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## The Stages of Christian Experience.

BY THE REV. GEORGE MATHESON, M.A., D.D.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."—MATT. vii. 7, 8.

THERE are three classes of minds in the religious world, three orders, into one or other of which all its votaries may be divided. The first may be called devotional minds—those who *ask* for God. They find their representative in John. They desire nothing so much as rest. They want just to lie on the bosom of the Christ unquestioning and unquestioned, to recline on the hilltop of contemplation far from the madding crowd, and commune with the Infinite Love unconscious of the strife below. The second class may be described as speculative minds—those who *seek* for God. They find their representative in Thomas. They are not in the least less earnest than the former, but they do not see their way so clearly to the contact with their object. How gladly would they, too, take the wings of a dove to fly away and be at rest, if only these wings were available to them. But between them and the blue vault of heaven there are the bars of a cage. They are imprisoned by intellectual difficulties. They see an obstacle interposed between their desire and its realisation, and they beat their wings frantically against the

bars and struggle to be free. There is a third class different from either of these, who by way of distinction may be called practical minds—those who knock at life's door. They find their representative in James. They have come to the conclusion that life is too short for sentiment, too short for speculation, too short for anything but action, that the one duty of man is to work while it is called day, and that the gospel of humanity is before all other things the gospel of service. Their watchword is "force," their ideal is Carlyle, their motto is "do," "do," "do"; they are the men who knock.

I have spoken of these as different types of mind. In truth, however, they are the stages of a single individual existence; every Christian life that would be perfected must pass in succession through each and all of them. We all begin with the devotional stage. Some of us can remember the intense fervour of our first communion. We stood upon the mountains and looked down upon the earth, and the inhabitants thereof were as grasshoppers. "What is this world to me?" we cried; "in a brief space it will be gone. Christ is coming; in a little while He will be here. A few short years, and this great scene of pageantry shall melt away. Its pleasures, its amusements, its avocations, its wars and rumours of war, its marriages and givings in marriage, its literature and commerce and art, shall vanish like

a chequered dream, and then, my Lord! my Life! I shall be alone with Thee. These things are ready to be dissolved; why should I seek them now? Let me forget them; let me ignore them; let me fly from them; let me see no man but Jesus only; let me build my tabernacle on the mountain to no name but Thine."

By-and-by there comes a change. The glory of the mountain fades and we are on the dusty plain. Instead of looking down upon the grasshoppers we are become ourselves the grasshoppers. The morning that promised sunshine has gone out in tears. Christ has entered into the cloud, and we stretch forth our arms after Him, and cry like Job of old: "O that I knew where I could find Him, O that I might come to His seat". The bird that yesterday soared to heaven beats to-day against the bars of the cage; the stage of asking is past and the stage of seeking is come.

At last to you and me there comes a final stage, a period in which the earlier phases are both transcended and reconciled. There breaks upon us the conviction that after all there is not time for sentiment, is not time for search. There wakes within us the knowledge that there is a shorter road into the temple of God than either the dreams of mystic ecstasy or the mysteries of intellectual speculation, that the surest way to know the doctrine is ever to do the will, that the clearest view of immortality is to be found in the path of duty. To cultivate the little plot of ground, to perform the daily task, to discharge the household service, to fulfil the hundred claims implied in that term "responsibility" is recognised at last to be the final aim of humanity and the highest revelation of God. The gospel of action becomes the latest word in Christian experience, and human life is rounded when man is knocking at the door.

Now, let us advance a step further. Christ says that these three phases are all acts of prayer. The assertion is a startling one. We can all readily see how *asking* is an act of prayer; but seeking! how can *that* be a sign of religion? To call a seeker after God a man of prayer seems like putting a premium upon doubt. And indeed there *is* a doubt which is the opposite of prayer. There is a doubt which belongs to the old man of the garden, which is born of pride. When a man stands in the midst of the universe and says, "I believe in the

existence of no apples but those which I can see, and taste, and handle; I take my five senses as the measure of possibility," that man is in the position of the first Adam, and He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. But there is another form of doubt which is born not of pride but of humility—a doubt which is but the shadow of an unconscious faith, but the disguise of an earnest prayer. What do you suppose to be the significance of these words of Thomas, "Except I shall see in Thy hands the print of the nails I will not believe"? Why, it was love trembling—love taking up the harp and faltering over the strings lest the music should be a delusion. What! the tomb rent for *him*, Christ risen for him, the graveclothes bound in a napkin for him—it was too good news to be true. No wonder that he departed from the sepulchre with fear as well as joy; his doubt was the child of his love. And so I believe that much of what in our days is called Agnosticism is but an unconscious prayer to touch the print of the nails, but love's fear trembling over the strings. Yes, the hymn may be rolled to wintry skies, but if it is rolled from earnest hearts it is a hymn for all that; and when it passes those wintry skies and reaches the ear of the Lord of Sabaoth it shall receive an imputed righteousness, shall be interpreted not as a voice of scepticism but as a song of supplication: the seekers after God are men of prayer.

