

## "Prayer"

by  
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*"He spake a parable unto them to this end,  
that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."*

Luke 18:1

*Note:* the following is an excerpt from the above sermon; see below for full bibliographic details.

But what if, with every disposition and desire to improve in religion--what if, with the clearest conviction and the fullest sense of our wants before God--we still find that our hearts are cold in the performance of the task; that (at least) we have no fervency of spirit, no ardor in supplication; that whether in our private or public devotions our thoughts rove in spite of us, occasionally abroad, and rest upon other objects while our lips repeat their mechanical exercise?

Or what if, having prayed long and earnestly for such as we feel to be fitting objects of prayer--for ability to keep our good resolutions, for the correction of some evil habit or the extinction of some irregular desire, for the removal of involuntary evil thoughts or of religious perplexities and doubts, for the spirit of prayer itself, for an improved manner of participation in all the acts of divine worship, for changes in our own circumstances or in the state of affairs around us (which would seem manifestly calculated to promote our usefulness or the interests of religion; what if, having prayed long for any or all of these we still have prayed in vain, till we begin to think ourselves excluded from the benefit of those encouraging promises, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you"--"If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." We seem to suffer from the principle laid down by St. James, "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss." Yet, in *what point* we ask *amiss* we are incapable of ascertaining.

To all these different complaints we must reply, Persevere, persevere, persevere! The wanderings and distractions to which we may be subject, although we ought still to struggle against them, will never perhaps be totally subdued. Some degree of this imperfection is probably inseparable from nature. And how often do we see it feelingly lamented in the posthumous private devotions of men who have truly deserved the name of *saints!*

We have to do with an indulgent Master, Who, if the heart be truly humble and the spirit truly willing, will not visit it upon us severely that the flesh is weak. It is also useful for us that our presumption should be chastised by feeling that, while we are encumbered with this house of clay, we cannot be exempt from the mixture of infirmity; and that, although in the resurrection we shall be as the angels of God in heaven, we never can be so while on earth. I confess, in fact, that I would rather hear a believer lament his deficiencies in prayer than boast of his enjoyments, and should regard it as a better evidence of his spiritual state.

And when we speak of defect of ardency in prayer, it is necessary that we should understand what we mean. Our necessities are great and our sense of them ought to be deep; our love

ought also to be lively. And to all this our devotion should correspond. Yet, possibly we are coveting (if I may so express it) a style of praying which has more to do than we suspect with a fervid temperament, or even with a meretricious [showy/superficial] excitement of the imagination. Prayer, although it should be earnest and reverent--prompted by a sense of our wants before God, springing from fixed principles of faith and love, and flowing immediately forth from the depths of the heart--yet may be acceptably offered in the form of a calm, solemn, and composed address. And among the varieties afforded in the examples of prayer recorded in Scripture, we see little which exhibits the character of an agitated and tumultuous vehemence.

Let me not however be misunderstood, for [we ask that] God in His mercy keep us from being content with formality and coldness! Let me not be supposed to exclude the strivings of the soul when it longs to lift itself on high and feels that its wings are clogged with the base particles of earth; the sorrow, even the agony, of the heart under the consciousness of multiplied failures and transgressions; nor, on the other hand, the light and comfort which breaks in upon it in happier intervals when its yearnings are graciously met.

But again, with respect to prayers long offered in vain, the first step to be recommended is to satisfy ourselves whether we have proved our sincerity and at the same time that we have sought the grace of God above, have in dependence upon Him maintained the conflict faithfully and done all that human weakness could do to master the object ourselves. And if we have, and still have failed, we may confide in Almighty God that in His own good time He will remove our trial or temptation, if to remove it be really for our advantage (with which condition, and the committal of our cause into the hands of His wisdom, we ought to qualify our prayers).

But possibly our struggle with that temptation is precisely the proof of our faith and constancy, which it is the will of God to exact; or the continuance of the evil which we deprecate is itself the very exercise of our perseverance in prayer, by which it pleases Him to put us to the test. The text instructs us not only "that men ought *always* to pray," but that they ought "*not to faint*." Prayer, therefore, itself is still the cure. And it is always to be remembered that we are not to look, in general, either for a *sensible effect* in *immediate* answer to our prayers or an infallible guidance when we seek to be led in the way of truth. For this would be little short of asking a sign from heaven, and would totally subvert the appointed system of our Christian warfare and probation. How could there be any trial of faith and patience if men were sure always to gain the object of their prayers by as direct and perceptible a consequence as they procure the article for which they make payments to their brethren among mankind? Or where would there be any field for the exercise of spiritual discernment for steadfastness and soundness of belief, for resistance to every passing *wind of doctrine*, if God dealt out information to those who ask it by as regular a return as our correspondents in the transactions of the world?

The wants which the sincere Christian has represented to his Father will always be supplied at such time and in such measure as the Father knows to be for his happiness and health. The very turn of affairs which had disappointed his hopes and caused him to think the object lost will, perhaps, issue in some point which his eye could not command, and develop to him in its subsequent course the conduct of a power which sat above him and saw more than mortal ken [perception]. The reward of his perseverance, though seemingly long delayed, will come at last:--"though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it

will not tarry." "O tarry thou the Lord's leisure: be strong, and He shall comfort thine heart." "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness." *His* measure of the lapse of time is not adjusted to the scale of impatient and short-sighted creatures:--"Hear," says our Saviour in the parable introduced by the words of our text, "hear what the *unjust judge* saith. And shall not *God* avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, *though He bear long with them?*" God, who is not only a *just Judge* but a merciful Father,--"I tell you that He will avenge them *speedily.*" . . .

The example proposed to our imitation is that of an importunity not to be rebuffed. And there are other passages of Scripture in which terms equally strong and decided are employed to dissipate the scruples and to stimulate the backwardness of nature. In the parable subjoined, in St. Luke's Gospel, to the Lord's prayer, one friend is represented as at first resolutely refusing to be disturbed for a matter of neighbourly accommodation, but yielding in the end to the pertinacity of the other. And the word in the original Greek which we there render importunity is of such force as hardly to bear a literal translation, signifying properly his effrontery, his want [lack] of shame. We are instructed also by scriptural precept and example to "continue instant," --to strive "fervently in prayers," and to watch "thereunto with all perseverance."

Excerpt from Sermon XIII, "Prayer," by George Jehoshaphat Mountain, *Sermons* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1865).