

CHARLES BRENT

WITH GOD IN THE
WORLD: A SERIES OF
PAPERS

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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24169604

With God in the World: A Series of Papers:

ISBN <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/34706>

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Preface

Charles Darwin says somewhere that "the only object in writing a book is a proof of earnestness." Whether it is the only object, may be a question; it is certainly one object. And the poorest book that ever went to press, merits respect, provided that its writer is sincere and speaks from conviction. It is this and the sense that "thought is not our own until we impart it" to others, that has encouraged me to write these pages – originally a series of papers prepared for the Saint Andrew's Cross, the organ of a Society for which I am glad to profess publicly a deep admiration and affection. Often, more frequently far than is noted, I have borrowed the thought and language of others to express my own mind. I send out this little volume with the hope that, before it meets with the fate of the ephemeral literature to which it belongs, it may help a few here and there to take up life's journey with steadier steps and cheerier mien.

C. H. B.

Chapter I

The Universal Art

It is productive of much mischief to try to make people believe that the life of prayer is easy. In reality there is nothing quite so difficult as strong prayer, nothing so worthy of the attention and the exercise of all the fine parts of a great manhood. On the other hand there is no man who is not equal to the task. So splendid has this human nature of ours become through the Incarnation that it can bear any strain and meet any demand that God sees fit to put upon it. Some duties are individual and special, and there is exemption from them for the many, but there is never any absolution from a duty for which a man has a capacity. There is one universal society, the Church, for which all are eligible and with which all are bound to unite; there is one universal book, the Bible, which all can understand and which it is the duty of all to read; there is one universal art, prayer, in which all may become well skilled and to the acquirement of which all must bend their energies.

Active or dormant, the instinct of prayer abides, a faithful tenant, in every soul. The peasants who went to the Incarnate One and said "Lord, teach us to pray," were representative of a whole race, a race which feels stirring within its breast a capacity for prayer, but whose power to pray falls far short of the desire. The

instinct to pray may be undeveloped, or paralyzed by violence, or it may lie bed-ridden in the soul through long neglect; but even so, no numbed faculty is more readily roused to life and nerved to action than that of prayer. The faculty is there; no one is without it. Whether it expands, and how, is only a question of the will of the person concerned.

It is good to be quite honest and frank. Is it not so that the real thing that makes men dumb towards God is, in the first instance, at any rate, not intellectual doubt about the efficacy of prayer but the difficulty of it all – the rebellion of the flesh, the strain upon the attention, the claim upon the time? Are not the common stumbling-blocks in the way of prayer incidental rather than essential? Do men give up prayer because they are conscientiously convinced that they would do violence to their noble nature if they were to persist in its exercise? Nothing can release a man from the duty of praying but the profound conviction that it would be a sin for him to continue to pray. And it might be safely added that any one thus momentarily caught in the toils of pure reason, any one endowed with such a delicate conscience as would lead to this, must eventually turn again with joy to the neglected task. Even the great agnostic scientist, Tyndall, who, of course, had a very limited view of what prayer was capable of accomplishing, and was in a position to perceive only one dim ray of its beauty – its subjective refining influence upon the petitioner – even such an one declares that "prayer in its purer forms hints at disciplines which few of us can

neglect without moral loss."¹

How to perfect the talent of prayer – that is the question. Bent upon this errand many wind themselves in the folds of complicated rules or bathe themselves in the vapour of fascinating theories, all to no purpose. Or, as in the case of most things worth coveting, they cast around for some easy way of attainment, only to experience that where they "looked for crowns to fall," they "find the tug's to come, – that's all." Simplicity and courage are two virtues indispensable for those who covet to pray well. Especially must they be ready to embrace difficulty and court pain – and that through the long stretch of a life-time.

Let no man think that sudden in a minute
All is accomplished and the work is done; —
Though with thine earliest dawn thou shouldst begin it
Scarce were it ended in thy setting sun.

Let it be clearly understood at the outset, then, that though the art of prayer is a universal art it is the most difficult of all. But even so this is not an excuse for discouragement or a justification of spiritual indolence, for a man's best desires are always the index and measure of his possibilities; and the most difficult duty that a man is capable of doing is the duty that above all he should do.