But *knocking*—how can that be a prayer? Is not the beating at life's door a purely practical thing, a course of commonplace action? Yes, but every act, however commonplace, is a seed sown in faith. Neither you nor I know the ultimate issue of any one trivial deed. We sow the seed and sleep day and night, and the seed springs up, we cannot tell how. We are like the American poet Longfellow: we shoot an arrow into the air; it falls to earth and seems to be shattered for ever; long years afterward we find it unbroken under an oak tree. We breathe a song into vacant space; it seems to be lost in the infinite silence; long years afterwards we find it from beginning to end in the heart of a fellow-man. Every man's act ought to be an act of prayer. Emerson says that a man is praying when he is pulling a boat. So he is—at least, he should be. Every stroke of life's oar is carrying us further than we meant, further than we know, and one day we shall be surprised at the might of our own trivial

deeds. Uncover, then, thy head before the commonplace; what God has made momentous, call not thou common. Uncover thy head in the presence of life's prosaic duties—in busy street and bustling mart, in exchange and counting-house and workshop. Realise the solemnity of life's little things. Think not that the turning of a corner is trivial; it may make or mar your destiny. Put off the shoes from off your feet, for every spot on which you stand is holy ground; the knocking at life's door is an act of earnest prayer.

We advance a step further still. Notice the congruity which is said to exist between the desire and its fulfilment, "Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you". It is not, "Ask and ye shall find, seek and it shall be opened"; there must be a harmony between the mode of prayer and the mode of answer. Now, strange as it may seem, this is a point which many of the best Christians have yet to learn. Nothing is more common than to hear one say, "How strange are the ways of Providence! I have been a man of prayer all my life. I have been asking all my life that Christ would make me partaker of the fellowship of His cross. What have I gained by prayer? Nothing. Has my life been more prosperous than that of others? It has been less so. Crops have died; friends have died; the labour of the olive has failed, and fields have supplied no meat. And all the time my prayerless neighbour over the way is flourishing. His family circle is unbroken; his commercial orders are pouring in; his ships are sailing over summer seas. What advantage is there in my devotions, what profit is there in my blood? 'I have washed my hands in innocence and cleansed my heart in vain.'"

Stop! you are charging God foolishly. Your prayer has been answered—answered in the very way in which it seems to have been denied. You have been asking God to give you the fellowship of the cross, and He has sent you the hour of trial; how else could He answer your prayer? When you asked for fellowship with Christ's cross, did you expect to get something different? "If a man ask bread, will He give him a stone?" Did you think that you were to pray for one thing with the view of receiving another? You ask participation with Christ and God sends you trial. Did you

expect the trinket instead of the gem? Did you think your prayer for rectitude would be rewarded by mere riches? Or, take this favoured neighbour over the way. He never prays, you say; but every man has wishes of the heart. Let us say that his unspoken wish or prayer is something like this: "O Thou whom men believe to reign in heaven, I want from Thee none of the things which people ask in the sanctuary. I do not want any of those mystical possessions called peace, rest, joy in the Holy Ghost, and the like. Give me something tangible, something that can be weighed and measured. Give me threescore years and ten of pleasant sensations—purple and fine linen and sumptuous faring every day. Give me the power to fill my outward nature—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life; none of your spiritual benefits, but gold, gold, gold!" Will he get it? Perhaps he may. Even a *misdirected* prayer has a power to calm the mind and help it towards its goal. But if he gets it, will he have a right to turn round and say, "Why hast Thou mocked me thus? I have got all I asked from Thee—pressed down and shaken and running over—and yet I am no nearer to rest. Not one care has been removed from my bosom; not one wrinkle has been smoothed from my brow. I was happier when I was a boy and had nothing; why with Thy gift didst Thou not send Thy peace?" Would not the answer be clear. You did not ask peace; you asked gold. You did not want spiritual joy; you wanted only purple, and you *have* purple. If a man ask a stone, shall I give him bread? "Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap; for he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting." "Everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

