect conceptions. In a word, it is *thinking with God in all our thoughts*. And, at times, our thoughts will or may be full of colour, glow, passion; the light that was never seen on sea or shore will suffuse and tinge them; as we seek to utter them, our words, like all impassioned speech, will break into cadence and rhythm. Hannah, made joyful by the gift of a man-child, simply exults in the God whose motto, like that of the Roman empire, she takes to be,

Parcere subjectis et debellare superbos.

She flings up her whole soul in praise of Him who kills and gives life, who maketh poor and maketh rich, who bringeth low and lifteth up: she asks absolutely nothing for herself and her son, she does not prefer a single request: and yet her song is *a prayer*. Habakkuk, his fine imagination quickened to its utmost force by an inspiration from on high, glances from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven: he sees God rising like a sun over the mountains of Sinai, tipping range after range, crag after crag, with fire; again he sees Him riding on the wings of a tempest beneath which the earth quakes and the mountains crumble into dust, passing in fury across the earth to smite the sea, that He may make a pathway for his people, and to stamp down the nations which set themselves against them. What he can apprehend of the Divine Majesty he sets down in words that breathe and burn.

The mountains see Thee; they writhe:
 The rain-torrent sweepeth along:
 The abyss lifteth up its voice,
 It flingeth its hands on high:
 Sun and moon draw back into their habitations
 At the light of Thine arrows shooting by,
 At the lightning-splendours of Thy spear.

As he recalls the Divine manifestation, so splendid, so terrible, yet so gracious, the Prophet resolves that, come what may, he will trust and rejoice in the God of salvation, and entreats Jehovah to revive and continue his work of redemption. And this sublime ode, which is mainly a theophany, and which contains only a single petition, is expressly called "*A Prayer*."

Judging, then, by the prayers of the Old Testament, we should conclude that prayer is by no means mainly an importunate asking for gifts; that it is mainly a devout meditation on the character, works, providence of God, and on our relations to Him, this meditation waking all the chords of emotion in our souls, and uttering itself in fervid and impassioned speech.

And this conception of prayer is confirmed by the Scriptures of the New Testament. If the holy apostles assure us that in the days of his flesh the Lord Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications with strong cryings and tears;"¹ if they affirm that his Spirit maketh intercession for us "with ineffable sighs;"² they also record prayers in which we find both the same elevated and impassioned tone and the same tone of sustained and devout meditation which, as we have seen, characterize the prayers of the Old Testament prophets. If, at one time, they set the Son of Man before us as crying in the agony of abandonment, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" at another time they describe Him as singing, in a rapture of grateful joy, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that, hiding these things from the wise and prudent, thou hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight."³ But it is when we consider the more prolonged utterances of Him who prayed without ceasing, and in everything gave

¹ Heb. v. 7.

² Rom. viii. 26.

³ Matt. xi. 25, 26, where it is instructive to note how this "prayer" shades off, in *Verse 27*, into a meditation on the relations of the Father and the Son, and of both to men; and in *Verses 28-30*, into a pathetic strain of invitation to the weary and heavy-laden.

thanks, that we gain our best conception of what is meant by prayer. And of these we can take no nobler and more conclusive instance than the litany known as "the Intercessory Prayer," and recorded in John xvii. In this sublime litany beyond a doubt there are many petitions. The Son asks much of the Father—asks that He Himself may be glorified, that his disciples may be kept from the world and sanctified by the truth, and that all who believe through their word may become "one" with God, genuine partakers of the Divine nature. But the first and the most lasting impression which this prayer makes upon us as we read it is, that we are listening to a Divine meditation. We feel that, in the presence of the Father, the Son of God is *thinking*—thinking of the work He came to do, and of how He shall finish it, and of the issues of that redeeming work in days to come. He recalls the power with which He had been endowed from on high, and the use He had made of it. He is conscious that He has quickened an eternal life in many hearts. He pauses to define eternal life (*Verse 3*), to reflect on his complex relation to his Father and to his disciples (*Verses 6-10*), on the sanctifying power of the word of truth (*Verse 17*), on the conflict and toil which awaited as many as should believe on his Name, on the love which will be their stay and comfort under all the sorrows of time, and on the unclouded and eternal glory into which they will rise when time shall be no more. In short, this great prayer is a meditation, thrown into the petitionary form, on the facts and verities of the spiritual kingdom; a prayer more tender, more lofty, more devout, than any we

find in the Psalms : and if it does not burn with the glowing hues of passion and imagination, it breathes a sacred and Divine calm more potent than the most impassioned moods and the most musical cadences of poetic speech.

Even "the Lord's prayer," which is both a form and a model of Christian prayer, is not, nor does it warrant, an importunate solicitation for personal or temporal gifts. It holds, indeed, to the petitionary form throughout. But it contains only one request for outward good—the prayer for daily bread. And this solitary request is for the very simplest necessity of life ; not for rich and sumptuous fare, but for the bare food without which we die. Even this solitary petition is redeemed from all selfishness by its very wording, since even in asking for bread we have to ask a supply for our neighbour's need as well as for our own. And, moreover, it comes after, and is subordinate to, the earlier and greater petitions—"Hallowed be thy name ; thy kingdom come ; thy will be done ;" so that, even in asking for bare bread, we virtually profess our entire willingness to go without it, *i.e.*, to die, if, by dying, we may help to hallow God's name, or advance the interests of his kingdom, or cause his will to be done on earth as it is done in heaven.

