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THE

EFFICACY OF PRAYER.

BY THE

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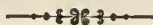


THE reader will perceive an abruptness in the manner in which this treatise closes. Though logically complete as an argument, rhetorically it lacks the graceful conclusion which no hand could so tastefully have appended, as the hand of the author himself. Yet, perhaps, no peroration could be so impressive as a simple statement of the fact, that *death* summoned the lamented author away before his work was finished. For months he had been preparing the manuscript for the press, as the feeble state of his health, and other multiplied labours would allow. He had spoken of it to one associated with him in labour : and when, very suddenly, his disease assumed a form so violent, that he felt his end was near ; within less than twelve hours of death, and when taking leave of the weeping friends who stood around him, he again

spoke of his manuscript to the same friend, and requested him to supervise the publication. In labours for Christ he was very abundant, while life was spared; and it was his desire, when dying, to leave something behind him which might still be useful to the souls of men.

On the 23rd of June, 1857, the Rev. John C. Young, D.D., departed this life. Though the call of the Master was sudden, it found him neither unprepared nor unwilling to depart; and the peace, the calmness, the holy joy which filled his heart then, is *another* proof, additional to those which his pen has here recorded, of
“THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER.”

EFFICACY OF PRAYER,



SUCCESS in our undertakings depends greatly on the spirit with which we engage in them. If we commence any practicable work with confidence, with earnestness, and with vigour, there is every reasonable prospect of a good issue to our labours. If, on the other hand, we commence with doubt, irresolution, and sluggishness, we almost inevitably fail. No man can, however, undertake any business with determination, and energy, unless he is strongly persuaded that his efforts will command

success. It matters not how important may be the object presented to any of us for our attainment, if we distrust our ability to gain it; we will either utterly decline all effort, or our attempt will be so spiritless and inefficient as almost to ensure a failure. This is the principle of our nature, which gives importance to our views of the efficacy of prayer—which makes a full and assured belief in its efficacy absolutely indispensable to our welfare. A man may be persuaded that he is in want of many things which God alone can give him—he may be persuaded, too, that God could easily grant all that he needs—and he may be further persuaded that, unless God shall supply his wants, he must certainly perish; yet he will never pray to God, or will pray, if at all, coldly, languidly, and

unfrequently, unless he has a full and abiding conviction of the fact that God answers prayer. To produce in us this conviction, and thus to induce and enable us to pray as we ought, the Father of all mercies, and the God of all grace, has furnished us with proofs that he will grant, when we pray, objects which would be withheld if we were prayerless, so abundant and satisfactory, that if they were fairly considered, every shadow of doubt would vanish from our minds. He has enjoined it upon us to “pray always, and not to faint” or give over—and he never gives us an injunction, that he does not accompany it with the most ample encouragement to undertake its fulfilment.

It is true that if there were only a *slight probability* that the Almighty would grant us assistance when we

called upon him, it would still be wise in us to pray. When any one of us is attacked by a disease which threatens life, the services of the most skilful physician can furnish us only with a probability, and often a very slight probability of recovery; yet, on such an occasion, we would regard it as the height of infatuation to refuse to avail ourselves of such services, if they were procurable. How promptly, when seized with a dangerous illness, do we send for a physician; and how readily do we swallow the most nauseous drugs which he may prescribe! If then prayer were only a probable means of procuring from God the blessings which we need, and if it were the most irksome task that could be imposed upon us, it would still be most inexcusable folly to neglect to pray.

God has not, however, in this important matter, left us to act on a mere probability, for he has, in his abounding mercy, exhibited to us such reasons for believing in the efficacy of prayer, as to enable us to approach him not with a bare hope that he may hear us, but with a strong confidence and firm assurance that he will grant our request.

To a very brief exhibition of some of these reasons, we ask your serious attention :

1. All our views of God's character, and the relation in which we stand to him, would incline us to believe that he would answer our prayers. ✓