Let us take one step further still. You will observe that in each of the three stages the human soul is becoming increasingly active; God is doing less and man is doing more. In the first stage—that of asking—man is purely passive; he has nothing to do but to receive. But in the second stage it is otherwise. Seeking is a process, and a process implies time and trouble. Moreover, we do not find *exactly* what we seek; we are in

search of an intellectual Christ, and we find a moral one. I have often been struck with that passage in the Gospel history where the women seek their crucified Lord. They come to the door of the sepulchre and ask with tears the dead body of Jesus. They do not get it, thank God; they receive instead a living Saviour. And so you and I are in search of the mere outward form. We are trying to understand the mystery of Incarnation, to comprehend how in one life heaven and earth could meet. We cannot understand that; such knowledge is too high for us; we cannot attain unto it. But all the time that we are seeking merely for an intellectual Christ there is unconsciously before our eyes an image of moral beauty, a spectacle of stainless splendour, a mirror of sacrificial love, and one day we shall wake to the discovery that we have got more than we asked, that we have substituted the living spirit for the dead form, that we have been mesmerised into the same image from glory to glory. We *find* only as the fruit of moral toil.

But when we come to the last stage of all, that of knocking at life's door, it would seem as if man had to do nearly everything. For what is implied in the promise, "Knock and it shall be opened unto you"? Simply this, that in the sphere of practical life God does not interfere until man has touched the very point of interruption; has reached the last limit of human effort. Are there some here to-day who are looking forward to clouds in to-morrow's sun—difficulties of the ledger, difficulties of the domestic firmament, difficulties of the path of life? Do you see a wall in the middle of this week which you do not know how you are to pass? Shall you sit down and fold your hands because you do not know how you are to pass the barrier? The divine message comes to you and says: "Have you strength for the three days that intervene between this and the forenoon of Wednesday? Have you strength for the three intervening *hours* between yourself and your barrier? Have you strength for the one intervening hour? Have you strength for the intervening half-hour? Have you strength for the last five minutes? Have you strength for the last remaining step that intervenes between you and your barrier? Then in God's name let that step be taken. Go up to the very point of interruption

and put forth your hand and touch the barrier. And lo! what seemed to have been a continuous wall will be found to have had a gate in the middle; and the gate shall be seen to be a golden gate; and the golden gate shall open, and through the expanding portals you will enter into the joy of a liberated soul. God's opportunity comes when man is knocking at life's door.

Finally, all these phases of humanity find a meeting-place in Jesus; it is this which makes Christianity the universal religion and Christ the universal man. All these types of human aspiration meet a response in Him. Are there devotional minds here to-day—minds whose desire is simply to *rest* in the Lord? *You* have your response in the heart of Jesus. He who took the little children to His arms on earth, He who pillowed on His bosom the head of a beloved disciple, has within His inmost soul a place for you. Are there speculative minds here to-day—spirits which require to search before they can begin to adore? You, too, have a meeting-place in the heart of Jesus. He who once as a child asked questions in the temple of earthly knowledge; He who laid bare His wounded side to the search of a doubting apostle has within His deepest spirit a place for you. Are there practical minds here to-day—minds whose whole aim is to find something to *do* in the vineyard? Pre-eminently in the heart of Jesus there is a response for you. He whose life on earth was one long prayer of action, who from morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve, toiled in the mission fields of time, He who went down into the lowest haunts of human nature to succour, to comfort, and to elevate, who broke the bread to the wilderness and preached to the spirits in prison, and touched the demoniac amid the tombs, He whose path emphatically was strewn with flowers—not flowers spread out before Him but gathered with His own hands out of the thorns and cast behind Him on the way—has within the mansions of His love a sphere of work for you. There shall be not one soul unanswered that knocketh at this door.

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A gentleman who had followed successively the professions of clergyman, physician, and lawyer was asked which profession his experience could show to be the most profitable. He replied: "A man will give a threepenny-bit for his soul; two shillings and sixpence for his body; and six and eightpence for his will".—*Family Churchman*

## Point and Illustration.

### God's Plumb-line.

Ry the Rev. W. L. WATKINSON, of Harrogate.