With these New Testament prayers in our minds—and it would be easy to add many more, such as the *Magnificat*, the *Nunc dimittis*, and, above all, the prayers with which St. Paul's Epistles abound—it is impossible that we should conceive of prayer as simply an asking, an insisting on the supply of our real or supposed wants. It is, rather, the movement

and uprisal of all the faculties and affections of the soul towards God as our home, our satisfaction, our rest, our joy. It may take the form of a tender, sustained, devout meditation on God, on what He is, what He does, how He stands affected toward us ; *or of a mournful, passionate, persistent quest after Him ; or of a rapturous outburst of joyful praise because we have found Him and are at one with Him ; as well as the form of earnest supplication for a supply of our own wants, or of generous intercession for the sins and needs of our fellows. It may put on all the changeful colours of the soul ; but its one unvarying distinction is, that it is a sincere, thoughtful, spiritual communion and intercourse with the Father of our spirits, in whom we live.

And thus, in its better moments, the Church has always understood it. Perhaps the grandest of uninspired prayers, if it be uninspired, is the *Te Deum*, the early clauses of which are as truly prayerful as the later. According to the biblical conception, we as truly pray when we praise the Father everlasting, when we exult that all angels, cherubim and seraphim, the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs, the holy Church throughout all the world, acknowledge and praise Him ; or when we meditate on the Father of an infinite majesty, the everlasting Son, the Holy Ghost the Comforter, or the incarnation, passion, and ascension of our Lord ; as when we beseech God to have mercy on us, to save us, to keep us without sin, and to number us with his saints in glory everlasting. Any conception of prayer that would exclude these lofty meditations, or these joyful

grand-toned outbursts of praise, is too colourless, too narrow, too faint and poor. It lacks the wide scope, the generous ardour, the sustained power, the play of memory and thought, of passion and imagination, which characterize the prayers of the Bible.

Finally, the prevailing conception of prayer in the Church is as much too *unspiritual* as it is too narrow and colourless and cold. It is because we have too long regarded it as a mere asking for definite, for personal, and even for temporal gifts, that some are now sneering at prayer as only "a machine warranted by theologians to make God do what his clients want." Such a sneer would have had no force had the current conception of prayer been more biblical, *i.e.*, more philosophical and more spiritual. And, indeed, it has but little force even as it is. For defective as the common conception may be, we all admit, so often as we truly pray, that we know not what things to ask for till we are taught by the Spirit of God, and refer ourselves to his higher and perfect wisdom. We know and are sure that God desires our real welfare, the welfare of our spirits, and that of all men; but, nevertheless, we admit that even in imploring spiritual gifts we must not prescribe to his Wisdom nor insist on receiving the very things for which we ask. It is a commonplace of the Church, a mere and recognized truism, that all our prayers run up into and really mean, "Thy will, not ours, be done." We are perpetually citing illustrations of it from the life of our Lord and of his chief apostle. Christ Himself besought, we say, that if it were possible, the cup of agony and shame might pass from Him; the cup did not pass: but was not his prayer

answered when an angel appeared out of heaven to strengthen Him? St. Paul thrice besought the Lord that he might be delivered from "the thorn," or rather from "the stake," in his flesh; he was left to endure his infirmity unrelieved: but was not his prayer answered when, assured of a sufficient grace, he was able to rejoice in his very infirmity? We talk glibly of "the misery of a granted prayer." We confess that God gives us "the desire of our hearts" if He does with us and for us, not what we ask, but what He knows to be best. Some of us even take up the great passage in the Gospels¹ on the efficacy of prayer, beginning, "Ask, and it shall be given you," and find in it a new argument for spirituality and deference to the will of God in our supplications. We observe that, while St. Matthew represents our Lord as saying, "How much more shall your Father who is in heaven give *good things* to them that ask Him," St. Luke² reports Him as saying, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give *the Holy Spirit* to them that ask him;" and we argue and admit, "Yes, after all, this pure Divine Spirit is the sum and substance of all good; if God give us the Holy Spirit, in that He does verily give us all good things."

All this is very simple, very easy—to talk about. But do we believe it, and act upon it? What are our own prayers like? Are they calm and sustained meditations on the character, works, and ways of God, and his varied yet ever gracious relations to men? Are they passionate confessions of our alienation from Him, and passionate yet steadfast en-

¹ Matt vii. 7-11.

² Luke xi. 13.

deavours to return to Him and to lift our weak wayward wills into accord with his righteous will? Are they rapturous outbursts of grateful song, in which we summon our soul and all that is within us to a loving and happy contemplation of his goodness, and celebrate his praise in forms and hues borrowed from a kindled imagination and an adoring heart? Or are they only, or mainly, an importunate solicitation that we may take our own way, choose our own gifts, and be enriched with temporal and spiritual blessings at our own will? Are they even less and worse than this—a cold and formal recitation of our wants and desires, fresh with no play of thought, bright with no expectation of good; or even a perpetual and querulous lamentation over our infirmities and needs, and God's reluctance to supply our needs and strengthen our hearts?

Surely it is *we* who are to blame if the world misconceives the very idea of prayer! Only as we heartily adopt the broad biblical conception and act upon it, only as we form a more adequate, a more vivid and spiritual, conception of it, and enter into a sincere and cordial fellowship with our Father in heaven, shall we put the efficacy of prayer to a decisive test, and find it abundantly verified.

CARPUS.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST.

III.—THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FACT.

BUT what is there in the fact of the Resurrection which is so precious to faith? Does this miracle differ essentially from the many others recorded in our sacred writings?