

XLI.

Prayer in the Unconverted.

“When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.” —*Psalm xxvii. 8.*

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The faculty of *prayer* is not an acquisition of later years, but is *created in us*, inherent in the root of our being, inseparable from our nature.

And yet consistent with this fact is the fact that the great majority of men do not pray. It is possible to possess a faculty dormant in us for a whole lifetime. The Malay possesses the faculty for studying modern languages as well as we, but he never uses it. In sleep we retain our faculties of seeing and hearing, but then they are inactive. Altho possessed of great power, the big fellow did not lift a finger against the little scamp who tormented him. Hence a faculty may remain in us wholly undeveloped and dormant for a lifetime, or partly developed but suppressed. And the same is true of the faculty of prayer. Among the fourteen hundred millions of the earth's population, there are scarcely two hundred million who do not appear to be acquainted with prayer, altho their form of prayer is very defective. Of the non-praying masses, who almost exclusively occupy Europe, one half remember the time when, in some way or other, they used to pray. Many of those who have lost even that, still breathe an occasional prayer. And the number of them who wish that they could pray is very large; and among the non-praying people they represent undoubtedly the noblest.

Hence we maintain our starting-point, that we owe the faculty of prayer to our creation. God created man as a being disposed to prayer. If this were not so, the faculty of prayer could not be among his endowments. We are created for prayer, otherwise we could never have tasted of its sweetness.

To the question, Why in our creation is this a peculiar work of the Holy Spirit? we answer: Prayer is the drawing and pressing of the *impressed image* toward its *Original*, which is the Triune God. To be the bearers of that impressed image is the marvelous honor bestowed upon men. Altho marred by sin—God grant by regeneration restored in you—yet the original features of that image are still the original features of our human being. Without that image we would cease to be men.

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And, owing its origin to the impress of that original Image, our inward being draws toward It, naturally, urgently, and persistently. It can not live without it, and the fact that, on the other hand, the original Image of the Eternal One draws the impressed image in man to Himself, is the ultimate and constraining power of all prayer. However, to be exalted to the dignity of prayer, this drawing to God must not be like the involuntary suction of water to the deep, or the turning of the opening rose-bud toward the light. For the water knows not whither it is going, and the rosebud is unconscious of the sunshine which governs it. That almost irresistible drawing can be called prayer only when *we know* that it is prayer,

when we *perceive* it, and, knowing to whom it draws us, make it our own conscious, cooperating act.

Hence prayer does not spring from the will. The Triune God is He who rouses the soul to prayer, who draws us, and not we ourselves. Wherefore the Psalmist says: "When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek." ([Psalm xxvii. 8](#)) And how does this first impulse from God reach us? Not externally as the wind, but internally in the heart. And knowing that it does not *proceed from* me, but *comes to* me, it must be from the Holy Spirit who works in me. Are not all the internal impulses that proceed from the Eternal One *the proper work of the Holy Spirit*? We can have no fellowship with the Son but through the Holy Spirit; none with the Father but through the Son to whom the Holy Spirit has introduced us.

However, we do not speak now of the state of regeneration. In our treatment of prayer thus far, we have reference to man in his original state, and independent of the restoration; and in that state we say, prayer is not the cry of an independent being for a God to him unknown, with whom he hopes thus to become acquainted; but, on the contrary, that all prayer presupposes, on man's part, an inward sense of the Eternal Being of God, and of the fact that, being created after His image, he belongs to Him and *consciously* draws to his original Image. Wherefore we may call it a spiritual magnetism, which operates unceasingly upon him, and originated in his creation. However, it is different from magnetism in a twofold aspect: (1) in that man is *conscious* of it; (2) in that it is a *mutual* attraction.

The *second point* needs special emphasis. In magnetic attraction the magnet is active and the iron passive; but in prayer it is not so. Prayer rests upon the foundation of *mutual* attraction. So long as it proceeds from God's side alone, there is no prayer; but there is, when our being begins to draw to God, when we feel the impulse if possible to draw God to us: "Come, Lord, how long! Lord, delay not! come quickly!"

This is the power of love which finds in prayer its most glorious manifestation. Prayer is the fairest flower that grows upon the stem of holy love. Then love works in God *for man*, on account of the image in which He created him. And in man love works *for God*, because of the Image after which he was created. In fact, every distress from which we cry to be delivered is to the soul but the conscious need of the power and faithfulness of God. So love labors to meet love, that in tranquil whisperings it may pray not for deliverance from trouble, but to possess Him for whose love alone the heart is yearning.

Upon a lower level prayer certainly assumes a lower form, which by sin has become so low and selfish that prayer, which should be love's breath, has become an egoistic cry. But we discuss prayer as it was originally, before sin had affected it. And as the true heir of heaven yearns for his heavenly home not for the sake of crown and palm and golden harp, but for his God alone; so is prayer, pure and undefiled, a longing, not for God's gifts, but

for God Himself. As the Shulamite calls for her bridegroom, so does the praying soul, from the consuming desire of love, pray and thirst for the possession of its Maker and to be possessed of Him.