IN the Old Testament on several occasions God is represented as a destroyer with a plumb-line. Now, a plumb-line is not an instrument that you use very much when you go to destroy. It is a delicate instrument to build with, but when it is a matter of pulling down it is a question of dynamite, and the place is tumbled over with very great ruthlessness and rudeness; but when God comes to destroy, He brings a plumb-line—that is to say, He brings into His action the most delicate care and the most rigorous adjustments. There is just as much restraint in the north blast as there is in the kiss of the south wind. There is just as much moderation in the thorn as in the flower. And when God comes to take down the tabernacle of the body, He takes it down with the same curious wisdom with which He fashioned the uttermost parts of the earth. Grand thought for us in this world of sweeping change and terrible destruction and mighty tragedy. God never moves without the plumb-line.—*Methodist Recorder*.

Speaking of a certain place in which he conducted a mission, the Rev. W. Haslam says: "It was certainly a very difficult place, for the congregation had been hardened with overmuch evangelical teaching of a general kind. Seed had been abundantly sown without any due preparation of the ground. It was amazing to witness the hardness of the people, and their unwillingness to yield."

Only a baby's grave—  
A foot or two at the most  
Of star-daisied sod:  
Yet methinks that God  
Knows what that little grave cost.

### United Prayer.

By R. W. DALE, LL.D.

God deals with us one by one. He also deals with us as churches. There are some prayers, I suppose, which He will not answer unless many unite in them. When the blessings which are asked for relate not to individuals, but to a whole community, it may be contrary to the settled principles and laws by which God acts to answer the prayers unless a considerable number of those who form the community make the prayers their own.

### A Northern Saga.

An unwise man  
Is awake all night  
Worrying about everything;  
He is weary  
When the morning comes;  
All the woe is as it was.

Of his father, who was a roadmaker, the Rev. John Macpherson, of Dundee, says: "He was too ready, out of sheer compassion, to give employment to navvies on the tramp, although these Bohemians frequently caused him no little trouble by raising strife among his men. Referring to these quarrelsome and ungrateful mischief-makers, he used to say, 'I know what Paul means when he speaks of fighting with beasts at Ephesus: the beasts were unreasonable and wicked men, more treacherous and cruel than lions or tigers'. And yet the wandering navvy, who turned up hungry and forlorn, always got 'another chance'."

"The work of our hands, establish Thou it,"  
How often with thoughtless lips we pray;  
But He who sits in the heavens shall say,  
'Is the work of your hands so fair and fit  
That ye dare so pray?'"

Softly we answer, "Lord, make it fit,  
The work of our hands, that so we may  
Lift up our eyes and dare to pray,  
'The work of our hands, establish Thou it  
For ever and aye!'"

### The Morality of the Old Testament.

By PROFESSOR CALDERWOOD, LL.D.

It is affirmed that the Old Testament morality is so much lower than the New Testament, that there is in that consideration alone a very serious difficulty towards acceptance of the Bible as a whole. What, then, is the answer to this question? Obviously the answer runs in this way—I shall state it only in outline—Distinguish between the Bible in its history and the Bible in its revelation. Bear in mind that that revelation is necessarily piercing the history in order that it may be of any value. Bear further in mind that that revelation must come into the darkness just as it is, however dense. Bear in mind further, that as it comes from generation to generation there must necessarily be moral progress, else it has come in vain, and then recognise that whatever there is of moral advance in the history of previous generations, all moving onwards to that fixed time in the world's history when Jesus Christ appears, that advance has been secured under the direct action of the God who is preparing for this grand revelation in His Son. We find in the history only the natural and true record of things as they were, and the unfolding of that plan which we now recognise as the one consistent plan through all creation—a steady, onward movement towards higher and grander results. In this way, then, you look upon the morality of the Old Testament as a record of the history of the past, showing us from what we have been delivered,

### The Tongue.

If wisdom's ways you wisely seek,  
Five things observe with care:  
Of whom you speak, to whom you speak,  
And how, and when, and where.

## Literature.

## BOOKS.

1. PATON (JOHN G.): *An Autobiography*; edited by his brother. The Second Part. Hodder & Stoughton, 1889. Cr. 8vo, pp. 382, 6/. If you thought of buying any other book, whether for yourself or your friend, buy this instead.

2. REITH (G., M.A.): *St. John's Gospel, with Introduction and Notes*. Handbooks for Bible Classes. Clark, 1889. 2 vols., crown 8vo, pp. lxi., 136, 178, 2/ each. This Commentary has been long promised, but it was worth waiting for. Mr. Reith has produced a thoroughly satisfactory exposition of St. John, on conservative lines, much better suited for the purpose of this series, we think, than other volumes in it. The Introduction is carefully written, the chapter on the Object and Scope of the Gospel being exceedingly well done.

