

XVII.

A Dying Man's Regrets.

4. PRAYER.

FEBRUARY 3, 1856.

MY dear friends in Christ, amongst the subjects towards which the regrets of the Christian who thinks himself near his end turn, there is certainly not one in which he would make a greater change, if he were to return to life, than in his habits of prayer. What is prayer, in practice and in reality, for the greater number of Christians—I mean of those who believe and who pray? Some moments given to retirement for prayer in the morning, some moments in the evening, the time being longer or shorter according to circumstances, and sometimes very short; then the heart lifted up to God under extraordinary circumstances, in which special need of drawing near to Him is felt; it is to such narrow limits as these that the habits of many Christians, or men who call themselves by this name, are restricted. It is for this reason that the fruits of prayer so often promised in Scripture are so little known to the greater number! Where are to be found those powerful fruits of sanctification that enable the soul to triumph over all temptations, like Jesus in the desert, making us more than conquerors in Him who loved us? Where are those fruits of consolation that diffuse into the soul a sweet and profound joy, capable of rising above the afflictions of the earth, so that even in the greatest anguish and bitterness, whether of the spirit, soul, or body, we are still able to rejoice in that perfect joy that Jesus, dying, desired for His disciples who were to live a dying life? Where are those fruits of deliverance in which the soul obtains from God what it asks, whether it say with Jesus, “I know that thou hearest me always,” or, not being able to rise so high, it can say with David, “I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me”? Let us be sincere, and acknowledge that between the promises made in Scripture to prayer, and the fruits that we reap, the distance is so great that our feeble faith has more than once been troubled, and perhaps even shaken and we have been tempted to say, And is that all? No, it is not all that was promised—but we have not done all that was commanded. Ah! my friends, prayer such as I have shown you is very different from prayer such as the Scriptures show it, and to which all the promises are made.

What is not prayer in the scriptural sense? I said some days ago that the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God, is Heaven speaking: continuing the figure, I now say that prayer, as described in Scripture, is Heaven abiding in us by the Holy Spirit. Without the Word, prayer is nothing, having no food. Without prayer, the Word is insufficient, because it does not penetrate into the heart. But when the heavenly truths with which the Scriptures abound are received, and, assimilated with the very substance of our souls by prayer, penetrate into our inner man, we then know that prayer brings within us Heaven, and all its blessings—the Holy Spirit, and all His graces—God, and all His promises. Prayer

is the key that God has put into our hands, to open a communication for us with the invisible world: by it, we have everything; without it, nothing. I say, the key that God has put into our hands; for He has another key that He keeps in His own, and that He sometimes deigns to use for opening to us the invisible world, when we have neglected to open it for ourselves, that we might enter into communion with Him, and participate in His Divine proceedings, as it is written, "We are labourers together with God." Thus God, casting down Saul upon the way to Damascus, and raising him up a new man, opened heaven to him—when Saul, far from seeking Him, sought the disciples of Christ to torture them, and finally to put them to death. But these are extra-ordinary manifestations of the grace of God, upon which we ought not to reckon, and on which the more we reckon the less will they be granted. There can be no doubt that in all these extraordinary effects of the grace of God, we shall find, if we examine closely, sincerity in the soul that seeks. Saul of Tarsus, who went about persecuting the name of Jesus in His followers, was sincere in seeking God and His truth; and perhaps from the time that St. Stephen prayed for those that were putting him to death, a new life had begun to dawn in the soul of Saul. However that may be, we know that God's ordinary way of proceeding is to grant His favours in answer to prayer, and to wait for prayer before He grants them. Isaiah says, "And therefore will the Lord wait that he may be gracious unto you." And what does He wait for? He waits till you have cried unto Him. And in Jeremiah: "Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken, and ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." And so it is with us. It is by prayer that we can obtain everything; and it is to true prayer, such as the Scriptures describe, that all the promises are made.

Thus we see, my friends, that prayer is the distinctive mark of the Lord's mighty servants. With considerable differences, they all have this common feature—they are men who pray much and who pray fervently. Consider the prayers of Jacob: he wrestled with the Lord a whole night, till he had prevailed over the Lord himself, who allowed him thus to triumph in order to exercise the faith of His servant. Consider the prayers of Moses and Samuel: of Moses, the lawgiver of Israel: of Samuel, the reformer in Israel; of whom Jeremiah says in the beginning of his fifteenth chapter, to show that God had resolved not to grant a certain grace, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people." And now, let us try to substitute our own name for that of Moses or Samuel. Though such or such a one amongst us should have prayed, the petition would not be granted. . . . What a fall! What a humiliation! What a contradiction! Consider the prayers of David:—the Psalms—those prayers that were able to support, not only himself, but which are like the hundred and fifty pillars that have sustained generation after generation, and that will sustain all the generations of the people of God to the end of the world. Consider the prayers of King Jehoshaphat, who overthrew by prayer alone the combined armies of the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the inhabitants of Mount Seir; and of King Hezekiah, his great grandson and follower, who by prayer alone called down the exterminating vengeance