Since it is the Third Person in the Godhead who makes this communion between God and the soul possible, working and maintaining it in the soul, it is evident that prayer belongs to the proper domain of the Holy Spirit; only when thus considered can prayer be understood in its deepest significance.

The other question now arises, regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in *our* prayer, *after that we became sinners*.

For even sinners pray. This is evident from the heathen world, which, however low its forms of prayer, yet offers up supplications and petitions. It is evident from the ease with which a little child, taught by its mother, learns to pray; and from the many who, estranged from prayer, in sudden calamities bend the knees, and, altho they can not pray, still assume the attitude of prayer, willing to give half their kingdom if they only could pray. And lastly, it is evident from the thousands and tens of thousands who, convinced of the impossibility of praying for themselves, cry to others: "Pray for us!"

Prayer in higher, holier sense the sinner can not offer. Everything in him is sinful, even his prayer. In his sin he has reversed the established order of things: not he existing for God, but God existing for him. Confirmed in his selfishness, the God of heaven and earth is to him little more than a Physician in every sickness and a Provider in every need; a wonderful Being, ever ready at his first cry to supply out of His fulness his every necessity.

This is the egoism that inseparably belongs to every sinner's prayer. The prayer of the redeemed saint is: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever. Amen." The *converted sinner* offers first the petitions for *His* name, *His* Kingdom, and *His* will; then he adds the petitions for bread, for forgiveness, for protection from sin. But the *unconverted sinner* has no conception of a prayer for God's name, Kingdom, and will. He prays for bread only; for forgiveness also, but only from the motive that bread and luxury and deliverance from trouble may not be denied him.

Wherefore it is impossible to have *too low* an estimate of the sinner's prayer. The depth of our fall is in nothing so apparent as in the sin of this degenerate, bastardized prayer. All such prayer may be designated as a defying and vexing of God and His eternal love. In this sense the prayer of the sinner contains nothing of the work of the Holy Spirit. All this prayer springs from the egoism of the sinful heart, and has not the least value, rather the opposite.

But—and this is the principal thing—altho our hands have unstrung the harp so that it produces nothing but discord, yet the artist is just as great, for he had so planned and con-



structed and tuned the instrument that it could produce the purest tones and fairest music. And such is man's heart. Sin did not remove the strings, for then it could not produce even discord; but sin has put it out of tune, and now its tones are harsh and grating upon the ear. And yet these very strings testify of the work of the original Master, for by *His* original work they are still sound-producing. So long as the strings are only loose upon the harp, it may be repaired; but when they are altogether broken and gone, it is no longer a harp, but a useless piece of wood. Every prayer of the sinner is a discord which jars against the beautiful harmony of the eternal love of God; nevertheless the very discords of that prayer are the evidences that the Holy Spirit had originally placed the strings upon the heart.

If the Holy Spirit had never performed such a work upon the heart, there would be no harp at all; the heart could not produce even the discord. The fact that it does, shows that there are strings which originally were perfectly attuned. Hence prayer in the sinner is unthinkable without the work of the Holy Spirit.

But this is not all. Not only the possibility of such discordant prayer, but the discord itself is but the reversed working of a power created, supported, and actuated by the Holy Spirit's work. To put this in the strongest light, we add: that all cursing and blasphemy is the reversed action of a power of the Holy Spirit. Blasphemers and men given to profanity indulge in their terrible sin, because they realize that the Almighty God lives, and that His power is something terrible. Cursing and blasphemy are hellish tones and vibrations from the same harp of prayer, which the Holy Spirit created in the soul. An animal can *not* curse; and if the Holy Spirit had not strung the soul with these strings of prayer, no curse could ever have passed the lips of man. Cursing is a malignant boil, but it springs directly from the artery of prayer. Consider it well, even Satan has not a single power directly from himself; and all the power with which, in his blasphemous and insane rage, he wars against God is a power from God reversed by Satan.

Even the sinner's prayer is a manifestation of *power*. There must be an impulse and incitement, however weak, which causes him to pray. And this requires strength of consciousness and an expression of the will. And these powers he does not create himself, but the Holy Ghost; he only abuses or corrupts them.

When an unpractised hand touches the harp-strings and produces discords, it does not *create* those discords; but they are formed from the sounds and tones which are in the vibrating strings of the harp. The same is true of the sinner's prayer. He could not offer his sinful prayer if there were no tone of prayer in the strings of his heart. That he can pray at all, he owes to the fact that the Holy Spirit created the tones of prayer in his heart; which he brings forth, alas! only to make them discords.

