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PRAYER, AND THE HIGHER CRITICISM.

WE recently referred to the loose and slovenly views of prayer and its results that have been expressed in some modern professedly Christian journals. The scientists have found their echo among the ranks of believers, and help has been given to reduce prayer to a piece of useful mechanism. It is no platitude to say that such views are in direct opposition and contrast to the Divine Word, and that the baptism of a devout Bible reading is the best cure for this malady. Unhappily, it is chronic, and does not yield to an occasional application. He who has no confidence in prayer can secure trust in it only by familiarity with the spirit of inspiration. It is saturated with prayerfulness, so much so that the Divine Being takes part in its attitudes, and consents to implore, bow down, listen, hearken, answer, and help—all as the result or attendants of prayer. In the garden of Eden, at Abel's grave, in Noah's security, and the world's perils, from Moses to Malachi, and from the Old to the New Testament, and there in tones of emphatic encouragement, prayer is honoured.

Any tampering with prayer is the sapping of the foundation of the Christian life and prospects. While human necessities remain as they are, prayer must be vital to safety and help. The materialists and worshippers of physical law are compelled to admit that it is often helpless without human assistance. All the resources of light, heat, gravitation, &c., practically pray to man that his intelligence may aid them to effect the myriads of results that they are adapted to secure. Until human knowledge and help are theirs they lie apparently wasting resources of infinite value; but, manipulated by man, they photograph, beautify, paint, travel, talk, sing, plough the ocean, drive the engine, and proffer to others an infinite variety of influences. Nature asks man to use her, and he prays Nature to co-operate with him. This combined and interlaced asking and having are prayer and its results, in the domain in which man appears as the prime agent. But it may be reverently asked, Where is their God? If the Divine

Being has given to Nature its laws, and to man his powers, can He be left out of the reckoning? Is it not probable that this practical dependence of man on physical law, and law on man, are but the types and shadows of that supreme dependence which connects each with Him? The farmer waits on Providence, and Providence waits on the farmer's fidelity and labour; and does it not seem but reasonable that both should wait on God, and that His rule should be the law to which each and all are amenable? If so, prayer is the honour and goal that science seeks, and dependence on God the necessity that physical law acknowledges. The subjection of the latter to the human will is among one of the wonders of creation. The light that has taken millions of years to mature can be touched, tempered, resisted, perverted, or used by the folly, craftiness, skill, or selfishness of either childhood or manhood. It may be used to ignite and destroy, or illuminate and beautify. So completely do the most sublime and extraordinary forces of nature lie at the disposal of man! If so, is the adorable Creator to be the only impotent being in the universe? Is He to be helpless in the midst of the helpfulness of His creatures? Are all to be ministering angels of weal or woe, and He to be neither? If not, then prayer to Him is the best policy, as it is the highest duty and privilege.

The saddening tendency of Christian professors and leaders of public opinion to ridicule simple dependence on the prevalence of prayer is amongst the most serious signs of spiritual declension. To address a Divine Father for sympathy and help, who necessarily refers the applicant to His laws as His reply, freezes all affection, and kills all buoyant faith and hope. It is as the heart knows these laws to be the easy instruments of the Divine will and the pliant means of the Divine purpose, that it clings with loving trust to the throne of the Heavenly grace as its refuge and hope. This spirit inspires our worship, pervades our hymns, sustains our Christian life, nerves our action, checks distrust, and subdues despair. The angels that are sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation find physical law no obstacle to their benevolent mission, but catching the custom of the Divine, they know how to make the water wine and the bitter sweet, if their high mission may demand it. But their loftiest work is to discharge their embassy chiefly by the means of prevailing laws. We cannot understand the difficulty felt by some in the alteration of general law by a Divine

interposition. If creation be conceded, the after wonders of modification and alteration sink into insignificance. He who stamps His own independent impress upon His own works must reserve the power and liberty to modify, and these are appealed to by the importunate prayer of the hopeful and helpless believer. Even the anti-vaccinators, who depend more on prayer than vaccination, have reason on their side. Their error consists in an exclusive dependence on a half truth. It is quite true that God can more easily prevent the small-pox than man can ; but the mode, and time, and opportunity are in His own keeping, and the prayer of faith that acknowledges a miracle to be possible strives always and hard to make it unnecessary.

