

Sunday Reading.

For the Christian Messenger. Prayer.

A SERMON PREACHED AT STILLMAN VALLEY, ILLINOIS, ON SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 22ND, 1884.

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"What profit should we have if we pray unto him."—Job xxi: 16.

Three years ago the news flashed from Washington to all points of the compass that President Garfield was shot. For eighty days the prayers of God's people everywhere throughout christendom ascended to Heaven for his recovery. But he died. That death, which caused so much lamentation in this nation and called forth so much sympathy from all nations of the earth, led to such an investigation of the subject of prayer as perhaps it never received before. The present political excitement, amid which the name of Garfield is so often seen and heard, recalled vividly that memorable second of July, and it is fitting that the subject of prayer should occupy our attention anew.

The Scripture teaching thereon is clear. God hears and answers prayer. "Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." " whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that will I do." David could exclaim, "I love the Lord because he hath heard my voice and my supplications." Christ could say as at the tomb of Lazarus He lifted up His eyes to the Father, "I know that thou hearest me always." Language could not be plainer than that used in these and many other similar passages. And the history of prayer, when rightly understood, confirms the Scripture teaching.

We take the stand, then, that every true prayer—every prayer of faith—is answered, either, first, in its letter; or, second, in its spirit.

Notice that throughout this discourse whatever is said will be uttered regarding real, acceptable prayer, and no other.

I.—In its letter. 1. The very thing asked for is sometimes granted immediately. Hezekiah's prayer was heard and his life prolonged fifteen years. While the disciples were pleading for Peter's release the angel led him forth from the place of imprisonment. Melancthon was once at the point of death, and in answer to Luther's prayer he immediately began to recover, and he lived to pronounce the funeral oration of the great reformer. A few years ago the Prince of Wales was at death's door, and he was restored in response to the petitions of the nation. There are on record numberless instances of this nature. Some of us can recall cases within our own knowledge, or received upon the testimony of friends, of persons who suffered long from illness and got little or no benefit from the treatment received. But sudden restoration came in answer to prayer. Equally signal answers have come by way of deliverances in times of peril, and by way of providing for the wants of the distressed and needy. If it is best for us the specific thing we ask of God will be granted immediately.

2. But while our request may be in harmony with God's will He may see it best not to grant it for a time. This is often the case. What we long for comes after much delay. The heart has been for years set upon some worthy object of desire, and yet the petitions seem to be unheard in Heaven. The one who prays knows that the thing prayed for must be well-pleasing to God. And yet the months and years roll wearily by, while the heart grows heavier because the petition is not granted. But the answer will come. It may be that a mother prays for a wayward boy. When he lies unconsciously asleep in his chamber, she is on her knees asking God to save him. Often has it been that way. Years pass on. That son continues in sin; that mother continues in prayer. At length the faithful parent sickens and dies, and ere she leaves the earth her last prayer is for her wandering boy. More years are added. That son is away in a foreign land, and farther than ever from God. But suddenly something recalls his mother's prayers and

her dying admonition. Conviction seizes him. He falls upon his knees. His soul is saved. If those who are gone know aught of those who remain, then out from the spirit world that mother sees that son, and she strikes up a jubilant song of praise, in which all the angelic throng unite.

There is a good deal of prayer heard in that way—heard after the petitioner's voice has been hushed in death. God needs not to hurry. Let us remember that, while He delays the answer our faith may grow stronger. That soul is fast becoming great which ceases not to cry to God though the request is withheld.