Suppose that you knew a man eminently distinguished for his kindness and generosity of character, that you knew him to have ever manifested

towards yourself personally the most friendly feelings and the most munificent conduct, that you saw, wherever you turned your eyes, some memorial and token of his liberality to you as well as to others—suppose further that you wanted of him some favour which he could bestow upon you without the slightest effort or inconvenience to himself, but which would be of great value to you; would you need a particular promise from him beforehand to assure you that the favour would be granted at your request? You would feel that his character and his frank conduct were a sufficient guaranty for the success of your application, and you would go to him with the fullest confidence that he would give what you asked. Acting on the same principle which thus governs your conduct

towards your fellow-man, should you not, *even without any promise*, feel assured that your petitions to your Maker for his blessings will not be denied, and come to him with unhesitating confidence to ask of him all that you need? In no conceivable case can we have such grounds for relying on the success of an application to a fellow-mortal, as are furnished by the character of God and his conduct toward us. His benevolence we know to be, like all his other attributes, infinite; and this disposition to make each one of us perfectly happy is restrained in its exercise only so far as a just regard to his own glory, and the welfare of other beings, requires its restraint. The instances of his kindness towards each one of us are countless in number, and inestimable in value. Reflect for a

moment on what you have received from him during your past life ; look around, and see what you are now enjoying. This magnificent firmament, which canopies you, is his gift ;—this brilliant sunshine which enlivens you, this healthful air which invigorates you, this vital blood which so wondrously circulates through your body, carrying nourishment to every organ—these elastic muscles that enable you to move with ease and power—these senses that are the inlets of so many and such varied enjoyments—these noble powers of intellect which raise you above the beasts of the field, and fit you to exercise the dominion that God has given you over the lower creation—these warm affections which bind us in delightful union with our fellow-men, and which even raise us, by reverence, and

gratitude, and love, into communion with God himself,—these are all his gifts.

And can we believe that He, who has, unsolicited, bestowed in rich profusion such bounties as these, would refuse the comparatively small additional blessings which we need, when we solicit them at his hands? Would not the entertaining of such a belief, in view of all that we have experienced, and all that we are experiencing, seem like charging our Maker with inconsistency, with waywardness and caprice? Nor can we doubt his ability to supply us with all that we require. His power is unbounded. He has but to speak, and it is done; to command, and it stands fast.

Our situation too is one that appeals to his compassion. We are his de-

pendants. Our wants he alone can supply—and we call to him for aid. Can we believe that we shall call in vain, when we call on him, who hears the young ravens when they cry, and the young lions when, pinched with hunger, they roar for food? When the inarticulate cries of distress of the brute beasts come up before him, he compassionates them, and supplies their wants. Can we then believe that he will withhold his mercy from his intelligent creatures, when they humbly implore him for succour and relief?

So forcible is the proof of the efficacy of prayer, which is furnished by the mere contemplation of God's character and our relation to him, that many of the heathen have been deeply impressed with it. Defective as was their

knowledge of his character, compared with ours, some of the ancient philosophers, who had no revelation from God, and no source of instruction but the teachings of natural reason, earnestly inculcated the doctrine that he would answer prayer. There is indeed but one consideration, which can weaken ✓ the force of this natural argument for the efficacy of prayer; to every reflecting mind, the argument would be overwhelming and conclusive, were it not for our consciousness of having sinned against God, and thus forfeited all natural claim to his favour.

We see that we have so inexcusably ✓ abused and perverted his past bounties, and so basely requited his unsolicited kindness, that we sometimes feel as if it would be the most shameless effrontery to solicit anything further from

our heavenly Benefactor. The deep conviction of our own unworthiness and vileness might, if we were left without a revelation, cast a doubt over the propriety or utility of our approaching as petitioners to God's throne. Conscience might thus, naturally, seal up the fountains of our heart, and prevent the gushing forth of our desires to God in prayer. But revelation has communicated to us a fact, which relieves our minds of the *one* only cause of doubt, and gives us ground of assurance (beyond what reason can suggest) that God will hear us. Our offences have been expiated by the death of God's own Son. Through him we are reconciled, and restored to favour. When we come in his name, we are regarded, not as rebels, but as children. We can approach with all

boldness to the throne of grace ; assured that justice and mercy can now unite together in granting our requests.

2. But God has not left us merely to *infer* from his nature that we may pray with the hope of being heard, he has furnished us with a variety of *indirect*, but strong proofs of the efficacy of prayer. These indirect evidences consist of various facts and declarations, which were evidently intended to teach, mainly and directly, other important truths ; but which, while they were neither planned nor recorded with the immediate and express design of showing the efficacy of prayer, do illustrate and prove it, as clearly and strikingly, as if this had been the only purpose for which they were recorded. To some of these we call

your attention. In the book of Revelations, chap. 5, verse 8, we are told that, "when he had taken the book, the four beasts and the four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials, full of odours, which are the prayers of saints; and they sung a new song," &c. Here the prayers of saints are represented as odours poured out before God.