If the enemy should succeed in taking the life out of earnest prayer, the strength of the Church is gone. The poet's utterances are those of the universal experience. It is the vital "breath" of the Christian life, and the more it is enjoyed the more triumphant it becomes. There are some hearts and churches where this scepticism has proved to be the dry rot in the structure. "Only the prayer meeting" is but the coarse and business designation that conceals the distrust. We confess that the ordinary prayer meeting far too frequently merits this contempt and justifies this doubt. It has lost its fervour and reality. It is like the counting of the beads of the Roman Catholic devotees ; but this unhappy travesty of the warm-hearted and living meeting for prayer by the people is not the offence, but its approach to a real confidence in the power of prayer. We are questioned, Why ask for rain when we know it must be dry ? Why selfishly seek safety when others are in peril ? Such underlining of truth may serve the purpose of willing unbelievers, but not of either thoughtful or anxious applicants. We ask, and subject the limits of the reply not to the implied impotence of God, but to His power, regulated by His wisdom and love. We ourselves can often see a margin for answers without serious interruption of other laws and interests, and naturally infer that God sees more. There may be in Providence, as in Nature, an abundance of wealth that waits to be used by God in answer to prayer. Happily, most have passed far beyond these doubts and fears. They look back on a life that has been one perpetual answer to prayer. Daily blessings seem to have been linked by a special tie to the former appeals for aid, and Divine Providence has taken care to mould the reply so as to fit into the person's entreaty. As in the beautiful

mechanism of the skilled workman, some analogue is in each part which so corresponds that no other reply could have met the case. In the presence of the Bible, and of such an experience as each believer has enjoyed, it seems profane to explain away the specific power of prayer; but error always thrives in the vicinity of Christian truth and privilege, and needs watchful resistance. Happy would it be if this unbelief were confined to scientists, literary guides, and Christian journals; but the Church of Christ itself has no adequate confidence in the power of prayer. The prayer we mean is not that of public worship, the prayer meeting, or even family devotion. These are common currents that necessarily carry all with them. But the personal individual importunity of a single heart struggling with God for an end that only He can effect—this violence of faith that will yield to nothing but a Divine limit—out of this importunity has come the greater successes of the Church. The heart-wrestling of martyrs gave them all the triumph they secured. The eloquence of Irving, Chalmers, Hall rested for its effect, as they well knew, on prayer, their own, and on other kindred spirits of obedient trust. The prayer meetings of the Church are of incalculable value, but even this may be exaggerated. The devout spirit alone with its God has the better chance of success. It then best knows what it wants and why it is at the throne of the heavenly grace. It has the door shut, and the tumult is outside, while it essays to tell to God its sorrow, its joy, and its needs. This loneliness nourishes importunity, and the appeals unhindered go direct to the Divine ear. Private prayer is the strength and the hope of the Church. The prayer meetings should be the confluence of these separate streams, not their substitute. The room, field, shop, and study are the consecrated places whence comes a diviner spirit than all other places know.

We would listen attentively to our monitors, who remind us that Hercules is deaf to our appeals for help if we do not put our shoulders to the wheel to get our waggon out of the ditch. We are anxious to take our part, but only on the condition that when we have, we are not to be told that the god has no power to aid. The waggon had better by far continue in the mud than that we be laughed at both for our folly and credulity! Perhaps our higher critics will see in our faith in prayer a new illustration of the ignorant fear and hope that underlie the appeals of heathen worshippers to their gods. The cool impudence

by which some modern philosophers attempt to reduce Christian faith and practice to the level of heathenism is in perfect keeping with this explanation. The "mental processes that are clearly visible in the creeds, legends, and mythologies of the past resolve the whole phenomena of Christianity; and prayer, with its results, are but the new phases of old prophecies, outside Jewish and Christian influences." These echoes of Paganism would have no charm for us but as they express the ignorant groping of heathendom for the better revelation that is ours. If our modern critics mistake the twilight for the meridian splendour of the day, we have no wish for their sight. We are content to live amidst the easily-used privileges of prayer. They are to us the source of perpetual joy and hope. Prayer has been and is—

The upward glancing of an eye
 When none but God is near.
 . . . The sublimest strains that reach
 The Majesty on high.

And happily they do not reach that Divine Father in vain. He knows how to answer him that calls, and to open to him that knocks. Even on this special question, "if any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not."