3. Again, while our request is granted it may, besides being delayed, be answered in a different way from what we expected. It would be strange if it were otherwise. How can we who know so little, and who cannot see into the future, tell what the best way would be? Most of our prayers are answered in a manner different from what we anticipated. God's ways are not man's; and some day we will find out how much better God's ways are than ours. We fear that we are growing too worldly-minded, and we ask God to make us more heavenly-minded. He takes away our property, or our health, or some one dear to us. He removes earthly treasures that we may lay up treasures on high. We pray God to make us stronger and better Christians. So He brings us through temptation and affliction. He surrounds us with the conditions whereby we may realize the object of our desire. We often sing—

"Nearer, my God, to Thee! Nearer to Thee! E'en though it be a cross That raiseth me,"

when we hardly mean it. But God often does raise us by a "cross." Happy are they who are so wise as to make life's trials stepping-stones heavenward. That's what they are meant to be. They often come to us as the answer to our prayers. We don't ask for those particular things; but by these means God bestows the blessings we seek. Every aspiring Christian who has long prayed can echo the words of Newton:

"I asked the Lord that I might grow, In faith and love and every grace; Might more of His salvation know, And seek more earnestly His face."

"'Twas He who taught me thus to pray, And He, I trust, has answered prayer; But it has been in such a way As almost drove me to despair."

"I hoped that in some favored hour At once He'd answer my request, And by His love's constraining power Subdue my sins and give me rest."

"Instead of this, He made me feel The hidden evils of my heart; And let the angry powers of hell Assault my soul in every part."

"Yea, more: with His own hand He seemed Intent to aggravate my woe; Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, Blasted my gourds and laid me low."

"Lord, why is this? I trembling cried, 'Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?' 'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied, 'I answer prayer for grace and faith.'"

"These inward trials I employ, From self and pride to set thee free, And break thy schemes of earthly joy, That thou may'st at find thy all in me."

II.—Many prayers are answered in the spirit though not in the letter. Some prayers are answered immediately and the thing asked for is granted. Some, though not answered at once, are answered after a time by bringing the object of desire. Some, while securing the thing wished for, are answered in a different way from that which was expected. And, lastly, some do not procure the specific request, but they procure that out of which the request springs. One prays for a certain thing thinking that in the highest sense it would be beneficial to obtain it. The spirit of the prayer is this: Lord, give me that for which I ask Thee, because I think it will be for my good to have it. But God sees that it would not be for the individual's good. So He gives what really is. The spirit of the prayer is right: the letter of the prayer is wrong. God grants the former, and refuses the latter. His wisdom comes in to make good our lack of knowledge.

Now the prayers offered for President Garfield come under this head. For two and half months streams of petition went up for him from all quarters of the earth. The best of men—the men of the strongest faith in every

nation were on their knees asking God to save him. Just such a man as he was needed as the chief magistrate of the American people. The four months of his administration gave promise of good things to come. High hopes for our country were centred in him. But suddenly the gifted Christian statesman becomes the victim of an assassin. The nation is thunder-struck. Garfield lies in a precarious condition, and bright hopes are exchanged for midnight gloom! The godly betake themselves to prayer. "O God spare the President!" That is the cry which goes up in different languages from the different quarters of the globe. But he continues to fail. After sixty-six days he is removed from the poisonous fogs of Washington to the healthy sea-shore at Long Branch. But after thirteen days of suffering there his spirit passes from the shores of this life.

Were all those prayers unheard and unanswered? Did men in the home and in the pulpit, here and everywhere, beseech a throne of grace in vain? Did God fail to make good His word?

Look at the spirit of those numerous and importunate petitions. The country was hopeful in view of the administration which was promised. When Garfield was stricken down prayers arose for his restoration because the welfare of these United States seemed to require it. The welfare of the country was the underlying wish. We asked God to save the man because we thought we could not do without him. But we could. We thought our wounded leader must needs recover if the best interest of our beloved land were to be promoted. God saw that it was otherwise. The welfare of a nation depends not upon the life of any man. God rules the nations, and He is able to raise up new men to fill up the places of the fallen. The spirit of our petitions was answered: the letter was withheld. The divine wisdom in this matter will come out more distinctly as the years go by. We can now see in part how that God has done better for us than if he had saved the life we asked. It is not for us to pry too curiously into God's workings. There must ever be to us mysteries enshrouding some of His ways, and these must be left for the other life to make clear. Happy that man or people who can trust God in the darkness of the present. "God is His own interpreter and he will make it plain." But this life clears up many mysteries. Each day unfolds them. The darkness of yesterday flies before the incoming light of to-day. We now stand three years from the melancholy event of a second martyred President. What light has been thrown upon that event? What indications have we that our prayers have had or are having an answer? How has God heard by seeming to refuse?

