

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

the chaplains tell us, will demand instruction and not exhortation. But they will demand instruction in the Bible and in doctrine, not merely in ethics and politics. They will expect us to tell them what the Bible means and what is the meaning of the Atonement, the Holy Spirit, the New Birth, Heaven and Hell. Let us read and be ready. Let us read *The Mysteries of God* by the Rev. W. T. Nicholson, B.A., Vicar of Egham (Stock). It is a book in which these very subjects are explained simply and satisfactorily in a series of short sermons.

‘Howbeit if ye fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well.’ So said the Apostle James. And so says the anonymous and acceptable writer who is known as A. H. W. (Canada) through

a large volume of which the title is *If ye fulfil the Royal Law* (Stock). There is another law of love, love to God the Father. And so the whole message of the book is this: ‘Christ Jesus taught no doctrines other than love and obedience to the Father, and love towards each other. This is marvellously simple and scientific, and if obeyed brings about the highest results possible to the soul of a man, viz., the sinless life, the life that assures us of continuity of being, in some expression of entity and in some condition of environment; but it must be in conscious and acknowledged unity with our Redeemer. If we abide by this Law of Life we are immortal. The soul that sins shall die. Sin is disobedience to the Law, and is brought about by our own unwillingness to love and serve God and to love each other.’

Prayer in Relation to Human Freedom.

BY THE REV. ALFRED E. GARVIE, D.D., PRINCIPAL OF NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

I.

I. PRAYER is the universal and necessary speech as sacrifice the deed of religion. The worshipper expresses his belief, trust, surrender to the object of his worship in prayer. Prayer is so much a natural necessity of man that only the sophisticated by a little philosophy will ask for a rational justification of it. But recognizing both the need of and reason for prayer, when we think about its meaning and worth we are led to view it in four relations.

(i.) It is a condition of human development, *the growth of the soul*. As man is related to and depends on the natural and the social, so also on the spiritual environment; by prayer he maintains his correspondence with that environment in the double sense of the word, communion and concord with God; in prayer he holds fellowship with, and gains likeness to, God. Although the apostle is speaking of the religious life at its highest stage, he is enunciating a principle of universal and necessary application in all religion when he declares: ‘We all, with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit’ (2 Co 3¹⁸). The practice of the

presence of God has as its inevitable result the development of the resemblance to God, as the intercourse of persons is the most potent means of mutual influence.

(ii.) Inasmuch as man is called to self-realization, to make himself by the use of his own freedom, this development of human personality, this growth of the soul, is not apart from, but by means of, human freedom. Not only is prayer the free act of man, but in prayer man not only seeks for but even gains deliverance from limitations and hindrances of his freedom; his relation to himself, the world, and God becomes a freer relation than without prayer it could be. We shall afterwards fully develop this consideration; but meanwhile pass to the two other relations in which we may regard prayer.

(iii.) Many devout persons even would limit the purpose of prayer to the spiritual realm, and would discourage petitions for any natural goods. For them the realm of spirit is a free realm in which God can act freely on behalf of man, and in man; but the realm of nature is a realm of law, fixed and unalterable, in which God could act in response to man’s request only within the rigid limits of natural order, or by miracle, which is incredible.

But where religion is most vital and vigorous, it is least capable of submitting to any such limitation of the scope of prayer. In life itself the natural and the spiritual cannot be so severed from one another, but the loss or gain of natural goods does affect the use and enjoyment of the spiritual good. Still less for faith can God's relation to nature and to spirit be conceived as so entirely different, nay, even absolutely contradictory, free in one case and bound in the other. Theology, in the interests of piety and with due regard to the demands of intelligent and rational thought, may conceive God's relation to nature as a free relation, so that within the natural order itself He may through the natural forces which are the finite exercise of His infinite power and in accord with the natural laws, which are the finite expression of His infinite wisdom, meet man's needs in His fatherly goodness: and may even above and beyond that order as we know it exercise that same power and that same wisdom if that same goodness require, in what we call miracles, events which our present knowledge does not enable us to explain otherwise than as God's free acts. The believer will not demand or expect miracles, for he knows that God can and does answer most of his requests without these; but he will not doubt that God could, if need were, answer him by a miracle.

(iv.) But if God is not bound by nature, is He not bound by His own purpose? How is prayer related to the Divine Sovereignty? We must not transfer to the purpose of God the conception of a fixed and unalterable system which we have just refused to accept in regard to nature. God's will is not a cast-iron system of ends and means, a mechanism which can work only in one way, unless broken. Since God has made man free, He has left room within His purpose for the co-operation of free men; He does not fulfil His will apart from, but by means of, free men. If Calvinism can claim the support of a few isolated texts of Scripture, it challenges the contradiction of the moral and religious consciousness. The Kingdom of God, which is the end of God's ways in human history, is the community of free persons, freely submissive to the sovereignty of the divine truth and grace, and all the means towards the end are harmonious with it. Prayer as man's free act is not contrary to, but in accord with, and even a condition of, the Divine Sovereignty so conceived.

