

HE WILL REGARD PRAYER.

Does the Lord regard prayer only after long delay? Is He not omnipresent? Is not the whispered prayer known to Him before there is yet a word in the tongue? Can the All-Knowing One first stand apart, indifferently as it were, and only gradually perceive that we pray, before he regards what at first he ignores?

Such is the meaning of verses 16 and 17 of Psalm 102. The Psalmist stands outside a closed door. Out of the depth his prayer ascends. But the thorn in the flesh is not removed. The Lord does not hear his prayer. And the Arch-enemy, who does not pray, and who does not know God, is encouraged by Jehovah. God's covenant people are repulsed. God hides his face. And the Psalmist cries: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and from me. In the day when I call answer me speedily.

This brings relief to his troubled mind. With prophetic insight he anticipates the day when the Lord will hear the prayer of his people, and inspired by this thought he exclaims: "When the Lord will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer, then shall all the kings of the earth fear him."

Thus the Psalmist was still in that period in which the Lord held himself deaf to his people, and in which the moment tarried when he would regard their prayer. And do you think that the Psalmist did not feel and know the objections that are suggested by the nature of the Divine Being against this human representation? And

are we so far his superior that the thoughts which arise in us were foreign to him? Who has ever outlined God's omnipresence and omniscience in terms of finer poetic imagery than he? Are not the expressions in which we clothe our prayers for the most part borrowed from his writing? Did not he propound the question: "Shall he who planted the ear, not hear?" And did not he confess in Ps. 139: "There is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it."

The Psalmist has described the Divine virtues in behalf of the saints of all ages, and the mysteries of the Divine Being are nowhere more clearly set forth than in the language of his songs. And when this eminently-saintly man frequently speaks of God—also with reference to this matter of prayer—in this simple, human way, what can it mean, save that the confidential terms of intimate human fellowship have the same significance in the secret walk with God. And that there are moments when God disregards our prayers, but which, praise his name, are succeeded by other moments in which He does regard them?

You believe in Christ. You believe that his saying is true: "He that hath seen Me, has seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?" On bended knee you comess him as your Lord and your God. But what is the incarnation of the word except that God became man? And what profit can this be to you, unless you realize that in Christ God has come close to you in a human way?

Before the days of the Bethlehem birth God spoke to us in the human word, but in Christ God is manifest in human nature. He reveals himself to us as the son of Man. A human heart speaks here in human language and in human ways. As the Apostle John asserts: In Jesus they have not only seen and heard what is God's, but have touched, that is they have handled with their hands, and have actually seen before their eyes the eternal—Godlike in human manifestation and in human form. Hence the whole Christian faith and Christian confession rests upon the clear and firm conviction that God has not willed himself to be lost to us in endless abstractions, but that in our human nature, in human form and in human language he comes to us ever more closely, in order through the medium of our human heart to establish affectionate and full fellowship with us.

Our Lord Jesus makes no high-sounding, abstract statements of the infinite in the Eternal, but shows us God as our Father, and calls us to be his children, and with childlike confidence, in a childlike way, and with childlike intimacy to have fellowship with him. Let it be distinctly understood that this rests on sober reality. That this is not mere semblance but actual fact, since God created us after his image. That thus, in the face of a broad difference, Divine reality is expressed in the human. And that, when the Word became flesh, the fact that the Son of God became Man, is directly connected with our creation after God's image.

Would we undo all this, and create a distance between us and God which would exclude all personal fellowship, by putting a whole system of

abstract ideas about the immensities of God in the place of this heart-to-heart intimacy which can not be cultivated with God except in a human way? Let us leave this to philosophers who do not pray, and to theologians dry-as-dust who are not children of their Father in heaven. But as for us, let us love God with a devotion which can only express itself in childlike fellowship with him.

Moreover, in the practice of prayer we frequently observe that experience confirms the word of the Psalmist. At one time the heavens are open to us, and as we pray, angels descend and ascend to bring our petitions to the throne of grace. While at other times our prayers are faint, our words bound back as it were upon ourselves and every door of approach to God is closed up against us. At one time there will be an immediate hearing and a direct answering, and at another time we feel ourselves immured and thrown back upon ourselves, and it seems that there is no living God to hear us. And when the turn of the tide sets in, and we perceive that the gate of heaven reopens, and we feel that our prayer obtains free access to the throne of the Almighty, then we understand from our own experience what the Psalmist wrote about the blessedness of the moment in which the Lord regarded again the prayer of the soul that was destitute.

Is now the solution of this apparent contradiction as impossible as it seems? By no means; provided we have eyes to observe the part which God plays in our prayer-life. When we deem that prayer is original with ourselves; when we do not believe that the spirit of prayer goes out in us

from God, and we imagine that God's part in our prayer only begins when he hears and answers it, then indeed we face an insoluble riddle.

But if we take it in the other, truer way, and make it clear to our mind that God has quickened our prayer-life and that he directs and carries it, the matter gleams with light. The farmer sows the seed in the newly-ploughed furrows and leaves it alone to do its work, and only returns to the field when the dew of heaven and sunshine have caused the seed to sprout and to send the blade upward, and the corn to ripen in the ear, that he might gather the harvest.

And such is the case in our prayer-life. Our Father who is in heaven begins it by sowing the seed of prayer in our hearts. And then follows a slow process. The prayer-life must develop in us. Prayer must ripen in the soul. And only when this result has been obtained, and our prayer has unfolded itself in that higher form, does the heavenly Husbandman regard the prayer-life in us and enrich it with abounding answers.

Such is the case with our prayer-life taken as a whole. Through foolish petitions we arrive at purified prayers. Through earthly prayers we come to those holier petitions which have been watered with the dew of heaven, and which scintillate with light from higher spheres than ours. But such is the case also with our individual prayers. These, too, are not unfolded and ripened at once. They also undergo a process in the soul. They also spring from a root and only by degrees develop themselves into prayers such as the Father in heaven expects from his children. Prayers which are not merely sounds in the lips but which

rise from the depths of the heart. Prayers which fully harmonize with our own desires and inclinations. Prayers in which not merely a passing thought, but the whole person expresses himself. Prayers in which the soul truly pours itself out before the Holy One.

God allows us time for this. It can not be at once. If he interfered at once no prayer-life could be developed in us, and no single prayer could be sanctified in us. Weeds that grow between our prayers must first be rooted out. Every infectuous insect that crept in must be destroyed. Prayer must refine itself and sanctify itself and in a heavenly sense through faith must be able to mature. And therefore he leaves us to ourselves for a time that through the fiery trial gold may proceed from the ore.

And when at length our prayers are sufficiently purified to be laid upon the Altar of the Almighty, then he will regard them again. And we will thank our Father in heaven that he has brought us to the holy school of prayer.

6

“HEARKEN UNTO ME, MY PEOPLE.”

“GIVE HEED TO ME, O LORD.”

At one time it was thought that sound came from the throat, that its power was limited, and that it could only make our word intelligible at short distances. No one could hear us, nor we him, from a greater distance than our voice could carry. When there was anything to say, messengers were sent to carry it. When writing was