Thus strikingly does the Almighty depict to us the pleasure which he receives in hearing the prayers of his people. Think for a moment what a sensation of pleasure we feel when some rich odour is diffused around us, and the atmosphere is laden with its sweet smell. To this feeling of ours, he likens his own gratification in hearing our prayers. He teaches us to

think of his enjoyment when we pray to him, as resembling the enjoyment which we experience, when delightful perfumes fill the air, and fragrance flows in upon us at every inhalation. Can we conceive of anything more beautiful and encouraging, than this view which God himself has given to us, of the agreeableness to him of prayer? And can we believe it possible that our petitions, which he declares to be so grateful to him, will be rejected or disregarded? Can we believe that the offering to him of such pleasing services will bring no return?

Again, we find in various instances, that the inspired servants of God prayed for blessings, with full expectation of receiving them. Whenever they needed direction, or deliverance, or strength, they betook themselves to

prayer for obtaining it. These facts teach us the view which these men, instructed in the counsels of the Almighty, entertained of the efficacy of prayer. There are some who, while they believe in the duty of prayer and urge its importance, contend that its beneficial consequences are confined to the salutary influence which it exerts on the soul of the worshipper—that it has no effect upon the Almighty—that it has no tendency to procure for us the blessings which are sought. The conduct of those who were taught the nature of prayer by the Saviour himself, most fully refutes and exposes this derogatory and mean conception of its efficacy. If their object in prayer had been only the cultivation of their own pious dispositions, there seems but little reason for their praying with more

frequency and earnestness at one time, than at another; for such dispositions are at all times of priceless value. And further they teach us, as clearly as language can convey to us the idea, that when they drew nigh to God, in seasons of peculiar distress or difficulty, they did so, not with the idea of operating on their own hearts, but on God, and in the strong hope that he would grant them aid or deliverance. It is true, that prayer exercises a most healthful and invigorating influence on the soul of the sincere and humble worshipper; but for this very influence, we are indebted to our belief that it is efficacious in procuring the blessings which we ask. For how could we come to God, and pour forth our earnest petitions, if we believed that we were addressing a Being, who could not, or

√ would not, regard our requests—that our supplications never rose above our own heads, and that, unheeded by the Almighty, they were dispersed by the idle winds? How too, if with this weak conception of the efficacy of prayer, we even did attempt to draw nigh to God, would our addresses to him kindle in us any holy emotions?

That gratitude and love to God, that submission and thankfulness, that hope and trust, which sincere and earnest prayer breathes back into the heart of the suppliant, are the effects of our realizing, when we pray, that God pities us as a father pities his children; that he hears us when we cry, and that his mighty power will be exerted in securing for us the blessings which we ask. Thus it is that prayer exercises a reflex power, acting back

upon the soul, and cultivating in it holy dispositions. But how could these purifying, and elevating, and invigorating feelings arise within us, as we prayed, if we believed that our supplications had no influence upon God, no tendency to procure for us the objects of our requests? Thus we see that the notion, which confines the influence of prayer to its power of acting upon our own souls in the production of holy or pious emotions, is a suicidal one. If it were felt to be true, if producing such emotions is the only power it possesses, it would destroy the power of prayer for which it contends, and deprive it of even its conceded value. Under the guise of reverence for God, as one too exalted to be influenced by us, this fatal delusion would cut the very sinews of prayer.

If further proof were needed that the apostles entertained no such narrow and defective conception of the efficacy of prayer, they furnish us incidentally, but clearly, with abundance of such additional proof, by frequently ✓ and earnestly requesting others to pray for them, and by ascribing to the influence of those prayers many of the kind dealings of God with them. Thus, in speaking to the Philippians of a calamity that had befallen him, Paul tells them that he knew that their prayers, together with the supply of the Spirit which he enjoyed, would convert this apparent evil into a real blessing. “For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayers, and the supply of the Spirit ✓ of Jesus Christ.” Phil. i. 19. Again the ✓ same apostle writes to the Romans, xv.

30-32. "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them that do not believe, in Judea; and that my service, which I have for Jerusalem, may be accepted of the saints; that I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed." Can we reconcile such language with the belief, on the part of this man of God, that the prayers of his Roman brethren might exert a happy influence upon their own hearts, but could have no possible effect upon his condition? When he particularized these different personal benefits, which he wished to receive, and requested them to pray that God would grant them to him; did he mean

them to understand, at the same time, that their prayers could have no influence in procuring him these benefits? Or can we imagine that this ingenuous servant of Christ was aware that the prayers of those distant brethren could only benefit themselves, and that he meant benevolently to cheat them into the performance of a work which would prove salutary to themselves, by holding out to them the false pretence, that they would thus procure blessings for him? If the belief of the "holy men of old, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," can assure us of the truth of any doctrine, we will have no doubt of the power of prayer to draw down blessings from heaven, when we find them constantly soliciting the prayers of all their brethren, in their behalf. "Breth-

