

## "On Prayer"

by  
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*"Oh Thou that hearest the Prayer,  
unto Thee shall all flesh come."*  
Psalm 65:2

Now the arguments that are brought against the possibility of answers to prayer may briefly be summed up under two heads--theological and scientific.

### I. [Theological Argument Against the Possibility of Answers to Prayer]

It is said [by those against the possibility of answers to prayer]: do you suppose that God is like a weak man moved and governed by emotion? Can you imagine that He will change His plans or purposes because He is appealed to by one of His creatures? Does not such a supposition entirely overthrow our idea of His majesty and wisdom? Has He not made the world and ordered all things as He knew to be best, and if He were to alter anything in answer to man's entreaty, would it not imply a defect and a weakness?

Surely, so we are told [by those against the possibility of answers to prayer], we must believe that He who is upon the throne of the universe is beyond any such weakness as we might pardon in a creature. Is it not the height of irreverence, not to say presumption, to imagine that the God who upholds all things by the word of His power can be stirred or moved or changed from all His purpose by any need or prayer of ours? Look rather at God in His majesty, the Maker and Ruler of all, to whom you must submit, but whom you can never hope to move; a God as great and mighty as the God I worship, prayer and petition cannot move, for in wisdom He hath made all things.

Now to this argument two answers may be given.

#### (1) [First Answer to this Argument Against the Possibility of Answers to Prayer]

We never supposed that prayer could change God; the effect of prayer is purely subjective. By prayer I do not expect to change God, but I do expect to change myself. Whether we ever get anything through prayer or not, the effect upon ourselves is so beneficial that it is worth cultivating a spirit of prayer.

Or again [it might be said by those against the possibility of answers to prayer], if we do receive answers to prayer, it is not because God has been moved or touched by our entreaty, but because prayer is the condition which He has laid down for obtaining certain gifts; but the prayer is really no appeal to His will or His heart, it is simply the fulfilment of a condition.

Then [if that objection be true] all the passionate appeals to God for mercy, for help, all the trustful casting of oneself in weakness upon Him who is so strong is utterly meaningless, nay, nothing but an effort at self-deception. It has no power to touch Him nor to move Him. So far as God Himself regards me in my great earnestness and faith, I might just as well appeal to a block of stone. [Also, if this objection be true,] St. Paul was wrong. He is *not* touched by the feeling of our infirmities [Hebrews 4:15]. He only waits till His creature has fulfilled the conditions He has arbitrarily and without any reason laid down, and when those conditions are fulfilled He will, with cold indifference, grant what we have asked.

[But] if this [assessment of prayer] were true, I can only think that the evil effects of prayer would far outweigh any advantage that might be gained by answers to our prayer; for there could be only one result--the more earnestly we prayed the more completely we should deceive ourselves and try to fancy God altogether different from what we know Him to be. [The awful effect would be that] in my prayer I entreat Him as though He could be touched, while my theory of prayer has taught me that He is altogether emotionless. Which of us, in time of great sorrow or great need, when we are ourselves most real and most intensely in earnest, could bring ourselves to pray if in such prayer there was no room for the outpouring of our hearts, no room for the expression of our trust; [and which of us could bring ourselves to pray] if we were taught, before we went upon our knees, to remember that the God to whom we were about to pray cannot be moved by our tears or appeals, but that [our request would be granted only] if we fulfil our side of the arbitrary condition He has laid down He will fulfil His?

No, my brethren, you will not pray if such is your belief. No man who ever really prayed will believe in such a theory of prayer as that. I would rather never pray than force myself to believe, that when I succeeded in praying most earnestly I only succeeded in a most perfect piece of self-deception. It is only to a God who can be moved to whom men would care to pray, "O Thou that hearest the prayer, to Thee shall all flesh come." [Psalm 65:2]

We must believe then, if we believe in prayer at all, that it is not the merely mechanical fulfilment of a condition that is purely arbitrary, but that it is a direct appeal to God's Will; that the end [purpose and goal] of prayer is to move God; that God is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. True, indeed, prayer has its subjective effects, and they are great. But at the close of my prayers I don't ask myself merely or chiefly, has that prayer done me good? but has it reached, has it touched God? I expect God to be moved, even as man is moved by the helpless appeal of weakness to strength.

And therefore the question has to be answered [by us who believe that God can be moved by our prayer]: is not this an unworthy conception of God's character [that we hold]? Does it not imply weakness? Is it not beneath our idea of the Ruler of the Universe to suppose that He can change His purpose because man has asked Him? In other words, is not emotion rather a defect than a perfection, and should we not believe a perfect Being to be above such weakness?