1. The character of Garfield was lifted into the sight of the nations by his sufferings and his death. Inestimable benefits have flowed and will continue to flow from this. It will ever be a boon to this country and the world. Many knew little of him before that long-to-be-remembered second of July. Now he is everywhere known, admired, and loved. He has shown that Christianity is not only compatible with the highest type of statesmanship, but that it is necessary to it. Garfield's life will ever be an inspiration to the boys in this country, to students, and to men in public service. It is now moulding those young people in American homes who are to occupy the prominent positions of the future. The manner of his decease has led to such an examination of his career from dog cabin to White House as could not have been incited by the most brilliant term's administration. A man may accomplish more by dying than by living. "He lives who dies to win a lasting name." The moral grandeur of President Garfield's character, raised aloft by the manner of his death so that dwellers in every clime can gaze upon it, is moulding the boys of many lands, and awakening in the breasts of present statesmen a desire to emulate his worthy example. Garfield rules men from his grave. He has been a mighty agent in the affairs of this Republic since he left us. When he died the Spoils System in American politics was struck with death, and though it yet lingers its end is near.

In no small measure he has ruled Arthur for good during the time he has occupied the presidential chair. Taking up the mantle of the fallen hero Arthur has been stimulated to do his best. At the grave where Garfield was buried "with many tears" the north and south met in a common sorrow. There all differences were forgotten as family differences are forgotten at the bedside of a dying parent. The people were knit together with a band of sympathy not to be broken. As a racy writer expressed it: "The bullet of a man without a conscience smote the rock of public tranquility, and the waters of loyal and fraternal affection gushed forth and gladdened the desert of sectional alienation."

2. And did not God plainly teach us by denying the letter of our petitions that we must not rely too much upon man? It is well for this nation, and every other, if that lesson was learned. It seems to have been taught. We were too proud to suppose that the progress of this country with its fifty millions depended upon the President's recovery. Many eyes were expectantly looking toward a man. But God would not have us think too highly of any human being. The King of kings is ever upon His throne carrying forward His beneficent purposes, and man must not put too much confidence in his fellow-man as though success depended upon him.

A year from the time our President was shot the corner-stone of the Garfield Memorial Church was laid at Washington. The addresses delivered at that time called forth a well-deserved criticism from the Chicago Times. "One cannot read those addresses," said that paper, "without marveling that the preachers should seem to assume that the whole object was to glorify a man." A passage was then quoted from the address of President Hinsdale, of Hiram College, which ran thus: "While brick and stone and stone and iron shall defy decay, these foundation walls with the superstructure to be laid upon them, and the spire that will lift toward the sky, will speak of the widow's house in the woods of Ohio, of Hiram School and Williams College; of the army of the halls of legislation, and the chief magistrate's chair. They will speak of the inauguration, of the last letter to the white-haired mother, of eighty days uncomplaining anguish, of the death at Elbron, and of the majestic funeral march which bore the mortal, which had lost the immortal, to its last resting place at Lake View. Do you ask me to say more? In the words of Eneas to the Carthaginian queen, 'You ask me to recall unutterable sorrow.'" "No allusion," the Times goes on the say, "to God, to Christ, no quotation from Christian literature; nothing but deification of a mortal who had been a member of that denomination. Is it at all marvellous that pagan Greeks make demi-gods of their heroes when this sermon of a Christian educator will be scanned in vain for a suggestion that the creature in whose memory the church was erected was one whit less than the Creator who, it is to be presumed, is to be worshipped there!" This was certainly a humiliating criticism, all the more humiliating coming as it did from a secular paper. It is a sad day for any church or nation when it idolizes any man however great. God be thanked that He "cuts down worldly props that we may make Him our stay." It is this nation was relying too much upon its martyred President and not enough upon the President's God, then in Garfield's death the spirit of our ascending prayers was heard when we sought the welfare of the land we love.