¹ *On Prayer as a form of Physical Energy.*

A moment's reflection must convince us that man cannot teach man to pray, because of what prayer is. Prayer is man's side of converse with God; it is speech Godward. How passing absurd it would be for a third person to presume to instruct either one of two companions how to hold converse with his friend. Were he to venture the impertinence he would develop in his pupil the curse of self-consciousness – that is all. We can learn to converse with men only by conversing; we can learn to pray to God only by praying. Prayer is a universal art, but there is only one Teacher for all, and He never teaches two persons in exactly the same way. God's friendships are as diverse as the souls with whom He interchanges confidences. These confidences must come from Himself; none else can impart them. There are certain great truths about prayer which may be formulated to good purpose – fundamental laws governing all fellowship with God, laws to which all in common must give heed; but beyond this one may not venture. In the matter of prayer as in all else God reserves to Himself the exclusive right of imparting His most intimate secrets directly to each separate soul, having a separate confidence for each according to its capacity, temperament, and all those qualities which distinguish every man from every other man.

Though we may have learned the fundamental principles of prayer from devout friends and teachers, whatever we really know of prayer we have learned by praying. Even the mother, at whose knee the earliest phrases of prayer were lisped out,

at the best only led us gently into the presence of God. It is not too much to say that the Church herself cannot do more than put the soul very near God and leave it there, trusting that something will come of it. The rest must proceed in direct course from the lips of the Most High Himself. So delicate and subtle is the correspondence between the soul and God, so "intensely personal" a thing is prayer² that we are often seriously hindered rather than helped by the blundering but well-intended efforts of those who would guide us to better devotion. Even to put a manual of private prayers into the hands of some persons who have not been accustomed to reach God through a book might be sufficient to mar the spontaneity of their approach to Him and check the intimate relations with Him which have hitherto always obtained. Because it suits one person's temperament to call in the aid of a manual it by no means follows that every one else should be presented with a copy of the book. Indeed happy are those souls who have always been able to speak with a reverent yet free familiarity with God, having nothing to aid save the vision of His face; and the final aim of every good manual is to emancipate the soul into the joyousness of a spontaneity which is wholly devoid of blighting self-consciousness.

It ought to be further added that every one who regularly uses set forms of prayer should habitually incorporate into his devotions at least some words of his own which, however poor and few, yet are fresh and new from his heart. Of course what

² *Maturin.*

has been said about forms of prayer applies exclusively to private devotions. When the great corporate life of the Church speaks in worship it must be with one clear voice unmixed with the idiosyncrasies of the individual and summing up the aspirations of the best. But of this later.

The world just now is sadly in need of better service, but before this can be rendered there must be better prayer. A low standard of prayer means a low standard of character and a low standard of service. Those alone labour effectively among men who impetuously fling themselves upward towards God. In view of this it is a comfort to feel that no earnest man, whatever be the stage of his spiritual development, can be satisfied with his present attainments in his life of prayer. Fortunately for us, here as well as in other departments of life the ideal is always pressing itself upon our notice and making the actual blush with shame for what it is. And it is just because this is so that there is hope of better things. The ideal beckons as well as condemns. What if long steep steps of toil, strewn with the stones of difficulty, lie in between! God's home is far up on the hills, and nowhere is He so easily found as in a difficulty. As has been said, prayer is quite the most difficult task a man can undertake; but it has this gracious compensation that in no other duty does God lend such direct, face-to-face help. Man may speak wise words about prayer; the Church may bid to prayer; but God alone can unfold to souls the delicate secrets of prayer. The best help is for the hardest duty – the help that comes straight from the Lord.