ren, pray for us," 1 Thess. v. 25, was the request of Paul to the church at Thessalonica. These disciples must have revered this apostle, for to his preaching they had been indebted for all their knowledge of divine truth; through his ministrations they had received all their spiritual gifts; to his conduct they looked as a model of christian purity and zeal. Might they not reasonably have doubted, whether he could be benefitted by their prayers? Even if they believed that in ordinary cases their prayers would be heard, might they not have thought it would be presumption to believe that their prayers could add anything to the blessings of one whom they looked up to with reverence, and one so far their superior in wisdom, and power, and holiness? Yet each of

these converts, however unworthy he might feel himself to be, was taught by this request, that even his prayer could benefit this revered apostle; and that—enriched as he was with graces, encircled with the divine protection, endowed with inspiration, favoured with special visions and revelations, caught up, as he had been, to the third heavens, and called and commissioned to his great work, by the appearance and voice of the Son of God himself—this herald and champion of the faith, this distinguished friend of God, felt unwilling to dispense with the aid, which he derived from the supplications, in his behalf, of even the weakest and most ignorant of those whom he had himself instructed. Multiplied proofs might be given, that the inspired servants of God in every age entertained the

same belief in the efficacy of prayer. Thus, (to take a single specimen,) we hear the psalmist (Ps. lxxv. 2) addressing God as the being that hears prayer, "O thou that hearest prayer, to thee shall all flesh come." When we address any being, we do it by ascribing to him some name, title, or description, which distinguishes him from all others; for thus only can it be known to whom we are directing our words. How, then, could the inspired singer more fully indicate his conviction, than by addressing Jehovah in language which intimates that he regarded it as one of the peculiar and distinguishing traits of his character, in which he differed from all others, that he attended to the requests of all that cried unto him? He clearly felt, that while others *may occasionally re-*

gard the petitions that are presented to them, Jehovah alone does so with certainty and universality; and that has rendered it proper to address him, as if he were the only one that does it.

Another incidental proof of the efficacy of prayer is presented to us in the fact, that the *denial of its efficacy is mentioned as one of those acts which mark an abandoned, and heaven-defying impiety.* Those, whom prosperous iniquity has hardened into open contempt of God's authority and power, are represented as saying (Job xxi. 14, 15) unto God, "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" Had it been a truth of ordinary plainness, its denial would not have been

exhibited as a specimen of peculiar and hardened depravity, as one of the results of a long course of wickedness unchecked by punishment. That prayer to God profits us, must then be one of those obvious and perspicuous facts, the denial of which shows the very extreme of wilful and obdurate blindness; one of those blazing truths hung out, as it were, in the firmament of heaven, to be read and known of all men, capable of being discerned by the sinner, as well as by the saint, by the simple, as well as by the sage.

God's refusal at times to permit his children to pray for others, is another of those facts which disclose to us, incidentally, the power of prayer. Three times, (Jer. vii. 16; xi. 14; xiv. 11,) we are told by the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord forbade him to pray for the

Israelites. Their wickedness had reached such a pitch of enormity, that their destruction could no longer with propriety be delayed; and the Lord prohibited his servant from interposing his supplications in their behalf. But why should he have issued such repeated prohibitions? Can we conceive of any reason, except that having, by his own gracious appointment, made it one of the fixed principles of his government to grant the petitions of his servants, he did not choose to be hindered in the execution of that punishment which had become necessary, from the accumulated sins of a reprobate people? Jeremiah was therefore directed to interpose no intercession, which might avert their doom. There is another very remarkable case of a similar character, recorded in Exodus xxxii. ✓

10. When the children of Israel had made the golden calf in the wilderness, and bowed down to it in worship, the Almighty, after announcing this exhibition of their shameless ingratitude and their besotted depravity, used this remarkable language—"Let me alone." What strange words are these to be addressed by the Creator to one of his creatures—by the Almighty to a man of the dust! and what a disclosure do they make to us of the condescension and kindness of our Father and our God—of the fixedness of his purpose to grant the prayers of his servants! They picture to us Jehovah deprecating the interposition of Moses in behalf of the rebels whom he wished to destroy. It seems intended to teach us that he could not smite the objects of his righteous indignation,

unless his servant should withhold his intercession; and the prayers of Moses, if they were allowed to be offered, would throw around the guilty Israelites a shield through which the arrows of deserved vengeance could not pierce. ✕