(2) [Second Answer to this Argument Against the Possibility of Answers to Prayer]

In answer I would ask: what is our idea of a perfect man? Should we imagine a man, the more perfect he became, to become more entirely emotionless, and a man who was absolutely perfect to be beyond all power of being moved, to be ruled by reason and conscience alone, helping indeed the needy and suffering, but not because he pitied them or was touched? Do we think that if the judge's voice trembles when he passes sentence of death it is a defect, or that it was a defect in the prodigal's father to be moved with pity for his returning son?

Certainly our highest ideal of man is of One Who was touched with every sight of human sorrow and suffering; Who healed, not as a duty to the sufferer, but as the Evangelist tells us, being moved with compassion [Matthew 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:14]; Who wept by the grave of Lazarus [John 11:34-36]; Who was won round by the appeals of the Syro-Phoenician woman for her suffering child [Mark 7:25-30]; Who seemed to be the only One to think of the bodily needs of the multitude who had followed Him into the wilderness to hear His teaching [Matthew 14:13-21]. What would the life of Jesus be if all those acts of pity and tenderness were omitted? Do we think His life less perfect because He mingled His tears with ours and felt for all our woes? Does it not rather add to His perfection? And He Who is our ideal of manhood is God Himself. He Who stopped by the wayside to heal the blind man from very pity was God [Luke 18:35-43]. He Who was touched by the tears of the widow of Nain and, so to speak, out of compassion for her changed His purpose and restored her son to life, was God [Luke 7:11-17]. Certainly then, Holy Scripture does not hesitate to describe for us a God Who is full of compassion, long-suffering and of great mercy; Who like a father pities His own children [Psalm 103:13]. If we believe the revelation which Scripture gives of the character of God, it is of a Being most readily moved by the appeal of suffering and needy man.

We then, as Christians, believe not only that it is not a defect but that it is one of the Divine perfections that He is full of compassion and mercy, long suffering and of great kindness; and this compassion is elicited in a peculiar way by prayer. Certainly it is so among men. The claim which the sufferer has upon us is increased by the fact that he has besought our assistance. What should we say of the parent who had no desire to grant his child's request simply because it is his request? I think that we should call him a hard man. I think that we should feel towards such a character some portion of the moral repugnance which would be evoked by a character wholly devoid of emotion; and this repugnance is of the nature of moral disapprobation. Doubtless we should condemn the parent who always yielded to the wish of a child, but we should also condemn the parent who felt no desire to yield and who refused his child's earnest petition without some degree of pain. In a word, desire to comply with a child's request is a motive which we expect to find in a parent's heart, and we would regard as morally defective a nature from which it is wholly absent.

Now if we examine the elements of which prayer to anyone consists, or rather, the feelings of which prayer is the natural result, we shall find no difficulty in understanding the desire to comply with an earnest petition which exists in every kindly nature. Their component feelings are two--desire and trust. Prayer is the result of earnest desire for the thing asked for, combined with trust, more or less firm, in the person from whom it is asked, that he will be disposed to grant the request. It is this latter element, often very weak but never wholly

absent, which I conceive distinguishes the case of one who prays from the case of one who desires without praying. It is the presence of this element of trust which disposes a man [who receives a petition] to prefer a supplicant [one who prays humbly] to one, quite as deserving, [but] who does not supplicate [pray humbly]. In man, we know as a fact that there is nothing which more powerfully affects a generous mind than trust reposed in it by another; and I may add, it is an emotion of which our moral sense entirely approves; and if among the shades of human guilt we would distinguish one of surpassing darkness, it is the guilt of trust betrayed.

Now, in reasoning from the case of petitions addressed to man to that of petitions addressed to God, the principles already laid down allow us to conclude that the presence of the element of trust will justify a preference on the part of God for the person in whom that element is found; so that he might fairly receive a blessing which was withheld from one equally deserving in other respects, from whose mind the element of trust was absent. How entirely this principle pervades the New Testament I need hardly remind you. In truth, it is the groundwork of Christianity.

It is not then contrary to our idea of the perfection of God's character that He can be moved to grant us our requests. It is even according to all our analogy from human perfection that He is moved especially by the fact that man trusts Him enough to appeal to Him, and therefore, because we so believe we say, "O Thou that hearest the prayer, to Thee shall all flesh come." [Psalm 65:2]

"On Prayer" in B. W. Maturin, *Sermons and Sermon Notes*, ed. Wilfred Ward (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1917). **Note:** The sermon has been condensed; the text has not been modified, except numerous bracketed comments were added for clarity, which necessitated some change in punctuation; long paragraphs have been divided.