

EXEGETIC STUDIES ON THE LORD'S PRAYER.

I.

I HAVE hesitated to comply with the request to write these papers, lest thoughts so simple as these should be too unlearned, too little recondite, for readers of *THE EXPOSITOR*. Yet it may be good for us all sometimes to remind ourselves of very elementary truths, which are indeed so far from being beneath our notice that they are *inexhaustible* in their depth and significance. "Wisdom," as the wise poet reminds us,

"Is oftentimes nearer when we stoop,
Than when we soar."

A great theologian, in his old age, said that the truths by which he supported his soul's life were not those of the *Summa Theologiæ*; but those of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. "There are," said Coleridge, "some truths, and those of all others the most awful and interesting, which are too often considered as so true that they lose all the power of truth, and lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with the most despised and exploded errors."

May I be pardoned if I appear to begin far back from my immediate subject? In no other way can I re-brighten the forgotten truth which long familiarity has so grievously dulled, and tarnished, for us—the inexpressible importance of trying to grasp the full meaning of the Lord's Prayer?

In meditating on the Lord's Prayer we are meditating on a part of Christ's teaching which is, of all others, of the most consummate and daily significance for our spiritual being. For,

1. We stand, each one of us, high and low, rich and

poor, learned and unlearned, one with another, by the deep and rushing flood of life. With a roar as of Niagara, it is ever plunging into the vast unknown abyss. At every ticking of the clock some fifty human souls are streaming into eternity, and each soul makes scarcely a ripple on the waters as it drops through this bridge of threescore and ten arches into "the rolling waters of that prodigious tide." How are we to span that mighty chasm, which rolls through the unknown darkness on either bank, and of which we see so little except the momentary gleaming of its foam?

i. Beginning with what we *do* know, we "believe in the soul and are very sure of God." There may be, all around us, a limitless and unfathomable flood of mystery. *Omnia exeunt in mysterium*. "What we know is little, what we are ignorant of is immense." It is no clergyman, it is Mr. Herbert Spencer, who says that "The man of science realises with vividness the utter incomprehensibility of the simplest fact considered in itself. He, more than any other man, truly knows that, in its ultimate essence, nothing can be known."

If we could know the inmost essence of anything, we might get to understand the essential secret of everything.

"Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
Hold you there, root and all, in my hand;
Little flower, but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

Nevertheless, amid all our ignorance, we know first of all that though we *have* bodies we *are* spirits, and that we did not make ourselves. "We believe," as Browning sang, "in the soul, and are very sure of God."

ii. Since then "it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves," it follows on the very idea of God that "we are

His people and the sheep of His pasture." Since it is God who made the soul, there must be some relation between the soul and God. What is that relation? It may be expressed in the one word Duty. I *think*, therefore I am: I am, therefore I *ought*, I can, I will. "Oh, Duty," said Kant, "oh, wondrous power, that workest rather by insinuation, flattery, and threat, but merely by holding up the naked law in the soul, extortest for thyself reverence, if not always obedience, oh, thou before whom all appetites are dumb, however secretly they may rebel, whence is thine origin?" That categorical imperative is one of the ultimate facts of our consciousness, upon which we ought to build—as on the granite bases of the world—the superstructure of our lives, and all our aims. To Kant's question, "What is thine origin?" there can be but one answer, "Thine origin is God."

iii. But what are the contents of the Law of Duty? The answer is not infinitely complicated as the religionism and the theology of man have made it, but infinitely simple. It is given in the Voice from Sinai; it is comprehended in the Ten Commandments as Christ expanded and explained them. "He hath shewn thee, O man, what is good," said the Prophet Micah, "and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" "That supreme and sacred Majesty," said Lactantius, in a sentence which deserves to be written in letters of gold, "requires of us nothing save innocence alone." Tertullian gave the whole secret of the stupendous victory of Christianity in its "unresistible weakness," when he wrote in challenge to the Pagan world, *Nos soli innocentes sumus*.