✓ There are on record a few instances of ✓ God's denying requests. *These recorded refusals to bestow the blessings which were asked, furnish us incidentally with one of the most remarkable proofs of the efficacy of prayer.* Moses, when he had conducted Israel to the plains of Moab, earnestly prayed for permission to go over the Jordan, and see the heritage which God had given to his people. The Lord, for wise reasons, refused his request, but granted him an equivalent. He did not permit him to cross the Jordan, but he directed him to go to the top of Pisgah, and from that lofty

eminence, he showed him in its goodly prospect the inheritance of Israel. His feet, it is true, were not permitted to tread the soil of the holy land; but his eye gathered in its beauties, and fed upon them; he gazed on its vine-clad hills and its corn-covered valleys, until his heart was full, and his soul was satisfied. ✓ (Deut. iii. 23-27.) We find the apostle Paul too, (2 Cor. xii. 7-9,) at one time urging a petition that was not granted. But the dealings of the Lord with him, even in denying his request, show us the efficacy of prayer. Lest he should be exalted above measure through the abundance of his revelations, there was sent upon him some affliction, the particular nature of which he does not disclose; but describes it as a thorn in the flesh, to

denote its pungency; and as a messenger of Satan to buffet him, to denote its depressing and humbling effect upon his spirit. Oppressed with a sense of its painfulness, he besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from him. But it could not be removed without either substituting some other, and equally severe and oppressive, or jeoparding the spiritual and higher interests of the apostle. This suffering was the brace which the weakness of his human nature required, to sustain it under the pressure of his abundant and overpowering visions and revelations. Had it been removed, he must have suffered a greater calamity than that of its endurance. In mercy to him, then, God refused to withdraw it; but in answer to his prayer, communicated to him the assurance that his grace

should be sufficient for him, and that his strength should be made perfect in his servant's weakness. He refused his request to grant him what would have injured him, and he accompanied the refusal by the bestowment of a real good. He granted the prayer in substance, while he denied it in form. Unwilling to injure his servant by letting him have the object of his petitions, he gave him something better as an equivalent. While he withheld from him a curse which he had asked for, he bestowed on him a blessing which he had not solicited. And often, doubtless, does God thus answer our prayers. Incapable of seeing into the future, and incapable of always apprehending correctly the objects which surround us, we are constantly liable to fix our desires strongly on objects, which if at-

tained would work our injury, perhaps our ruin.

The knowledge of this fact might well lead us to be often afraid to pray to God, if we were assured that all the objects of our petitions would be absolutely granted to us. ✓ But from facts like those recorded in the scriptures, we gather the delightful assurance that God shields us from the evils which our own prayers would bring upon us; interpreting our mistaken expression of our wants, by his own infallible ✓ wisdom, and answering our requests, not according to our misconceptions of what will benefit us, but according to his own knowledge of what we need. A full appreciation of this fact would not merely make us pray with deference to God's will, presenting all our particular requests with the under-

standing that we submit them to be granted or refused, as his infinite wisdom shall see to be best; but it would enable us, in numerous cases, to derive comfort and strength from observing that our prayers were answered, not in the letter but in the spirit, not in the injurious form in which our ignorance had dictated them, but in the beneficial shape of the real blessings which our heavenly Father saw that we needed. Sickness and pain of body are often sent by him, to promote the health of the soul; losses of property, domestic troubles, the coldness of friends, the calumnies of enemies, are permitted to come upon us, to wean us from this world. We pray for their removal, when their continuance may be as necessary to us, as the continuance of the thorn in his flesh was to the apostle

of old. God is not so unkind as to withdraw from us these necessary aids to our weakness; and if we observe aright, though no immediate communication from God, such as the apostle received, should inform us that our prayer has been really heard, we may become assured that it has been, by observing the patience and resignation with which he has enabled us to bear our affliction, and the beneficial effects which have resulted from its endurance, so that we are enabled to rejoice that God did not withdraw it. ✓

↓ ✕ 3. The promises of God that he will answer prayer is another conclusive proof of its efficacy. These promises are numerous, clear, and striking; they are suited to any condition in which we can be placed; they comprehend any proper object that we can desire. ✓

There is no calamity, however uncontrollable by human agency, whether it be the wasting drought, the devouring locust, or the destroying pestilence, from which he does not promise to deliver us, if we humbly and penitently pray unto him. (2 Chron. vii. 12—15.)