Chapter II

Friendship with God – Looking

Yes, prayer is speech Godward, and worship is man's whole life of friendship with God, flowing out, as it were, of all that tide of emotion and service which is love's best speech. It is by thinking, then, of the nature of fellowship between man and man, which is the most beautiful thing in the world excepting only fellowship with God, that we can get substantial help in developing the life of prayer. Consider the Christian fellowship of two noble characters. It is "the greatest love and the greatest usefulness, and the most open communication, and the noblest sufferings, and the most exemplar faithfulness, and the severest truth and the heartiest counsel, and the greatest union of minds," – Jeremy Taylor stops here only because he has exhausted his stock of sublime phrases – "of which brave men and women are capable."³

Friendship is a full, steady stream, not intermittent or spasmodic. It is not something which lasts only when each looks into the other's eyes; for "distance sometimes endears friendship, and absence sweeteneth it." It moves and expands the life even when the mind is busied with matters prosaic and vexatious, even when there is no inward contemplation of the features or

³ *Works: Vol. i. 72.*

character of the absent friend. And yet, although friendship does not consist in face-to-face communication one with another, it is in this that it takes its rise, it is by this that it is fed. Fellowship is not the same as friendship, but there can be no friendship without fellowship. That is to say, there must be certain definite, formal acts, acts not made once for all, but repeated as often as opportunity is given; such form the cradle and nursery of friendship. In themselves they are not much – a grasp of the hand, a smile, a simple gift, a conventional salutation, a familiar talk about familiar things – but they introduce soul to soul, and through them each gives to the other his deepest self.

Friendship between man and man is no vague, intangible thing whose only reality is its name. Much less can one think thus of friendship with God. Friendship with God is the friendship of friendships. While it lives on strong and true even when we are not in conscious fellowship with Him, moments of conscious realization and contemplation of His person, character and presence are as essential to friendship with Him as food is necessary for the sustenance of life. There must be times of prayer and occasions of definite, formal approach to Him, the more the better, provided they be healthy and free. It is not an arbitrary enactment that declares morning, noonday and evening to be the moments of time when the soul of man should with peculiar intensity lift up its gaze unto the hills.⁴ One recognizes immediately the inherent fitness of having conscious fellowship

⁴ *Ps. lv: 17.*

with God at the opening, in the middle and at the close of day. In the morning, – because man's powers are then replete with life, his will nerved to act, his eye clear to see; never is he so well able to gain a vision of God, whether in the solitude of his room or in the quiet of the Church at an early Eucharist, as in the first hours of a new day. At noon, – because the soul like the body needs a mid-day rest; the dust of activity and the distractions of business will have dimmed the morning vision before the day is full gone, and it is good to refresh the nature by again, if it be only for a brief moment, looking straight up into the face of the Most High. At night, – for the evening shadows find God's servant with soiled soul and drooping aspirations in sore need of that cleansing and cheer which the sight of God imparts.

And the life of prayer works in a circle. The devotions of the morning give tone to those which come at noon and night, while the night prayers in turn determine the quality of the morrow's. Men usually wake in the temper of mind in which they went to sleep. It is all-important to gain a clear vision of God as the last conscious act before going to rest. The founder of French socialism was awakened every morning by a valet who said: "Remember, Monsieur le Comte, that you have great things to do." But it is not men who aspire only or chiefly in the morning that achieve great things, but rather those who aspire at night. What is of nature in the morning is of grace at night. The vision that comes easily at the beginning of the unused stretch of a new day is harder to see when disappointment and failure have

clouded the eye of hope; but it means more. The men who attain the highlands of the spiritual life never "sleep with the wings of aspiration furled."

Of course God is always with us, always looking at us with searching yet loving scrutiny. It would be impossible for us to be more completely in His presence than we are; for in Him "we live, and move, and have our being." But for the most part our lives are spent without much conscious recognition of the fact. He will be no more present at the last day when we stand before His throne than He is now. The only difference will be that then we shall see Him as He sees us; we shall be so wholly absorbed by that consciousness that there will be room for no other consideration as, God grant, there will be no other desire. But before that moment comes men must practise looking into His face by faith so that it will not be unfamiliar as the face of a stranger when the last veil is swept aside.