2. Much more might be said about prayer in each

of these relations, but the purpose of this essay is to deal with the second; and yet in dealing with the second, the other three will inevitably demand further notice. It will be convenient to distinguish these four questions regarding prayer by a distinctive epithet: we may call the first the *religious*, the second the *moral*, the third the *philosophical*, and the fourth the *theological* problem. *Human freedom* is a condition of *human development*, finds a limitation in *natural order*, and must acknowledge dependence on the *Divine Sovereignty*. We cannot accordingly discuss the one problem unless in relation to the others. The thesis to be proved is this, that only as exercised in prayer can man's freedom secure his full human development, change the natural order from hindrance to help, and be itself fulfilled in submission to the Divine Sovereignty.

II.

1. The Content of Man's Consciousness is three-fold—self, world, and God; and in the exercise of his freedom man finds a hindrance as well as a help in each of these. He very soon discovers that there is much he wants to do, but cannot do because of his own weakness; the reach of his desire goes far beyond the grasp of his capacity; with Paul he must often confess, 'To will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not' (Ro 7¹⁸); even apart from this enfeeblement by sin, man discovers very quickly and painfully the limits of his ability in contrast with the range of his desire and aspiration. Not only is he thus limited within his own free personality, but he finds himself as a part of nature in subjection to natural forces, and confined by natural laws. He can, it is true, by knowing use nature; by the science which knows the natural laws he can in his industry control natural forces; and yet he does not see all things subject unto himself; need and peril, disease and death are constantly reminding him that he is not always nature's master, but often her victim. As religious he recognizes behind and above self and world as the ultimate reality, and so the supreme sovereignty, God. This dependence is confessed in the common proverb, 'Man proposes, but God disposes.' To think of natural force as divine will may make subjection less humbling to the spirit of man; but it does not restore to him his sense of freedom, unless he can humanly will that the divine will be done.

2. Let us now look more closely at each of these limitations of man's freedom, and see how he transcends them in prayer. As regards man's limitation in himself, we must regard personality not as made, but as making, not as a fixed actuality, but as an expanding possibility. (i.) That in each individual the possibility is not absolutely unlimited must be conceded: nature does set bounds to what nurture can do, although these bounds are not as narrow as is often hastily assumed. To use a familiar proverb, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.' In the physical and mental we must recognize such a limitation more than in the moral and spiritual. A David could not by any amount of exercise raise himself to the stature of a Goliath; no amount of education can make a dull man a genius. But by God's grace the sinner can become the saint, and the rebel be welcomed as the son.

(ii.) No man, however, is all that he may be. By self-culture and self-control man may do much to realize himself and fulfil his own promise. Yet in the higher life man soon and painfully discovers the hindrance in himself of his sinfulness. The autobiographical passage in Ro 7⁷⁻²⁵ describes a more tragic experience than is common, as few men are so concerned about righteousness, or distressed about guilt, as was Paul; and yet wherever men think seriously and strive earnestly, they do discover their need of strength and deliverance.

(iii.) Recent science has been insisting on the necessity of an appropriate environment for organic development. Man is dependent on nature for his physical growth; for his moral progress he is largely dependent on society. But in such an experience as Paul's, when human freedom finds itself fettered, liberation does not come from society. There is a divine environment, on which man depends unconsciously, but which cannot have its full effect upon him, unless he consciously puts himself in correspondence with it. I would in passing protest against the assumption that for religion and morals the subconscious is more significant and valuable than the conscious. God's truth and grace affect us most potently as we consciously and voluntarily apprehend them.

(iv.) In prayer we freely will our own liberation from the limitations of our freedom in our nature and character by God's action in us and for us. God is so akin to our truest, best, worthiest self, that we are most ourselves, that we are freest in ourselves in the measure in which He dwells and works in us

by His Spirit. What must be insisted on is that there is nothing magical or mystical in the activity of God in man, but it is the free act of God's grace in response to the free act of our faith in prayer. Just as the influence of one human personality enables another to realize itself as apart from that influence it could not, so God's Spirit does not suppress but liberates man's freedom for his own self-realization; and God so respects our freedom that He waits the invitation of our prayer to dwell and work in us the fulfilment of His own purpose for our good.