A single specimen of these divine assurances of the efficacy of prayer will be sufficient to show us their clearness and strength; “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” In the ever-shifting scenes of life, we are continually made to feel our need of a wisdom higher than our own, to direct our course. If left to our own foresight, the events of to-morrow may stamp with folly the course that appears wise to-day.

What more satisfactory evidence of the power of prayer can our heavenly Father give to us, than his promise that amid all this felt uncertainty, perplexity, and helplessness, he will impart unto us the wisdom necessary to guide us in safety, if we only ask it in reliance upon him ?

The extent of the power of prayer will be sufficiently shown by another of these promises, exhibiting, as it does, the range of the objects for which we are invited to petition. "Be careful (*i. e.* anxious or troubled) for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make known your requests unto God, and the peace of God, which passeth understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ." Phil. iv. 6, 7. Here we are told, not

to permit any of our wants or desires, to distress or annoy us, but to acquaint God with all that we need; and we are assured that the effect of our supplications will be the satisfaction of our souls, beyond our own highest conceptions. God thus promises either to give us all that we ask, or to give us more and better blessings, to fully satisfy us for those that are withheld. Mark the wisdom and kindness of this direction or injunction, to mingle thanksgiving with our supplications; our petitions for future good are thus made the means of cultivating gratitude for favours already received; while the recognition of the innumerable blessings bestowed unasked, encourages us to expect that the few which are still lacking, will be granted to our requests.

The Saviour himself has given us, perhaps, the most striking of these promises—(Matt. vii. 7—11.) Here we find the success of prayer doubly guarantied, by a command and a promise. The command to ask would, of itself, imply that we were to receive; but this implication is expressed and corroborated by the direct promise, we “shall receive.” Then to give an additional impressiveness to this guaranty, it is varied and repeated in three different forms; each repetition presenting the assurance with increasing emphasis, by presenting it in terms of increasing force, “ask, &c., seek, &c., knock, &c.” Even yet the benevolent resources of the divine wisdom have not exhausted themselves in the attempt to bind and press down upon our hearts, a conviction of the efficacy

of prayer. To strengthen our faith still further, a reason is assigned for the propriety of the command, and the truth of the promise. The reason assigned is that it is a great fact, a principle, a law in God's government, that prayer is granted; "for every one that asketh receiveth," &c., &c. Thus the assurance given in these repeated and varied forms of command and promise, is again solemnly confirmed by a threefold, a varied and emphatic reiteration of the fact, that it is one of the fixed principles of the divine government to hear and answer prayer. ↵

A command, a promise, a statement of a law of the divine procedure, is each employed, and each employed with a threefold reiteration, to encourage us in drawing nigh to God in prayer. It is as if, in his wondrous mercy, the

Saviour were intending, by these triple cords, to bind down our reluctant hearts to the belief of this great and salutary truth, that *prayer will be answered*.

It might naturally be supposed that better evidence of the efficacy of prayer could not be furnished by any promise, than that found in those instances which we have cited, and others of a similar description. They contain each a clear and distinct declaration of the fact that God will grant our petitions. Such declarations are surely sufficient to destroy any cavil, to remove any doubt. We could expect nothing more, we could ask nothing more, to be done for the confirmation of our faith. But what we could not have expected or asked, God has done. He has gone beyond simple promises, he has given us more than mere declara-

tions, and naked assurance. In pity for our weakness, and lest our minds, from our natural unbelief, should stagger at the greatness and the incredibleness of these promises, the Father of mercies has condescended to corroborate them by any illustration and analogy, that could help to inspire us with confidence in their fulfilment. He interweaves them with comparisons drawn from those incidents of life, in which we feel most assurance that our applications for aid to our fellow-men will not be made in vain; telling us that our assurance of success in such applications is far less than that which we have a right to feel, when we pray to Him. * Thus our Saviour urges us to persevering prayer for any blessing that we may desire, by comparing its effect on God, to the effect on a man

of his neighbour's persevering request, that he will rise from his bed, and accommodate him with the loan of a few loaves, for the use of a friend who has just arrived at his house off a journey, and needs refreshment. The man may, at first, excuse himself from rising on the ground of the trouble; but if the application be repeated again and again, he will grant it to get rid of the continued annoyance. "I say unto you, though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him as many as he needeth." Luke
√ xi. 5—8. Here, we see how confidently we can rely on perseverance for the success of our application to a fellow-man, in a certain case; and can any one imagine that a selfish man will do more to avoid trouble than our

heavenly Father will do to gratify his benevolence, and furnish a token of his approbation of that faith in him, which induces perseverance in prayer? *

Can any one doubt whether the noble motive will operate on God, with more certainty than the mean motive will, in a similar case, operate on a mortal?

