

PRAYER.¹

THE words of our Saviour, "Not my will, but thine, be done!" are a prayer, and the highest form of all prayer. They express a desire on the part of our Lord, which was, in reality, the deepest in his heart.

Desire is the *soul* of prayer. Invocation is but, so to speak, a befitting forerunner. So is adoration. Invocation and adoration go naturally abreast, but before. They are not, indeed, absolutely initial acts. They react. They are responsive to the appeal which is involved in the universal revelation that is made of Himself by God. Thanksgiving too, and the confession of sin—another pair of the moral responses of the soul—constitute, in the case of beings who have forfeited their right to blessedness, but who are nevertheless "crowned with tender mercies," appropriate concomitants of prayer. *But prayer itself is the uplifting of desire to God.* It is "asking," that we may receive;—"seeking," that we may find;—"knocking" at the door of infinite grace, that we may get in.

It is of the greatest moment to bear in mind that prayer *is the uplifting of desire*, and *nothing else is prayer*. No amount of supplicatory word-grinding is of the nature of prayer. No amount of solemn toning is of the nature of prayer. No mere reading of David's prayers, or Paul's prayers, or any other man's prayers, is prayer. No mere hearing of

¹ This paper was written at the same time, and on the spur of the same occasion, as the Essay on Prayer, by Carpus, which appeared in THE EXPOSITOR for May, June, July, and August. It reaches the same conclusions, by similar processes of thought. I gladly insert it, however, as a singular and valuable confirmation of the views already advocated in this Magazine.—EDITOR.

prayer is prayer. No mere utterance of the words that are the appropriate vehicles of prayer is prayer. Without desire, there *can be no real prayer to any being*. Without desire lifted up to God, there *can be* and there *is* no real prayer to God.

When this one simple idea of the essential nature of prayer is held up steadily in view, it not only reveals itself by its own light,—it dissipates, like a torch, when shook and shining, some of the shadowy notions that have been, for some time past, brooding like a nightmare on the public mind.

A grave proposal, for instance, was a few years ago launched into public consideration, under the auspices of a distinguished London physicist, in reference to a quantitative test of the efficacy of prayer. It was alleged that this quantitative test might be obtained by having different hospitals, or different wards of the same hospital, put into different relations to prayer. Let all the patients, it was suggested, receive, as far as possible, not only impartial but identical treatment, so far as medical attendance and attention are concerned. Let one half, however, of the number be made the special objects of the unceasing prayers of the pious, while the other half are left out, as far as practicable, from the sweep of all specialty of prayer. It would then, it was contended, be ascertainable, after a sufficient length of testing time had elapsed, whether, and to what extent, any real efficacy is attributable to prayer. Such was the proposal.

Now we do not for a moment impugn the sincerity and good faith of the scientific investigators who propounded or commended this quantitative gauge or

test. But the proposal, nevertheless, is based on an entire misapprehension of *the real nature of prayer*. If prayer had been mere mechanical reading out of a book, or the mere mechanical utterances, without book, of certain forms or formularies of petition, then, indeed, it would be extremely easy to draw a line between certain wards or hospitals on one little spot of space, and certain others out in the dark on another, and to get some sort of human machines to grind out, in relation to the one sphere and not in relation to the other, the requisite amount of euchological phraseology. If prayer be mere words, the test is practicable. But if prayer be not the mere words of the lips, but the uplifting to God of the desires of the heart, how could any man, who really goes to God at all with his desires, deny them to the one half of those who are the undistinguished objects of the Divine benignity and mercy? How could religious men deliberately stint their compassions—the real material of their prayers—in the presence of Him whom they know to be no respecter of persons, but good unto all, and lavish of his tender mercies over all his works? How could they importune the God of universal love to be a respecter of persons? Even the scientific gentlemen themselves, to whose proposal I am referring, would not be able, I believe, to limit the sympathetic desire of their hearts to the poor patients in the one set of wards. Brace themselves as they might, and let them exert themselves as much as ever they could to put the screw on their hearts, and shut down the sluice on their compassions, that the streams might be dammed up or diverted, their desire would flow over, in spite of themselves,

to the occupants of the pretermitted wards. *And, if they but knew it, that sympathetic desire in their hearts is rudimentary prayer.*