Among men contemplation of another's personality is the requisite preliminary of fellowship with him. Fellowship can begin only when there is a mutual recognition each of his fellow's presence. Personality is the most powerful magnet the world knows; and the finer the personality the more readily will all one's best impulses be set in motion and attracted to it. How vain then is it to attempt to speak to God before the consciousness of His living, loving presence has caught the attention and absorbed the mind – or at any rate until we have done our best to see Him, attentive, sympathetic, with His gaze fixed upon us. Power

to pray is proportionate to the vividness of our consciousness of His presence and personality. When a man is talking to a companion his mind is occupied with the sense of the presence of an attentive, sympathetic personality rather than with the thought of the precise words he is going to use. His fellow acts as a magnet to extract his thoughts. An orator makes his finest appeal when he is least conscious of himself and most conscious of his audience. Just so then is it with speech Godward. The moment a man is assured that God's personality is present and that His ear is opened earthward, speech heavenward is a power and a joy, and only then. Many make prayer a fine intellectual exercise or a training school for the attention – this and nothing more. They strain their utmost, and doubtless they succeed well, to understand each sentence uttered and to speak it intelligently. Their minds are on what they are saying rather than on the Person to Whom they are saying it. They reap about the same benefit as they would if they recited attentively a scene from Shakespeare.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills." The vision of God unseals the lips of man. Herein lies strength for conflict with the common enemy of the praying world known as wandering thoughts. Personality will enchain attention when the most interesting intellectual, moral and spiritual concerns will fail to attract. If the eye is fixed on God thought may roam where it will without irreverence, for every thought is then converted into a prayer. Some have found it a useful thing when their minds have wandered off from devotion and been snared by some good but

irrelevant consideration, not to cast away the offending thought as the eyes are again lifted to the Divine Face, but to take it captive, carry it into the presence of God and weave it into a prayer before putting it aside and resuming the original topic. This is to lead captivity captive.

It is hard for those to see God's face who confine their contemplation of spiritual things to moments of formal devotion, who, while occupied with material things, do not explore what is beneath and beyond the visible, who do not strive to discern the moral and religious aspect of every phase of life. On the other hand the vision of God becomes increasingly clear to such as look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen. These may be exceedingly practical people, people ever active in the commonplace duties of life, but their wont is to cast everything into the upward sweep of the Ascension of Jesus and everything is seen by them with the glow of heaven upon it. Of course they pray well.

After all "the sin of inattention" does not begin at the time of formal approach to God. It only makes itself peculiarly manifest then. If a person lives listlessly and does not put his full force into the ordinary duties of his life where the aids to attention are plenty, how can he expect to command his mind at those times when it is called upon to make a supreme act of attentiveness and see Him Who is invisible? A good man of our day⁵ said of himself: "My greatest help in life has been the blessed habit of

⁵ *Charles Kingsley.*

intensity. I go at what I am about as if there was nothing else in the world for the time being."

Here then are two obvious, simple and rational principles upon obedience to which hinges the ability to make one's own the growing vision of God – the habit of spiritualizing the commonplace and the habit of attention in work. Whoever equips himself with them has made the best possible preparation for approach to God. It is an indirect way of getting at things, it is true; but often the method that is most indirect is the most direct. It is certainly so in this case.

Of course in considering the subject of God's Being one cannot wholly avoid the difficult question of personality. It would be aside from our purpose, however, to discuss the matter philosophically. For all practical purposes there is ample and secure footing near at hand. When by faith we look toward God, it is not toward an immovable but beautiful statue we turn, not to an abstract quality or a tendency that makes for righteousness, but to One Who looks with responsive gaze, Who notes our desires, Who heeds our words, Who lives, Who loves, Who acts. It is a horrible and deadening travesty of the truth to conceive of God as a great, impassive Being, seated on a throne of majesty, drinking in all the life and worship that flow from the service of His myriad creatures, Himself receiving all and giving none. Though probably no one believes this as a matter of theory, when men look for God in the practice of prayer too often it is such a God they find. And many can say with Augustine as they review

moments of fruitless devotional effort in the past: "My error was my God."⁶ The truth is that though a great tide of energy moves ceaselessly toward God, it is but the shadow of what comes from Him. Indeed He is the Source of the life which flows inward toward Him as much as of that which flows outward from Him. He is undying energy, with unerring purpose, moving swiftly and noiselessly among men, striving to burn eternal life into their lame, stained, meagre souls. He is the Father that goes out to meet the returning profligate, the Shepherd that follows the track of the wandering sheep. Man has never yet had to wait for Him. He has always been as close to man as man would let Him come. His hands have never ceased to beat upon the bars of man's self-will to force an entrance into starved human nature. All this must be in man's conception of God as he approaches Him.