3. The death of President Garfield has done more towards bringing about correct views of prayer than years of preaching could have done. Here is another inestimable blessing. No man's life was ever prayed for as was his, and yet he died. How can this be accounted for in view of Bible teaching? was a great question. Into this men went thoroughly and thoughtfully; and they have arisen from the investigation with higher and broader views than they before held. We ask for what we think will be for our own and others' best interests? God sees the desire of our hearts. He gives us our desire, but in so doing He may seem not to have heard us because we receive not the specific

thing we sought. We think that what we want must come in a certain way. God sees a better way. We ask for things we believe would be best for us, God sees that they would not. So He withholds them, but grants the spirit of our requests by bestowing what really is for our good. It would require as much knowledge on our part as God has if we always asked wisely.

The calamity which God sends in answer to some request may envelop us in darkness, but through that we are led into the splendor of noonday. There await praying souls wonderful disclosures in the coming life of the way prayers were answered. Seeming denials may then be seen as the most signal answers. We will adore the riches of God's grace for the way in which He led us and that He kept us from the ruinous things we would have brought upon ourselves if we had been allowed our own way.

"We, ignorant of ourselves, Beg often our own harms which the wise powers Deny us for our good; so find we profit By losing of our prayers."

If God granted the letter of the prayers, even of the best of men, chaos would dwell in the earth. One class of people think one thing the great thing to be desired, and another class think something different. Both may be equally good and both equally important in their petitions. Both may be equally ignorant too. One looks at a thing from one point of view and another from another. None get more than partial views at best. What a strange world this would be if men always received the things for which they ask! Quakers would have the world one way and fanatics another. The greatest chaos conceivable would exist. The globe would be little better than a great lunatic asylum. God does not sit on high to act out the wishes of ignorant creatures who cannot see one moment ahead. But if our desires are for the welfare of ourselves and others, He hears our prayers by acting out His infinite knowledge so as to bring about the results upon which our hearts are set. Let us thank God that the specific things for which we ask are continually being denied, and that wherein we fail through ignorance to ask aright, His wisdom comes in and grants what we would ask for if we were wise like Himself.

The greatest military achievement of our late President was won at the Big Sandy River in Kentucky. With only eleven hundred effective troops he gained a victory over Humphrey Marshall and his five thousand. When the enemy was confronted the question arose whether to enter upon the attack at once or wait for reinforcements. A council of war was held, and all but one advised delay. But Garfield gave the order, "Move at once; our fourteen hundred can whip ten thousand Confederates!" So his men, worn and weary already, marched through mud and storm and vanquished the fresh and strongly entrenched troops of Marshall. Why did he disregard the desires of his officers? Because he knew what they did not. A letter written by Marshall to his wife had been intercepted and forwarded to Garfield. It showed that Marshall thought the Union forces were coming against him with ten-thousand strong, and that he was filled with fear. Garfield decided to go forward and by a skillful display of his troops make it appear to the enemy that their supposition was correct. His soldiers were anxious for victory, yet it may have seemed to them that they were moving to certain defeat. But their leader knew what he was doing. He wisely kept the news he had received to himself lest Marshall might by some means learn the truth.

For wise purposes God withholds from us the reason why He does not make known His ways. If He always told us why He leads us along a different path from that in which we would like to go then we would no longer be trusting Him as our Leader. We are not to walk by sight in this world. Committing ourselves to God we will conquer all the enemies which lurk in our pathway, and final victory shall crown our arms.