We turn now to another shadow that has been projected on the subject of prayer. It has been contended that petition should be confined to the sphere of things spiritual, and therefore excluded from the sphere of material things. "Prayer," it is said, "involves petition, but it is request for nothing outward." "It rests," it is alleged, with those *who oppose this hemispheric view*, "to prove that one single physical event may validly be excluded from the list of the predetermined, before they call on us to pray with reference to it." ¹

The difficulty which has pressed upon the pounders and advocates of this theory is evidently to them serious and solemn. And it would therefore ill become any one to speak or think of them with feelings of disparagement. But it is no personal disrespect to say that the theory rests on misapprehensions.

It is, in the *first* place, at variance with the express injunction of the Apostle, "in *every thing*, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. iv. 6).

It is, in the *second* place, also at variance with one express petition in the model prayer which was taught by our Lord to his disciples, "Give us this day our daily bread."

It is, in the *third* place, based on a mistake con-

¹ "Contemporary Review," 1872, p. 189.

cerning the relation of the spiritual to the material. It is said, for instance, that "a spiritual antecedent will not produce a physical consequent." We are surprised at such a statement, for nothing seems clearer than that God's will was the spiritual antecedent which produced the whole physical universe. And, in the sphere of our own personal activity, nothing seems clearer than that a very large proportion of physical consequents are the direct results of spiritual antecedents. We will to speak, for example, or to walk. Our actual speaking or walking is the physical consequent.

Then there is in the basis of the theory this other oversight :— It is argued that all physical events belong to "the list of the predetermined," and therefore to that list of things which cannot be conceived of as alterable in consideration of prayer. But it is forgotten that the predetermination referred to, if a reality, must be either conditional or unconditional. If conditional, then prayer may be, in truth, the very condition that was, in multitudes of cases, precontemplated. But if unconditional, then the very same principle, in virtue of which it is maintained that there is no room and scope for prayer, must be further extended, and it must be contended that there is no place for *freedom* in reference to what men may utter physically with their mouths, or do physically with their hands.

But above and beyond these fallacies and unrealities, there is, in the *next* place, at the basis of the theory, an entire overlooking of the essential nature of prayer. Except in loose, though easily interpreted, popular and poetical representation,

prayer is not a force operating directly on the arm or hand of the Omnipotent. It is not even anything of the nature of an effort to prevail on the Almighty to exchange his own view of things for ours, or to substitute our plan of administering some of the affairs of his universe in place of his own. Prayer is the reverent and humble uplifting of the desire of the heart to a Being whom we recognize and adore, not only as infinitely powerful, but also as infinitely wise and infinitely good, and therefore infinitely removed from fickleness and caprice. We lift up our desire, not to confront and overcome any counter-desire in the heart of God, but to bow before his sovereignty in submission, adoration, and acquiescence. There is a *specific* desire that subtends every *particular* petition. It is this—that the infinitely wise and good One would do for us, and for those in whom we are interested, what *He* sees, all things considered, to be wisest and best. And beneath this *specific* desire there is subtended the one grand *generic* longing of the pious soul—“Not my will, but thine, be done.”

If there be this grand *generic* longing of the pious soul, subtending, in the depths of the heart, all specific desires, and thus also all particular petitions, then it never can be, in the least degree, unseasonable or unreasonable to lift our actual desires up to God, whether they have reference to things spiritual or to things material. It may be that, in our ignorance, we sometimes ask what it would be,—so far as the outermost twigs of our particular petitions are concerned,—unwise and unbeneficent in God to grant. Some of our particular petitions

may, though we see it not, be unreasonable. But God understands what we mean at heart. He interlines our utterances, and reads the blundering petition accordingly. He looks down from the terminating twigs of our particular petitions to the great subtending branches, the solid stem, and the deep far-reaching roots of our desires. So, indeed, do we ourselves. And hence, as regards our particular petitions for blessings that are not expressly promised, we invariably lay them submissively before the footstool, and inwardly breathe, either explicitly or implicitly—"Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done."