What above all gives to God that which enables man to see Him is the Incarnation. In the Godhead is a familiar figure – the figure of Man. It was this that absorbed the attention of the dying Stephen. The Son of Man standing on God's right hand, was the vision that enthralled him as the stones battered out his life. And it is this same vision that makes the unseen world a reality to men now. Humanity is there at its centre, the pledge of sympathy, the promise of victory. Not by a flight of imagination but by the exercise of insight we can look and see the sympathetic face of the Son of Man, who is also the Son of God; and with the sight

⁶ *For thou wert not thyself, but a mere phantom, and my error was my God. Confessions, Bk. iv. 7.*

fellowship with God becomes possible, the string of the tongue is loosed and we are ready to pray.

Chapter III

Friendship with God – Speaking

Quite a sufficient guide as to how God should be addressed is afforded by the Lord's Prayer. It was given by the Master in response to the earnest request of His disciples for instruction in prayer. Brief, compact and complete, it is as it were the Christian seed-prayer. Once let it be planted in the heart of a Church or the soul of a child of God and it will grow into the glowing devotion of wondrous collects and rich liturgies. Indeed there is no Christian prayer worth anything which does not owe its whole merit to the Lord's Prayer; and the noblest liturgy of the Church is but the expansion and application of the same. Hence it is the touchstone of all prayer. By it the Christian's mode of address to God is finally approved or condemned.

How important is it, then, that a man should know the Lord's Prayer! – know it, not merely as a formula, but as the embodiment of the vital principles of converse with God. The process of yore must be repeated by the disciples of to-day. Like their predecessors of Galilee they must approach the unchangeable One and prefer the old entreaty: "Lord, teach us to pray." Nothing short of this will suffice. Then if they listen they will receive the familiar measures of the "Our Father" as a new and personal gift fresh and living from the lips of Jesus. It is good

sometimes to "wait still upon God" between the sentences, and let the Holy Spirit apply each several petition to one's own special case and to all those interests which concern one's life – in sooth, translate it into the terms of our own day and generation. It is thus that the compressed richness of the Lord's Prayer is unfolded.

The Lord's Prayer is one of those most precious of things known as common property. But a common possession to be worth anything to anybody must be related by every one of the multitude who claim a share in it, each to his own personality. Before common property can fully justify its claim to be common, it must become in a sense private by a process of implicit appropriation on the part of the individuals concerned. So while the Lord's Prayer ideally belongs to every child of God as the common heritage of prayer, it actually belongs only to those who have recognized and used it as a personal, though not exclusive, gift from its Author.

Not the least important characteristic of the Lord's Prayer is its simplicity in thought and expression. Surely it is not without significance that as it stands in the English tongue it is the purest piece of Saxon in literature, a monument of clearness and simplicity. God neither speaks or desires to be spoken to in grandiloquent language which belongs to the courts of earthly kings. The difficulty that so many persons find in praying without the aid of some form of devotion is largely due to the impression that the language needed for address to God is not such as an ordinary mortal can frame. There are four leading principles, the

first of which contradicts this misconception, that stand out in bold prominence in the Lord's Prayer, and tell us what all speech Godward should be.

§ 1. *Prayer must be familiar yet reverent.* We are taught to address God as our Father. What a host of intimate confidences this single word calls up! There is no familiarity so close as that between child and father, no sympathy so sensitive. When Scripture declares that Enoch walked with God, whatever else it means beyond, it means at least that Enoch was able to hold familiar converse with God in prayer. Those who knew him could find no better way of describing his relationship with God than by drawing the picture of the familiar companionship of two intimate friends. Or again, when Abraham is termed the friend of God it implies, as well as much beside, that he knew how to speak familiarly yet acceptably to God. All this was long ago, before man's full relation to God was made known. The coming of the Son of God as the Son of Man makes what was really deep seem shallow, so mighty was the change that was wrought. It is not merely as an ordinary friend that the Christian may speak to God, but as a son. Filial relations are the highest type of friendship.