3. ROWE (G. STRINGER): *Alone with the Word: Devotional Notes on the Whole of the New Testament*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1889. 8vo, pp. 424, 6/6. Where else but to a scholarly Methodist should we look for the right thing when we want a devotional Commentary? The Governor of Headingley College has all the requisites, and this has been pleasant toil. In paragraphs he presents the narrative, draws out the inner thought, and gently leads it home to our conscience. And there is no lack of acuteness, for Mr. Rowe agrees with Dr. George Matheson that moments of devotion are not moments of mental vacancy.

4. SAYCE (A. H., LL.D.): *Bypaths of Bible Knowledge, XIII. The Life and Times of Isaiah as illustrated by Contemporary Monuments*. R. T. S., 1889. Cr. 8vo, pp. 96, 2/. That Professor Sayce's *Isaiah* contains the freshest and most reliable information on the subject, goes without saying. But the little book would have been more readable had an arrangement been followed which did not compel the author to go over the same ground again and again. Compare what is said about Taheel on pp. 43 and 73. The Indexes are full, but here only one, and that the least of the two references, is given.

## THE MONTH'S EXPOSITIONS AND SERMONS.

NOTE.—None but valuable sermons and expositions are noticed. Of Monthly Magazines the November issue is referred to. Of Weekly Periodicals the number is given.

B.M. (Baptist Magazine, 6d.); B.W. (British Weekly, 1d.); B.W.P. (British Weekly Pulpit, 1d.); C. (Christian, 1d.); C.C. (Christian Commonwealth, 1d.); C.E.P. (Church of England Pulpit, 1d.); C.H.S. (Christian Herald Supplement, 1d.); C.M. (Clergyman's Magazine, 1s.); C.P. (Contemporary Pulpit, 6d.); C.W. (Christian World, 1d.); C.W.P. (Christian World Pulpit, 1d.); E. (Expositor, 1s.); F. (Freeman, 1d.); F.C. (Family Churchman, 1d.); G.W. (Good Words, 6d.); H.M. (Homiletic Magazine, 1s.); M.R. (Methodist Recorder, 1d.); M.T. (Methodist Times, 1d.); M.T.P. (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1d.); Q. (Quiver, 6d.); R. (Rock, 1d.); S.M. (Sunday Magazine, 6d.); S.S.T. (Sunday School Times, 1d.); T.M. (Theological Monthly, 1s.); U.P.M. (United Presbyterian Maga-

zine, 4d.); W.M.M. (Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, 6d.); Y.M. (Young Man, 1d.).

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ii. 6, CWP 937, Fairbairn.  
vi. 11, CWP 937, Dods.  
xiv. 16, MR 1658, Watkinson.  
1 Cor. xv. 55-57, BW 159, Whyte.  
2 Cor. i. 2, CWP 938, Dale.  
x. 1, CWP 939, Rowland.  
Eph. iv. 12, CM, Hervey.  
v. 18, CM, Moule.  
Phil. i. 27, CWP 939, Woods.  
iii. 10, F 1811, Culross.  
\* iii. 12, BWP 77, Whyte.  
iii. 14, CHS, Aitken.  
1 Thes. v. 27, F 1812, M'Laren.  
2 Tim. iii. 16, CWP 937, Wace.  
Heb. ii. 18, CWP 937, Rowland.  
xi. 3, SC, Cox.  
Ja. i. 2, F 1813, M'Laren.  
i. 22, CEP 721, Sherrard.  
1 Pet. i. 8, 9, C 1029, Meyer.  
i. 11, C 1030, Meyer.  
i. 13-17, C 1031, Meyer.  
i. 18, C 1032, Meyer.  
ii. 4, 5, BWP 79, Dale.  
1 John ii. 15-17, FC 422, Moule.  
ii. 15-17, R 1267, Moule.  
iii. 13, FC 423, Sinclair.  
Rev. ii. 18-29, HM, Irwin.  
iv. 16, UPM, Ballantine.

## Dr. Pentecost in Airdrie.

One evening when the hymn "Rejoice in the Lord" was being sung, one of the workers was sitting in front of a young man who sang the chorus most cheerfully. Turning round, the worker said, "I am glad you can sing so merrily; when did you decide for Christ?" "Oh," said he, "I never have decided." "Well," said our friend, "you could not choose a finer night than this to settle the matter; it is such a lovely night, and He is such a Saviour." By-and-by this strong young fellow was kneeling with three other young men to find what a manly thing it is to be a Christian.

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