One other specimen we will give of this peculiar class of promises, or illustrations confirmatory of his promises, and perhaps the most striking. After the Saviour had uttered the conjoined command, promise, and statement, (which we have presented above,) intended to assure us of the efficacy of prayer, he added to all that he had said, an illustration designed to carry assurance home to every heart, by appeal to one of the strongest feelings of our nature. "What man is there, who if

his son shall ask him for bread," &c., &c., The case which the Saviour represents as analogous to the case of one of us asking what we need of God, is that of a son soliciting from his father the bread and fish, which were the common articles of daily food to those who lived around the sea of Galilee. Can a father, then, the Saviour asks, refuse a son petitioning for the bare necessaries of life, and mock him by offering him what is useless or hurtful, a stone or a serpent? The instinctive answer of every parent's heart is, that it is impossible. A son may have slighted his father's counsels, disregarded his admonitions, disappointed his hopes, outraged his feelings, cast off his authority, and fled from his presence. Yet should even this wayward and undutiful son stand at his door, wretched,

helpless, and starving, asking only the food that would sustain life,—we feel as if it were impossible that any father could mock him and leave him to die of want upon his threshold. But it is not as certain, the Saviour assures us, that an earthly parent will relieve a son in such a condition, as it is that our heavenly Father will aid us when we cry to him for what we need. “How much more,” &c. He does not attempt to measure the greater certainty there is, that our heavenly Father will give good things; no language can define it, no imagination can grasp it. We could only know “how much more” we might rely on our heavenly Father, than a son on an earthly parent, if we could measure the omnipotence of God, and see how much it surpassed the power of a mortal; and could compre-

hend the benevolence of our heavenly Father towards his offspring, and thus learn how far it exceeded the affection of an earthly father to his children. To save a son from starvation, requires some exertion and sacrifice on the part of an earthly father; to supply all the wants of *all* his children, requires no effort on the part of our Father in heaven. Human feelings may be found weak or wanting in a man; a parent may be a monster in human shape; but the benevolence of God is as essential and limitless as his existence. Nor let it be imagined that this gracious and wondrous assurance that prayer will be heard, is limited to a particular class of petitions, that it can be appropriated only by those who are, in a peculiar sense, the children of God. It is not said, "How much more,"

&c., to his obedient children, and to the favourites of heaven, to his affectionate and faithful offspring, but how much more to "*those that ask him.*" No condition is prescribed, no qualification is required for receiving good from God, except that of asking. "Every one that asketh receiveth." "How much more shall our heavenly Father give good gifts *to them that ask him.*" O sinner, you may feel that your offences are rank before heaven, and must cause God to abhor you. You may feel that your crimes have buried you as in ocean depths, far from the mercy of God; yet even to you comes this gracious promise, "Ask," &c.; even to you comes this gracious assurance, "How much more," &c.

4. Additional proof of the efficacy of prayer, and proof of the most satisfac-

tory kind, is furnished in the sacred scriptures. Facts are the best kind of evidence. Other arguments appeal simply to our reason, these strike our very senses. Their power of impression on those who witness them may be somewhat abated, when they become matters of record; but even as we read them in authentic narratives, they impart a felt reality to the truths they teach. Let us look at some of the many instances of the efficacy of prayer which God, in condescension to the natural weakness of our faith, has most graciously recorded for our benefit.

History records no achievement ever wrought by mortal man, that can compare with the deliverance of the Israelites by Moses, from the destruction to which they had been doomed, for

making and worshipping the golden calf—see Exod. xxxii. Could we have stood that day on the brow of Sinai, and thus commanded alternate views of the plain, in front of which Israel was encamped—and of Horeb in the rear, where Moses waited upon God—a strange and wondrous scene would have presented itself to our eyes. See stretched far and wide along the desert the tents of Israel. Three millions of people are there with their flocks and their herds. The vast multitudes assemble in the midst of the encampment. Now they all bow in adoration before the molten image. Now they sit down to eat and drink in honour of their idol, and again they stand up to dance before it. The roar of the multitude rises to heaven, as with united voices they shout, “ These

be thy Gods, O Israel, that brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." The anger of Jehovah kindles against these ungrateful rebels and besotted idolators, who, forgetting his kindness, and disregarding his commands, are thus giving his glory to another, and degrading his majesty by representing him in the likeness of an ox. He declares his purpose to destroy them. Sentence is about to be pronounced upon them. The commission for their destruction is about to be issued. The Angel of death stands ready to wing his way upon the blast to execute it. Soon all the voices of that vast multitude will be hushed, and their limbs stiffened in death; their carcasses stretched on the sand, with none to bury them, will be left to moulder away and pollute the air of the desert.