But familiarity must be chastened by reverence, a quality strangely lacking in our national character. It would seem as though in the boldness of our search for independence reverence had been largely forfeited. The Father addressed is in heaven. That is He is where holiness prevails to the utter exclusion of sin. So while we may tell out the whole mind it must be done

with regard for the moral character of God and His eternal and infinite attributes; with the familiarity, not of equals, but of lowly souls addressing sympathetic greatness and holiness. To dwell exclusively on either one of these two considerations, God's Fatherhood or His infinite character, will result, on the one hand, in familiarity without reverence; or, on the other, in reverence without familiarity. Familiarity without the discipline of reverence is desecrating impertinence, and reverence without the warmth of familiarity is chilling formalism.

§ 2. *Prayer should be comprehensive yet definite.* In the Lord's Prayer each petition gathers into its grasp whole groups of desires, and all the petitions taken together give shelter under their hospitable shadow to every need and every aspiration that belong to human life. Great gifts are asked for – "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." In such requests we even claim things *for* God as well as *from* Him. The dignity of each several petition is marked. We are taught to expect royal gifts from our royal Father, gifts worthy of members of that royal family, the children of the Incarnation. The effect of the persistent use of these comprehensive petitions has filtered right through human experience and taught man to expect great things in all departments of life, in science, in invention, in literature. Man's best desires have become a true measure of his possibilities.

The prayer that is shaped after the great model must not be timid or faltering, but bold and aspiring. It is a great mistake for

one to be satisfied with praying for, say, purity instead of "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is to ask for the crumb from the rich man's table when the rich man is beseeching you to sit by his side and share all that he has. Let us pray for purity by all means, though not as if it were a flower that grew in a bed all by itself. We can get one Christian grace only by aiming at all.

No less marked than the comprehension is the definiteness of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Each is as clear cut as a crystal. There is no mistaking its meaning. Like the articles of the Creed they are all too simple to be vague, and they carry their meaning on their face. It is a common fault in prayer to be content with a certain comprehension that abjures definiteness. If the latter without the former can at the best make a character of but small stature, the former without the latter can make no character at all. Take the one matter of penitence. The mere admission of sinfulness, as in the prayer of the publican, is but the first moan of penitence. A riper penitence rises from the vague to the definite in declaring the sins, and not only the sinfulness, for which God's mercy is implored. True comprehension implies detailed knowledge and minute accuracy.

§ 3. *Prayer should be social rather than individual in spirit.* *Our Father; forgive us.* The "our" and the "us" warn men never to think of themselves as units, or of religion as a private transaction between God and the individual. God regards each as a part *of*, and never apart *from*, the whole race, at the same time cherishing

each part as though it were the whole. Consequently petitions for others ought to keep even pace with those for ourselves. A moment's reflection shows how true philosophically the social form of prayer is. So closely is the web of human life woven that what touches one touches two at least, unless a man be a hermit, when he is as good as dead. Even supposing one were to pray for a spiritual gift for himself alone and receive it, it would at once become the property of others in some measure at any rate. It is an inflexible law that the righteousness or the evil, as the case may be, which dwells in a man, becomes forthwith the righteousness or the evil of the society to which he belongs. It is only common sense then to pray "give us" and "forgive us" rather than "give me" and "forgive me."

Of course, this does not mean that "I" and "me" should never occur in our private prayers. They must do so. But I am to love my neighbour as myself on my knees as well as in society. My neighbour is my other or second self to which I owe an equal duty of prayer with myself. To link "their" or "his" with "mine" on equal terms is really to say "our"; to ask for others separately what I have already claimed for myself is to be social rather than individual in prayer.