3. How often does a man chafe and grieve at the limitations that the world around imposes on his desires, expectations, and efforts. (i.) The child at first thinks he can have whatever he wants, but how soon does he discover that he can't. Men do not notice how many are the goods which nature bestows upon them, but they are quick to complain of any evils which it may inflict. Ungrateful for health, they grumble at sickness. Unawed by the wonder of life, they are frightened by the mystery of death. Sunshine and shower do not compel their attention as do earthquake and flood. It humbles, affrights, oppresses man that he should be the sport of forces he cannot fully understand and freely control. Some thinkers have found in man's sense of the limitation and even subjugation of his personality by nature the root of religion: by belief in gods above nature, and at last a God over all, man sought deliverance from his bondage to the fear and force of nature. This is not the sole root of religion; and yet in religion man does escape from subjection to the world.

(ii.) While the civilized man does not so constantly and painfully experience his subjugation to nature as does the savage, since his science and skill give him a large measure of knowledge and control over nature, yet he too has often to realize that his dominion is not complete. The watcher beside the sick-bed of a loved one, when death is approaching, realizes his utter helplessness, in spite of all the alleviations which medical science and skill can offer. Man finds it easy to destroy, hard to produce and preserve life.

(iii.) Must we then submit with Stoic fortitude? Must we not pray for the preservation of a loved life? In such a condition human love makes and cannot but make its appeal to divine love. But even as regards lesser goods, are we required

to be so spiritual that we are so indifferent to our natural perils or needs as never to pray about them? Man is not disembodied spirit; his inner life depends and is affected by his outer; he can escape anxiety only as he can cast his cares upon God. Our relation to God would be subjected to a limitation which would narrow and impoverish it, could we not pray to God about natural goods. We must not be childish, while childlike. There are fond fancies and petty wishes we shall cast aside, as we become ashamed of bringing them under God's eye; but there remains much in our relation to the world that touches us so closely and moves us so deeply even in our inner life that we can find deliverance only as we pray.

(iv.) The belief that God can answer our prayers, if He will, at once frees us from the bewildering and baffling sense of subjection to an inscrutable, ineluctable power; and transforms our relation to nature into a relation to God. If in His wisdom and grace He does not grant our request, it is not to nature that we feel ourselves subjected, but it is His will that we are called to obey. The denial which comes to us in answer to prayer not only assures us that it is best for us so to want or suffer, but also that His grace will be sufficient for us to endure; and so in His will we recover our freedom.

4. How are we to conceive the relation of God's will to our own will, since our consciousness of self and world leads us on to the consciousness of

God? (i.) God's strength helping our weakness is not a suppression, but a realization of, our freedom; for what we ourselves willed, and failed to do, God has willed and done by and in us. Again, our surrender of natural goods in submission to the will of God is not subjugation to a hostile power of nature, but a recognition that God knows better than we do ourselves what is really good for us, and that we shall in the end realize our good as personalities related to God more fully by lacking than by having the natural goods we sought, and failed to find.

(ii.) If in prayer we remain in God's company we shall come to think, feel, and will as He does, and so what He gives is all we seek, and what He withholds we no longer wish to have. It is because as Father He wants His children freely to will His will that He does not exercise His Divine Sovereignty through a physical omnipotence regardless of our wishes and aims, but waits in His action either in ourselves or in the world around us for our prayers, in which our human freedom, limited as it is, links itself with His Divine Sovereignty and so finds its enlargement, and deliverance from subjection to the natural order. In prayer we become God's partners, and so even amid our tears can smile

To think God's greatness
Flows around our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness His rest.

Contributions and Comments.

John Mark.

WHY is it that in the discussions about the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Ac 15³⁶⁻⁴¹), it is almost universally assumed that the latter two are the ones to blame? Seldom is a good word spoken for Mark, and it is usually overlooked that Barnabas was 'a good man,' 'full of the Holy Spirit.' Is it not as probable that he was in the right as it is that Paul was? Are there not good reasons for saying that in such an affair he was much more likely to be in the right at this time than Paul? A masterful man like Paul, at least early in life, is not accustomed to show much charity for any one of less strong or aggressive nature, and is it not fair to assume that he was a

little unjust in his treatment of Mark? Does not his later treatment of him lead to this view rather than to the wholly gratuitous assumption that Mark had confessed his fault?

In his delightful volume, *The Second Things of Life*, Dr. Moffatt takes the unfavourable view of Mark's character, speaks of him as 'unreliable,' and of his leaving Paul and Barnabas as an 'act of moral cowardice.' But some way it does not seem to me quite warranted by the story as told in the Book of the Acts. Why should we try to save Paul from blame by imputing motives and conduct to John Mark, and, by inference, to Barnabas, which must be read between the lines?

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

Auburn Theological Seminary, New York.