iv. And what Duty requires of us no man can have any doubt, because God has sent His great angel of Conscience to be ever with us, and to take us by the hand. If any one ask, "What is Conscience?" the question has been

rightly answered long ago by many of the world's greatest thinkers. "It is," says Dante, "the strong supporter who buckles his breastplate on those who fearlessly do their duty." "It is," says Shakespeare, "the blushing shamefast spirit which mutinies in a man's bosom." "It is," says Milton, "God's secretary within us." "It is," says John Smith, "a domestical chaplain within us which preaches to us the sermon over again." Bishop Butler defined it as being "the principle in man by which he approves or disapproves of his heart, temper and actions." Cardinal Newman calls it "the primitive vicegerent of God within us, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its sanctions and anathemas." And perhaps, as in that beautiful reminiscence, which Theodore Parker has given us of the day when he first awoke to the consciousness of conscience, we may best call it "*The voice of God in the heart of man.*"

v. So far then we have gained the means by which we may bridge the dark and fathomless abyss of life which rolls between that which may seem to us to be the darkness and the darkness; and by these means we may discover that the unknown past from which we came, and the unknown future to which we go, are, in reality, not banks of darkness, but great deeps of divine and infinite light.

vi. How *did* they bridge the roaring flood of the Niagara, just at the point where it plunges into that awful cataract?

"They say," writes an American clergyman, "that a tiny kite flew over the chasm, and fell with its silken thread on the other side. The chasm was spanned by a thread! But the thread was used to pull over a cord, and the cord a rope, and the rope a chain, and the chain a cable, and so was built the bridge of steel, over whose steadfast span the massive trains thunder as they come and go. Thus may it be with the most attenuated thread of

honest, earnest faith. What possibilities, what destinies hang upon it! Ah, it may be lightly snapped asunder! But place it in the hands of God with the prayer, 'Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief,' and the thread may become a rope, and the rope a chain, and the chain a bridge, over the vast abyss."

vii. Now I maintain that when we start with the conviction that we have souls: that the soul is not the body, but a different and an immaterial entity; that God made us; that God stands in immediate relation to the souls which He has made; that this relation is expressed by the Law of Duty; that the duty is taught us by our Conscience, which is God's voice within us; then, seeing that we have wounded our conscience, violated our duty, disobeyed the voice of God, injured and ruined our souls and our whole being, into which God breathed the breath of life, when we are deeply convinced of all this, it becomes *not difficult to believe, but impossible not to believe* that, as by God's miracle we have been created, so by God's miracle we should be redeemed. The broken Law becomes the attendant-slave (*παιδαγωγός*) to lead our sin-burdened souls to Christ. God would be to us no God if He were not love. Knowing that He is love, we know that He would not leave us, with the curse of our misused free-will, to the deathful menace of the law. Every fact of our being prepares us for the revelation of the Gospel, that herein "God commendeth His own love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. v. 6, 8). So are we led—

"To that unknown, obscure, sequestered place,
Where God unmakes but to *remake* the soul
He else made first in vain—which must not be."

II.

Yet neither law nor gospel would have been of any avail to us had we been vouchsafed no means of constant communication with God. The first possibility of such communication is by prayer. Prayer in due time may ride, as on the wings of eagles, into rapture, into passive ecstasy, into the beatific vision; and—

“ In those high hours
Of visitation from the living God,
Thought is not; in enjoyment it expires.”

This may never come to us on earth, but *prayer* is always ours. Christ has come to deliver us from the curse of the Law; He offers us forgiveness for past sins, strength for future faithfulness; but one chief means by which alone we can avail ourselves of both is prayer. That we should be allowed to pray—that free, unimpeded, immediate access to God should thus be given us in Christ—is the most priceless boon bestowed upon our suffering humanity. It is the glory of life that Christ Himself encourages us to pray.

2. It is needless, here at any rate, to waste time over the theoretic and philosophic difficulties which sceptics have urged against prayer. Prayer, they say, is an intrinsic absurdity. It is a childish attempt to interfere with inevitable laws and unalterable sequences. It is an insult to All-wisdom and Omnipotence. It arises from a childish terror, which attempts to secure that things shall not be as they are. It is a fetish-worshipping endeavour to bring about the impossible, and to interfere with the certainty that two and two must ever make four. Such reasonings may sound very formidable, but they are utterly inoperative. We stride through them as through so many threads of gossamer. When we have heard them all, even if we feel ourselves incapable of giving an abstract answer to