It would follow, then, that intercessory prayer is not a work of extraordinary merit but a necessary element of devotion. It is the simple recognition in worship of the fundamental law of human life that no man lives or dies alone. But intercession rises to sublime heights when it claims the privilege and the power

for each child of God to gather up in his arms the whole family to which he belongs, and carry it with its multifold needs and its glorious possibilities into the presence of the common Father for blessing and protection. It is grand to feel that the Christian can lift, by the power of prayer, a myriad as easily as one, that he can hold in his grasp the whole Church as firmly as a single parish, and can bring down showers of blessing on an entire race as readily as the few drops needed for his own little plot.

§ 4. *Prayer must maintain proper proportions.* Spiritual needs are paramount, material are secondary. Out of seven petitions six bear upon the invisible foundations of life and the remaining one alone is concerned, directly at any rate, with things material. It is further remarkable that the latter is as modest as the former are bold. The soul needs the whole of God's eternal Kingdom where the body requires but bread for the day. The Lord's Prayer does not teach asceticism, but it certainly condemns luxury, and implies that the physical nature requires a minimum rather than a maximum of attention and care.

With the vision of God above and the Christian seed-prayer well planted in the soul, man can dare to hope that his speech Godward will not waste itself in hollow echoes, but will travel straight up to the throne of Grace and bring a speedy answer.

Chapter IV

Friendship with God – The Response

Probably the greatest result of the life of prayer is an unconscious but steady growth into the knowledge of the mind of God and into conformity with His will; for after all prayer is not so much the means whereby God's will is bent to man's desires as it is that whereby man's will is bent to God's desires. While Jesus readily responded to the requests and inquiries of His disciples His great gift to them was Himself, His personality. He called His apostles that they "should be with Him." The all-important thing is not to live apart from God, but as far as possible to be consciously with Him. It must needs be that those who look much into His face will become like Him. Man reflects in himself his environment, especially if he surrenders himself unreservedly to its influence. In the case of God, "in Whom we live and move and have our being," the influence is not passive, but active in impressing its character upon us. It is not as the white of the land of snow which coats its animals with its own colour; it is a Person. The complete vision of Christ will mean the complete transformation of man – "We shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." If there were no other conceivable result from prayer than just this, it would even so be wonderful. Certainly that which we treasure most in companionship with an earthly

friend is not his counsel or service; it is the touch of his soul upon our own; it is the embrace of his whole being that wraps itself about our whole being. One may say then that the real end of prayer is not so much to get this or that single desire granted, as to put human life into full and joyful conformity with the will of God.

This thought, beautiful and true as it is, would be too intangible and too great a tax upon faith, unless man had some more or less definite and immediate recognition of his heavenward appeals. The Old Testament is a standing witness to God's consideration for human limitations and weakness. He sometimes gave man less than the best because of the latter's inability to receive the best, though He always gave as much as could be received, until at last He gave His Son. Now it is in this same way that He deals with His children of to-day. At first the lesser gifts are sought for and given, but as spiritual life ripens what man craves most for and what God is most eager to grant is that the Father's will may be wholly worked out in His child. Trust so grows that there can be no such thing as disappointment regarding the way God treats our petitions.

Not Thy gifts I seek, O Lord;
Not Thy gifts but Thee.
What were all Thy boundless store
Without Thyself? What less or more?
Not Thy gifts but Thee.

This frame of mind, however, belongs to the to-morrow of most lives. For the present the lesser gifts are the best we are equal to. And it cannot be too often or too strongly said that God has direct answers to prayer for every soul that appeals to Him. But many fail to recognize the answer when it comes because of inattention. If God is to be heard when He speaks we must give heed. It is no less a duty to "wait still upon God" than it is to address Him in prayer. A one-sided conversation is not a conversation at all. Conversation requires an interchange of thought. He who is one moment the speaker must the next become the listener, intent upon the words of his companion. The expectation of an answer to prayer is laid down as a condition of there being one.

§ 1. Oftentimes God's answer is in the shape of an action rather than a voice. When we entreat a friend to do something for us, speedy compliance is a sufficient response to the request. If we are certain of the person addressed no verbal assurance is required. The character of our friend is the guarantee that the petition will be heeded. When, therefore, God is petitioned to do, we must look for an action rather than listen for a voice.