However, in this respect, ordinary grace in its sometimes preparatory character ought not to be overlooked. The sinner is on earth, and not yet in hell. Between the two is, first,

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this difference, that on the former there is preventive grace, which bridles the power of sin and prevents it from breaking out in all its violence. Sin on earth is like a chained bulldog or a muzzled hyena. Secondly, God loves this world. He has thoughts of peace concerning it. He does not forsake the work of His creation, and by His sovereign grace He provides a redemption which saves the organism of the world and of the race; so that the tree is saved, while the useless shoots and dry leaves are gathered to be cast into hell. Having this in view, ordinary or general grace aims at the preservation of the powers of the original creation, to develop them to some extent, and thus to prepare the field in which by and by the seed of eternal life will be planted. And, altho this ordinary grace is not effectual to salvation, any more than the mere plowing of the field can ever germinate the wheat which is not sown in the furrows, yet this plowing of ordinary grace has real significance for the future growth of the seed of eternal life.

And in this general grace, the grace of prayer occupies an important place. If there were no general grace, muzzling sin and plowing the field, the sinner could no more pray than Satan, but like him would curse God without ceasing. But now he still prays, he has prayed for ages, and by his prayer, even tho it is the fruit of tradition, he has sometimes risen above the sinful egoism of his heart. But this prayer never sprang from the root of sin, nor from something good which he had kept along with sin in the holy closet of his heart; it was but the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

Evidence of the deep inworking of this grace is found in the exalted devotions that still sound in our ears from the most ancient traditional prayers of Indian, Egyptian, and Greek antiquity; and in the ministry of prayer from the pulpit by unconverted ministers whose supplications often move and touch the soul.

However, the glory of this does not belong to the sinner; nor does it in the least affect the absolute character of man's depravity by sin. But it shows that the Lord God did not leave the sinner to his sin; but even in the absence of regeneration, and to the glory of His name, caused general grace to intervene, which frequently illuminated the life of prayer.

And when such a people, still acquainted with these holy traditions and gracious operations, received the knowledge of Christ crucified and of His power to save, it became evident afterward that the prayers which, independently of himself, were laid upon the sinner's lips had prepared a way and opened a gate through which the King of Glory could come into such a people. And taking it in individual cases, it appears from the experience of many that, long before the soul became conscious of saving grace, the grace of God not only kept him from violent outbreaks of sin, but, through the *tradition of prayer*, wrought a work in him the blessed effects of which were understood only long afterward.

And all these operations of *general grace* are, as soon as they touch the life of prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit. He who in creation strung the harp of prayer in the soul is the same who causes not only the tone of prayer to vibrate even in our egoistic petitions, but



who, in a more glorious way, sometimes even as tho the soul were an Æolian harp, touches the strings with the breath of His mouth, and draws from it the beautiful and entrancing tones of prayers and supplications.

XLII.

The Prayer of the Regenerated.

"Likewise the Spirit helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which can not be uttered." —*Rom. viii. 26.*



Next in order comes the question: What is the work of the Holy Spirit in the *prayer of the regenerated*?

Here we distinguish (1) the prayer of the saint, and (2) that of the Holy Spirit for him.

The last we consider first, because, through the Apostle Paul, we receive clearest revelation concerning it: "Likewise the Spirit helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings that can not be uttered" (*Rom. viii. 26*). For the better understanding of this passage, observe:

In the *first* place, that the apostle refers to the prayer or groan arising not from the regenerated person himself, but from another in his behalf. It is not a prayer, but an intercession from the Holy Spirit for him."¹³

In the *second* place, it is necessary to distinguish between the intercession of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus Christ the Righteous.

Christ intercedes for us in *heaven*, and the Holy Spirit on *earth*. Christ our Holy Head, being *absent* from us, intercedes *outside* of us; the Holy Spirit our Comforter intercedes *in our own heart* which He has chosen as His temple.

There is a difference, not only of place, but also in the *nature* of this twofold intercession. The glorified Christ intercedes in heaven for His elect and redeemed, *to obtain for them the fruit of His sacrifice*: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the



13 Expositors of an earlier period judged with Calvin that the intercession of the Holy Spirit signified a working upon us, by virtue of which *we ourselves groaned in ourselves*. But this view is incorrect; for [verse 23](#) states what Calvin supposed to be stated in [verse 26](#). In the former, the apostle speaks of groanings that proceed from us, wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. [Verse 26](#) can not be a mere repetition; for the word "likewise" introduces a new thing, altho it is similar to the preceding. Moreover, the word here applied to the Holy Spirit is the same as the one used in [verse 34](#), "*entunchánein*," which signifies the intercession of the Holy Spirit. And again, the word "*sunantilambánesthai*," which is translated "to help," requires that the person rendering assistance be not only in us, but also works *with us* and *for us*. [Verse 27](#) leads to the same conclusion, first, because it speaks of the mind of the *Spirit*, and not of man's mind; secondly, because the intercession is said to be according to God, "*katà Theón*," not "*eis Theón*," *i.e.*, according to the will of God, and this can be said of the Holy Spirit alone. We do not, however, deny that, in one respect, this groaning makes instrumental use of the vocal organs, as in the matter of the "*glóssais lalein*," the speaking with tongues. We maintain only that the unutterable groaning does not imply the use of those organs; rather the opposite.