them all, we kneel down with as much confidence in God as before, and it may be with a more passionate conviction than before, and cry, "God be merciful to me, the sinner." The Divine instincts and the imperious needs of humanity tear the "difficulties" of sceptics to shreds, and fling them to the winds. God's unmistakable whisper within us *bids* us make our requests known unto Him. Yes, and many a time, the sceptic himself, when he has been plunged into the waves and storms of calamity, belies all his own negations and pours out prayers, which he cannot help, to the God in whom he refuses to believe. It is told of a certain notable historic prisoner that, after arguing against the existence of God, the moment he was left alone he was heard to fling himself on his knees in his prison-cell in a passion of entreaty; and that on the scaffold he poured out the desolate and agonised supplication, "O God, if there be a God, save my soul if I have a soul!"

3. Nor shall we be content with pleading in support of the habit of prayer its unquestionable reflex benefits. Prayer, as St. Augustine says, "brightens the heart, and purges it for the acceptance of the gifts of heaven." Prayer strengthens the faith from which it springs; it gives to hope its *ἀποκαρδοκία*, the stretching out of the neck, the standing on tiptoe in earnest expectation; it kindles love to a purer and brighter flame. Yes; but more than this,—

"Prayer moves the arm of Him who moves the world."

We are not in the least shaken by being told that this is miraculous, that it is supernatural. Of course it is. We live, and move, and have our being in the region of the supernatural. We are encompassed on all sides by daily, hourly, momentary miracles; there is nothing else but miracle all around us. We are miracles ourselves. It is only in the atmosphere of the supernatural that the spiritual can draw vital air.

III.

If we have realised these truths we are at last in a condition to realise the stupendous importance of the fact that Christ should Himself have taught us how to pray. It means nothing less than this: that *God has taught us how to address God*; that divine lips have taught us in what manner, and even with what words, to approach and to appeal to the divine.

In comparison with such teaching must not all else sink into comparative insignificance? If God has thus taught us how to pray to God, what need have we greatly to worry ourselves, or the pure, simple souls of God's children, with all the intolerable and interminable prolixities of party opinionativeness, and controversial dogmatism? What can it avail to magnify the non-essential; to alter the whole perspective of the New Testament; to reintroduce post-exilic Levitism into the gospel simplicity; to substitute the huddle of mediæval corruptions for the simplicity of gospel truths; to make more of Pharisaic scrupulosities than of the elementary Christian graces? What need have we of arrogant pretensions and infinitesimal nullities, when God has taught us the utter simplicity of all His essential requirements—the utter simplicity with which we may draw nigh, not with our lips only but with our hearts, to God?

IV.

If the Lord's Prayer be of so Divine an origin, it must justify its origin by its absolute perfectness, its flawless inspiration, its all-comprehensive adaptability to every need. That it does all this, I will try to show hereafter. I will now very briefly point out one or two initial elements of its priceless and exemplary revelation.

i. First, it is most observable, that Christ endeavoured

to make Prayer as infinitely *easy* to us as it is infinitely blessed. It is by no means so with other religions, even with some of the least false religions of the world. They surround prayer with all kinds of mechanical difficulties and restrictions, or they even tend to relegate it altogether into the hands of a caste. Even "the statutes which were not good" and "ordinances whereby a man cannot live" of later Levitism, hedged prayer around with so many ceremonial prescriptions, that the plain, unlearned man could hardly tell when or how to pray, without committing some mechanical sin in the very act of doing so. Some fringe, or some phylactery, or some ablution might be wrong, and everything would be vitiated; Christianity itself, when corrupted into a self-asserting and exclusive sacerdotalism, offers its public prayers in a tongue not understood of the people; turns it into a penance of mechanism; relegates to an usurping class the efficacy of its most supposed-effective exercises. Not so Christ! He made the access to prayer, so far as all external obstructions are concerned, incredibly easy. He allowed neither priest, nor gifts, nor sacrifices, nor formality, nor functions, nor saints, nor any human intercessor, nor Gerizim, nor Jerusalem, nor ceremonies, nor rubrics, to thrust themselves, or to be thrust, to the most trivial extent, between the soul and God. Every time, every place, every posture, it has been truly said, is easy. "Talent is not needful. Eloquence is out of place. Dignity is no recommendation. Our want is our eloquence, our misery our recommendation. Thought is quick as lightning, and quick as lightning can it multiply effectual prayers. The whole function is simply this—a child, a wandering child, comes to its Father, and pleads for forgiveness and for help."

ii. And with this simplicity Christ taught the ordinary desirableness of brevity.