Is there any possibility of averting the storm of divine vengeance that is just bursting upon them? Is there any power which can at such a moment avert their doom? Look back and see Moses standing on Horeb, unconscious of what is passing in the distant camp. He is just ready to descend into the plain, when Jehovah announces his purpose to destroy this guilty nation, and asks him not to intercede for them, promising to raise up from his family a nation that should serve him. Behold the venerable servant of God prostrating himself in the dust; he fears not that Jehovah will regard him as presumptuous in attempting to change his will, or as ungrateful in declining the blessings or glory offered to himself. He entreats, he implores, he beseeches him to spare those whom

he had so long befriended, guilty and vile as they were. His prayer triumphs, the avenger is stayed, pardon is granted. Nor was this the only occurrence of the kind in the life of Moses. On two other occasions, it is recorded that this man, by his intercession, averted the wrath of God from his people. Num. xi. 3.—xxi. 5, &c.

The occurrence on the plain of Dura, where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were delivered from the cruel fate to which Nebuchadnezzar had consigned them, furnishes us with another signal manifestation of the fact that God answers those who call upon him. For refusing to bow down to an idol, they were bound hand and foot, and cast, at the command of the idolatrous and enraged king, into a fiery furnace, so hot that the soldiers who

threw them in were burned. But they had prayed and committed themselves to the God of heaven, and when they fell amid the fierce flames nought was consumed but their bands. Accompanied by one like the Son of God, they walked, unscathed, in the midst of the fire, while the devouring element played harmlessly around them. The haughty monarch, terrified by the sight, rose in consternation from his throne; and awed into an acknowledgment of the supremacy of that God whom they adored, addressing them as the "servants of the most high God," he called them to come forth. Then, as they stood amid the assembled captains and counsellors of Babylon, it was seen that the fire had no power upon their bodies. Not a hair of their heads was singed, not

a thread of their garments changed, nor had even the smell of fire passed upon them. Such is a specimen of the facts recorded in the Old Testament, illustrative of the power of prayer.

♥ Let us pass down to a later period, and we will find God bearing witness to the same truth by examples not less wondrous and impressive. Herod Agrippa, we are told, (see Acts xii.) had put to death James the Just, and finding that it pleased the Jews, had arrested Peter, cast him into prison, and delivered him for safe keeping to four quaternions of soldiers. On the night previous to the day fixed upon for his execution, Peter was confined in one of the innermost cells of the strong prison of Jerusalem. Calm and fearless, because he knew that God watched over him, he had lain down

to rest, and now he was quietly sleeping in silence and darkness. Two soldiers lay beside him in the cell, and according to the Roman custom, a chain fastened on his right arm, was riveted to the left arm of the soldier who lay on one side of him; while his left arm was chained, in like manner, to the right arm of the soldier who lay on the other side. Two guard-rooms in which were stationed the remaining soldiers of the watch had to be passed, before the iron gate of the prison could be reached; and that gate, so heavy that no single hand could possibly open it, was barred and bolted.

What possibility is there of Peter's escaping from such a prison? But we are told that the church had prayed for him without ceasing; and behold!

even now, in one of the dark streets of Jerusalem, in an inner chamber of a retired house, with door and windows closed and bolted from apprehension of their enemies, are assembled a company of God's people praying for Peter's deliverance. Suddenly as they are praying, the angel of the Lord descends, and a light shines in the prison—he gently smites Peter on the side, and bids him arise up quickly, and as he does so, the chains fall from his hands. But there is no need to hurry; he bids him gird his loose robe around him, and bind his sandals on his feet, then cast his cloak around him, and follow him. Peter follows him out of the cell. No soldier challenges them. They pass the first ward, and the second ward; the great gate opens to them of its own accord; they go out and

pass through one street before the angel disappears. It was only then that Peter came to himself. So unexpected, so incredible was his deliverance, that he could not for a time believe in its reality ; he imagined himself to be dreaming, he thought it was all a vision of the night, and when he came to the house of his friends, who were praying for him, neither could they credit the reality of his appearance. When the damsel, who went to the door to see who knocked, came back and reported that Peter stood at the gate, they regarded her as mad.

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The efficacy of prayer.

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