This being the case, not only is it reasonable that we should lift up to God our desires in reference to all things physical that interest us, as well as in reference to things spiritual, but it would be most irreligious, unreasonable, unphilosophical, and injurious, *were we to allow ourselves to cherish any desires which we could not thus lift up to God in prayer.* Our cherished desires, whether we lift them up to God or not, form a large proportion of the vital constituents of our moral state. We cannot advance in life without them. We could not work without them. We *must* have desires, and cherish some of them. We must, so long as we continue self-consciously in the body, have desires in reference to physical things,—in reference to our bodily states for example, our bodily actions, and our material surroundings. And, if we are not utterly shut up in ourselves and to ourselves, we must in addition have desires in reference to the physical condition of others. If so, and if it is not wrong and unreasonable *that we should*

Love and cherish such desires, how can it be wrong or unreasonable to uplift and utter them to God? Is it not the case, on the contrary, that the uplifting of our cherished desires into the realized presence of Infinite Purity, Infinite Goodness, and Infinite Wisdom, is the best of all imaginable ways of getting them increasingly transfigured into what is pure, and good, and wise? It should either be contended that we have no business to cherish desires in reference to things that are physical, or it should be frankly conceded that we should, ere we grant such desires a license to be the cherished inmates of our hearts, insist upon their being presented reverently before the throne of Him who is the living Ideal of perfection. It is in this way, doubtless, that we are to read the injunction, "Pray without ceasing."

In the light of these principles, all dark shadows of doubt and conscientious difficulty about praying for fine weather, or rain, or for the prosperity of honest and honourable business, or for the arrest of pestilence, take flight. It has been said, indeed, that "to pray for fine weather, or for rain—(except as a humble expression of man's dependence upon forces that are far vaster than he, and on Him from whom they emanate)—is quite as illegitimate as to pray against the approach of winter, the return of the seasons, or even against to-morrow's sunrise."¹ But not only does our Saviour say to his disciples, "Pray ye, in order that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day;" we can see the reasonableness of his injunction. It was right in his disciples to *desire* that they should not require to flee

¹ "Contemporary Review," 1872, p. 187.

amid the severities of winter, or amid the solemnities of the Sabbath day. And if it is, for corresponding reasons, right that we should *desire* good weather, or rain, or prosperity in business, or protection from pestilence, or any other material blessing, it cannot be wrong to take our desire into the presence of our Father in heaven.

But will our prayer be efficacious? some one asks. Yes, we answer, to a certainty, if there be beneath the particular petition—as there always will be in the case of men reverent and righteous—the subtending specific desire, of which we have already spoken, the desire that God would do what, all things considered, He sees to be wisest and best; and if, too, beneath this specific desire, there be the still deeper subtending generic desire, to which our Lord Himself in his extremity gave utterance, “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.” Our prayers *will* be efficacious if they be “the effectual fervent prayer” — the earnest energizing prayers — “of righteous men.”

But yet, why is it, we would ask, that that question regarding *efficacy* is urged? All admit that the desire for good health, however interlined its utterance may require to be, is right and reasonable and beneficial. So is the desire for good weather, or for a good harvest, or for prosperity in business; though doubtless in each of these cases the utterance of the desire may require to be divinely interlined. And hence these desires are unquestioningly cherished; and no one troubles himself with the query, *But will they be efficacious?* We all know that they are right and reasonable, whether they may be effi-

cacious, in the sense intended, or not. We all know, too, when we begin to reflect, that in a certain high and most important sense they will be efficacious,—they will avail much. We all know that. And hence we *deliberately* cherish the desires.

It is right surely to apply the same principle to these very desires, *as lifted up to God*, and as thus transfigured into actual prayers. If it is right and reasonable that we should cherish the desires, it must be right and reasonable that we should lift them up as prayers to God. If it be wrong and unreasonable that we should lift them up to God as prayers, it must be wrong and unreasonable to cherish them as desires in our hearts. Their ascent to God can do no harm. On the contrary, it is sure to be beneficial and blissful, even although it should happen that the particular petitions presented are of such a nature that it would be neither wise nor merciful to answer them according to the minutiae of their letter.