Here let us firmly take our stand:—"Praying breath is never spent in vain." Well might Queen Mary of Scotland fear the prayers of Knox more than an army. "Prayer moves the arm that moves the world." Let scientists object if they will, and infidels scoff. "Let God be true, but every man a liar." "Ask, and it shall be given you." If what we ask for comes at once, let gratitude succeed. If it is delayed, let faith abide. If it comes not as we hoped, let us adore our God for the better way. If the letter is denied let us rejoice that Divine knowledge fills out our ignorance. If sometimes all is dark, let us be patient in the certainty of coming light. Eternal day will dawn and in its light all mysteries which remain will be solved. For the present let us take the promises of the Word, and rest upon them as immovable as the everlasting hills. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

The living Christian, pure of heart and unspotted by the world is the best preacher of the gospel in these days.—T. L. Cuyler.

FOREIGN MISSIONS.

From China.

FROM MISS INVERN.

Ningpo.—After the meeting of the Eastern China Baptist Association in October, I made several trips into the country, accompanied by Mr. Mason and one Bible-woman. Four days were spent in Si-u and ten of the surrounding villages. River Pearl, the Bible-woman, had worked in all these places and in ten or fifteen others. . . . One day, we met a very bigoted idolater, who was considered particularly devout. She was all the time praying to Buddha, and had no doubt that, in this way, all her sins would be washed away. When asked if she had peace, she replied, "No." This is the universal cry: "No rest! Our hearts are not at rest! How can we have rest?" And yet, when told the gospel of peace, how often it is indifferently listened to or rejected altogether! At another house, one of the crowd was an old, white haired, deaf woman of eighty years. The Bible-woman almost screamed in her ears some of the most important truths, and tried to teach her a little prayer for the forgiveness of sins. By her side was a dear, sweet, little girl, perhaps eight years old, who, as she held the great-grandmother's hand, repeated to her what was said in such an easy, child-like way, the old woman bending over to catch every word. The child repeated the little prayer to her over and over again, and then asked her to repeat it, which she did correctly. . . . God bless the dear old woman and the little child! . . . The trip is very pleasant after we leave the noisy, busy west gate suburb and strike out into the country. . . . About half way out, I heard the piercing cries of a child, and learned on inquiry that she was undergoing the torture of having her bound, crushed little feet dressed. How many thousands of girls are constantly undergoing the same painful process! The Church Missionary Society, at a recent conference in Ningpo, passed a resolution henceforth to abolish foot-binding from their boarding-schools,—a stand which our Baptist Mission took more than twenty years ago. . . . I arrived in Ningpo about six o'clock, more determined than ever to do my utmost to advance the cause of Christ among the people. I have in session now a class of fifteen women, representatives from Ningpo and five out-stations. I spend the whole forenoon with them and part of the afternoon. I hope to select one or two of the beginners to train for Bible-women. They will all return to their homes with an increasing desire, I trust, to spread the glad tidings of salvation.

Japan.—In a communication to the Church Missionary Intelligence, a missionary makes the following points: (1) That Japan is ripe for the gospel as no other nation in the world is at this moment; (2) That it is manageable in size, making its evangelization possible in a comparatively short time; (3) That the Japanese are an active and energetic race, eminently qualified themselves to do missionary work. The Missionary Herald quotes one missionary in Japan as expressing the opinion that Japan will be a Christian nation within ten years, while another missionary of long experience allows fifteen years. Dr. Davis writes: "I think there are missionaries on the ground who will see the time when our usefulness, save in exceptional cases, will be at an end, when the native church will have assumed such a position of strength and independence that it can work better, in most cases, without the foreign element than with it."

Words like these are both encouraging and stimulating. Let all denominations unite their efforts to make the predictions true.

A certain preacher who desired to discourse upon the heated term, chose as his text, "There came a Viper out of the Heat." This may have been somewhat a strain upon the Scriptures, but we know of a good many spiritual vipers which come out of the heat of the summer, and they do more harm to the souls of men, than did the viper mentioned in the above passage, to the apostle Paul.