of God upon an army of a hundred and eighty-five thousand men, who were only waiting for a good opportunity utterly to destroy Jerusalem. Consider the prayers of Nehemiah and Ezra, to raise and reform their people, like Moses and Samuel, the one reviving the spiritual state and restoring the observance of the law, the other rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and re-establishing its civil constitution. Consider the prayers of Jesus, the "author and finisher of our faith," who though He was Jesus, though He was the Son of God, nevertheless prayed,—spent whole nights in prayer, and did nothing but by prayer. By prayer He appoints the apostolic body; by prayer He supports His apostles; by prayer He triumphs over the devil in the desert, in Gethsemane, and at Golgotha; by prayer he accomplishes the whole work of our redemption, having been rendered capable of suffering inconceivable pain, of which our sufferings, even the most excruciating, are scarcely able to give us the faintest image. And after Jesus, consider a new succession of men of prayer. Paul—what a giant in prayer! Prayer is the soul and spring of all his labour. Paul is Paul above all by means of prayer. Consider the prayers of St Augustine; the prayers of Calvin; of Luther, who, when he appeared before the Diet of Worms, passed three hours, taken from the best part of the day, in crying aloud to God, not knowing that his faithful friend Dietrich was indiscreetly listening at his door, to gather for the good of the Church those burning prayers.¹ Consider the prayers of Pascal, who, though suffering when still young the most cruel and unremitting pains, is enabled to overcome them with a fortitude and a piety which we find deeply impressed in those beautiful and fervent prayers of his that have been handed down to us. Consider prayer in all the saints of every age; it is their faith, their life, the mainspring of all their actions, their work.

Oh! my friends, I know not if you will be as deeply humbled as I am by these reflections. For my part, I cannot express to what a degree I am humbled when I think what my prayers have been compared with what they ought to have been—with what they might have been. We should certainly be, in our humble sphere of action, what these men were in the history of Scripture and of the Church, if we knew how to pray as they prayed, and if instead of saying, God granted them special privileges, we knew how to say, "Lord, teach me to pray." Ah! if I were to return to life, I would, with the help of God and in distrust of myself, give much more time to prayer than I have hitherto done, reckoning much more upon the effect of that than on my own labour; which, however, it is our duty never to neglect, but which has no strength but in as far as it is animated by prayer. I would especially strive to obtain in my prayers that unction—that fervour of the Holy Spirit which is not learned in a day, but is the fruit of a long, and often a painful apprenticeship. O my friends! you who are full of life—you whose career does not seem to be near its end—though of that we know nothing, and I may live longer than you—lay hold of the opportunity and redeem it—cultivate new habits of prayer. Bring into prayer, with a spirit of fervour, a spirit of order and method that will increase its power, as it increases the power of all human things, and co-operates with the Divine agency itself; that method and arrangement of which Jesus Christ has given us an example in the model he left us—the Lord's prayer.

And, finally, pray God to guide you, and leave this place full of that prayer, "Lord, teach me to pray." I will exercise myself in it with you, however short the time may be: God does not consider length of time, but uprightness of heart. Humbled by the lukewarmness of our prayers, let us all, with one heart and one mind, form a holy resolution to learn by experience what are the promises made to prayer, that we may reap a blessed inheritance in that invisible world with which prayer alone, by the Word of God, puts us into communication; in that invisible world, nearer to some of us—further from others than they think or hope, and which, however that may be, in ten years, in twenty, in fifty, in a hundred—which would be immense—that is to say, in the twinkling of an eye—will open before all those of us who have built their hopes on Jesus Christ crucified and risen again from the dead. This is my earnest prayer for you, and if the Lord call me to Him, it is the inheritance I would wish to leave to each of you, beginning with my own dearly beloved family. Amen.

FOOTNOTE

1 Speaking of a residence at Cobourg, during the Diet of Augsburg, Dietrich thus writes to Melancthon:—"I cannot sufficiently admire his firmness, his joy, his faith, and his hope, in these times of desolation. Every day he becomes, by constant application to the Word of God, more firm in his convictions. He never passes a day without reserving at least three hours for prayer, taken in the part of the day the most favourable to his work. One day I had the privilege of hearing him pray. Great God! what force, what faith in his words! He prays with all the respect of a man who is in the presence of God, but with all the confidence of a child speaking to his father. 'I know,' said he, 'that Thou art our good God and our Father, and therefore I am persuaded that Thou wilt exterminate those that persecute Thy children. If Thou do not, the danger is as great for Thee as for us. It is Thy cause; what we have done we could not have left undone. It is Thou, merciful Father, that must protect us.' While I listened to him praying in a loud voice in these words, my heart burned with joy within me, for I heard him speak to God with as much fervour as liberty: he rested so firmly upon the promises of the Psalms, that he seemed assured that nothing he asked could fail of being accomplished."