In the light of this same principle we can, with facility and deep inner satisfaction, account for those numerous and explicit promises of our Lord,—“What things soever ye desire, ye shall have them.”—“All things whatsoever ye shall ask, ye shall receive.”—“Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”—“If ye shall ask anything, I will do it.”—“Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father, he will give it you.”—“Ask, and ye shall receive. Seek, and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.” These are certainly most

comprehensive promises. Are they always fulfilled? *Assuredly they are, when the prayers are the uplifting of the desires of the meek and lowly and righteous.* Jesus did not speak unadvisedly, or hold out expectations that could not possibly be realized.

Suppose, then, that two men, meek, lowly, righteous, agree to ask for rain, let us say, or for the recovery of some friend who is tossing to and fro under the grip of some dire disease, or for the patients in a hospital, or in all hospitals, or for the conversion of some sinner, or of all sinners,—will their prayer, in its real essence and import, be answered? Will their desire, in its real intensity, be granted? *Assuredly it will,* if the exceeding great and precious promises which are written in the volume of the book be indeed “yea and amen.”

Why then, you ask, are any sinners unconverted? Why are any of the diseased unhealed? Why is there any distress at all? Why is there any anguish of nations, any inward commotions, or mutual antagonisms? Why are there any wars? Why any woes? Is it because the prayers of the righteous for the great masses of the world have been withheld? No; for Jesus prayed, and Paul prayed, and John prayed, and Elijah prayed. Is it then because their earnest energizing prayers have been unanswered? No; for the promises are “yea and amen.” What then? The whole difficulty takes flight when we notice that in a meek and lowly and holy soul there cannot be unconditional or absolute desires for any of the objects specified. All desires for such objects are desires with a subtending condition expressed or understood. They are petitions subtended by other elements of

desire, which spread out wider and draw deeper. And these subtending desires are but partial aspects of one great element of desire, which absorbs within itself all details of desires. Minute details of desires are never absolute, and never detached. They are all and always but partial aspects of one great desire. That great desire is this,—*that God should do, in every given case or conjuncture, what it would be wisest and best, all things considered, and all interests consulted, for Him to do*,—what would be most in harmony with *our* moral constitution and with *his own* moral government. In its ultimate and sublimest form it is this—“*Thy will be done!*”

There is thus in every holy heart a vast ocean of desire that turns itself to God. On the surface of this ocean there are, it may be, waves of great generic desires. On the surface of these great waves there are, it may be, minor waves of specific desires; and on these minor waves there are still further, it may be, wavelets of desire for multitudes of minute things. Whatever, however, be the direction of these wavelets, they are never detached. They are never absolute. There is always, subtending them, a much larger wave, of which they really form only a part, and which rises up to God. This larger wave in its turn is but the partial upheaving of a still mightier wave of desire, which therefore comprehends within itself the smaller waves and wavelets. Then, underneath the whole is the great deep ocean of the soul's desire—absolutely undisturbed by all the little surface occurrences that produce wavelets and waves, and absolutely at rest,—conscious of no tides but what are simply responsive to the mightily attractive

power of the infinite will—the infinite good-will—of God. Hence, for instance, not even the most affectionate of holy fathers or mothers would wish God to overturn his infinitely wise method of administering the affairs of the universe in order to rescue their dearly beloved and lovely daughter from a watery grave. Neither would they, or could they, wish that He should break into shivers the moral constitution of the human heart and conscience, in order to convert their prodigal son from the error of his way. But, nevertheless, they earnestly desire their daughter's rescue and their son's conversion, and who shall say that the desire is either sinful, selfish, or absurd? If it be a right desire to cherish, *why, in the name of all that is right and reasonable, should it not be lifted up to Him, who is not only glorious in holiness, and fearful in praises, but truly unfettered in his hands, and ever doing wonders?* Why should the child be forbidden to ask from his Father, when it is certain that He will append to all his particular petitions the all-embracing one, the prayer that is inclusive and comprehensive of all prayers—"Not my will, but thine, be done!"

J. MORISON.

PRINCIPLES, NOT RULES.

ST. LUKE xxii. 35, 36.

AT last I have found a passage of which I have long been in search, not for my own sake indeed, but for the sake of many whose spiritual condition and wants differ from my own. In common with most modern Commentators, I have frequently affirmed that the