There are some requests the answer to which returns with the speed of a flash of light, as, for instance, when we ask God to give us some Christian grace or disposition of heart. The giving comes with the asking.⁷ A man may not be strong enough to retain the gift, but it actually becomes his before he rises from his knees.

⁷ *St. Mark xi: 24.*

The rationalist will object to this, that such an answer to prayer is nothing more than the subjective effect of a given attitude of mind. Granted; but that makes it none the less the direct work of God. Secondary or scientific causes exhibit to the observer the method by which God fulfils His purposes. The stone falls to the ground according to the law of gravitation, but God is behind the law controlling it. The distinguishing feature of the Jewish mode of thought was the way in which it related all things to God's immediate activity. The Old Testament is the book of God's immanence. The present attitude of mind leads men to rest in all causes short of God, and even to forget the need of a Cause of causes. An earnest student of nature remarked upon leaving her microscope: "I have found a universe worthy of God." She at least felt that a revelation of secondary causes was, at the same time, a new revelation of the God of causes.

If it could be proved that all answers to prayer came according to the working of natural law, it would not eliminate God from the process, or have any sort of bearing upon the efficacy of prayer. All we know of God's method of work demonstrates His love of law; and it would be no surprise, but rather what we should expect, to find that all the unseen stretches of life are equally within the domain of His law and order.⁸

§ 2. But when occasion requires, the reply to speech Godward comes in the shape of a voice. In one sense God is always speaking; He is never still. Just as in prayer it is not we who

⁸ Cf. Liddon, *Advent in St. Paul's*, p. 22.

momentarily catch His attention but He ours, so when we fail to hear His voice it is not because He is not speaking so much as that we are not listening. We may hear sounds, as a language with which we are not conversant, but be unable to interpret. Or perhaps we are in the position of one who sits in the summer evening when nature is instinct with music, – the chirping of insect life, the whispering wind, the good-night call of the birds, – deaf to the many voices, whereas a companion has ears for nothing else but what those voices say. The cause of the former's deafness is that his attention is wholly absorbed by other interests. We must recognize that all things are in God and that God is in all things, and we must learn to be very attentive, in order to hear God speaking in His ordinary tone without any special accent. Power to do this comes slowly and as the result of not separating prayer from the rest of life. A man must not stop listening any more than praying when he rises from his knees. No one questions the need of times of formal address to God, but few admit in any practical way the need of quiet waiting upon God, gazing into His face, feeling for His hand, listening for His voice. "I will hearken what the Lord God will say concerning me." God has special confidences for each soul. Indeed, it would seem as though the deepest truths came only in moments of profound devotional silence and contemplation.

The written Word of God has special messages for the individual as well as a large general message for the entire Christian body. The devotional use of Holy Scripture is the

means by which the soul reaches some of the most precious manifestations of God's will. By devotional use is meant such a study as has for its ultimate purpose an act of worship, or of conscious fellowship with Him. The Bible reveals not merely what God was, but what He is. Finding from its pages how He loved, we know how He loves; learning how He dealt with or spoke to men, we perceive how He deals with and speaks to us. But our instruction in things divine must come to us from a Person rather than a book, though *through* a book perhaps. If we approach the Bible as we would approach Bacon or Milton, merely as a collection of the wise thoughts and actions of the dead, it will never sway the life to any large extent. Holy Scripture is separated from all other literature by the fact that it contains absolute spiritual truth and because its Author, as a living Person, always stands behind it. Those who listen will hear the Holy Spirit saying to them, in direct application, the same things that lie on the open pages as the record of what was once said to men of old. Meditation or the devotional use of Scripture renders conscience, that organ of the soul by which God's voice is received by man, increasingly sensitive. The Old Testament days were full of men who could say "Thus saith the Lord," with the same assurance that they could report the speech of a comrade. Doubtless God had many ways of speaking to the prophets, but whatever these ways were and however special and singular, they were based originally on those by means of which He addresses all men in common. As a result of the Incarnation "all the Lord's people are

prophets" and the Lord has "put His Spirit upon them;" and they, too, ought to be able to say "Thus saith the Lord."

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