When, in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ said, "After

this manner pray ye," He gave warnings against two parasitic destructions of prayer,—*βαττολογία* and *πολυλογία*—babbling iteration and wearisome formality, He gave an example of directness and brevity.

There are no vain repetitions in the Lord's Prayer, such as marked the prayers of the heathen. The Hindoo Fakir will spend the whole day in repeating the name of his god—Brahmah, Brahmah, Brahmah, or Krishna, Krishna, Krishna. The Buddhist Bonze thinks that there is efficacy in the endless repetition of his mystic formula, OM MANI PADME HUM. The Mussulman will interlard the interminable intricacies of his most cheating bargain with incessant asseverations that "God is merciful" and "God is great." The ignorant Romanist mumbles by the hour together his Aves, and his Paters, dropping a bead of his rosary with every idle reiteration. God bears compassionately with all our ignorances, but this is what our Lord compared to mere stuttering, and "the tumbling out of empty words." And in its ultimate degradation prayer sinks into the fetichistic mechanism of the Tartar's supplication, who thinks that "with every clatter of his prayer-mill he offers so many thousand prayers. Long prayers may sometimes have their place, as when Jesus spent all night in prayer. Repeated prayers may sometimes have their place, as when in Gethsemane He prayed thrice, using the same words. Augustine tells us that he once spent all the night in the simple prayer, *Noverim Te, Domine; noverim me!* A prayer is not a repetition, so long as it is a genuine out-pouring of the heart; but it ceases to be a prayer at all the moment that it becomes a mechanical weariness. It changes from prayer into "*battologia*" the moment the heart has ceased to follow what the lips repeat. Long formal services in our churches may degenerate into a mere superstition, a material function, an idle waste of time. The longest prayer which Scripture contains, that

of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, would hardly occupy seven minutes. The briefest prayers which Scripture records were the most intense, the most potent—"God be merciful to me the sinner!" "Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom!" "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" When our Lord gave His model prayer, saying, "Thus pray ye," knowing our wants, knowing our nature, knowing whereof we are made, remembering that we are but dust, His model was brevity itself.

iii. Lastly,—for at present we are only looking at the outward characteristics of Christ's perfect prayer,—observe its directness, its freedom from all formality.

"What God requires and looks at," says Bishop Hall, "is neither the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they be; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they be; nor the music of our prayers, how sweet our voice may be; nor the logic, nor the method, nor even the orthodoxy of our prayers"—but the one thing that avails in them is fervent sincerity. Let us not deceive ourselves for a moment as to the value of outward functions, which may only deaden us into spiritual torpor, or inflate us with self-satisfaction. Far better that our prayer should only occupy one minute, and be from the heart, rising like incense from the golden censer of our one High Priest, than that it should be kindled with the strange fire of Pharisaic pride.

iv. How much may be learnt from the characteristics of the prayer itself, we may see hereafter; meanwhile, its *infinite adaptability* proves its heavenly origin. It has been tested for nearly twenty centuries by all sorts and conditions of men in every clime, under every variety of circumstance. Not one has ever found it wanting. Carlyle, in a pathetic letter to Erskine of Linlathen, tells his friend that he was "dule and wae" on hearing of a recent bereavement, and had the night before repeated to himself the Lord's Prayer.

“Our Father!” he writes, “in my sleepless tossings, these words, that brief and grand prayer, came strangely into my mind with an altogether new emphasis; as if written and shining for me in mild, pure splendour on the black bosom of the night there; when I, as it were, read them, word by word, with a sudden check to my imperfect wanderings, with a sudden softness of composure which was much unexpected. Not for perhaps thirty or forty years had I once formally repeated that prayer; *nay, I never felt before how intensely the voice of man's soul it is*, the inmost inspiration of all that is high and pious in poor human nature, right worthy to be recommended with an “After this manner pray ye.”

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