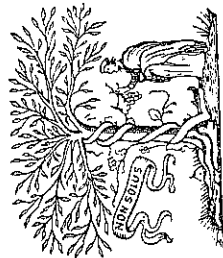


# PRAYER AND WORSHIP

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## II

### THANKSGIVING AND ADORATION

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*One God and Father of all, who is above all.*  
EPHESIANS IV, 6.

If worship is a human necessity, adoration and thanksgiving are necessary elements in any worship that can truly be called Christian. We will begin, therefore, by asking a question, the answer to which has, in the first instance, a wider reference than that which is now our special interest. We must ask, what view of God and of His relationship to human affairs does specifically *Christian* prayer, in *all* its aspects and not merely in its aspects as adoration and thanksgiving, presuppose as its basis and inspiration? It is important to seek some answer to this question at the beginning for two reasons. First, because prayer is the most universal, the most distinctive, the most spontaneous of the religious activities of men. At all its levels, and in all its forms, religion and prayer go together. "To be religious and to pray," says Schleiermacher, "are one and the same thing." Or, in Heiler's words, "Prayer is the very hearthstone of all piety." Or again, in the words of a contemporary French scholar, "The genius who succeeded in writing a history of prayer would by that very fact furnish us with a history of all religion." The danger, therefore, is always present that

the Christian in his praying will slip unwittingly into some form of it which, without ceasing to be prayer, *real* prayer, lacks, in greater or less degree, a specifically Christian character. The very instinctiveness and spontaneity of prayer as religious activity are its danger. In the sphere of prayer the *anima naturaliter Christiana* is very rare, if indeed it exists at all.

The second reason why it is necessary to seek some answer to this question at the beginning is that only by so doing can we hope to keep the various aspects and forms of Christian prayer, which are the subject-matter of this course of sermons and which can only be considered one by one, in unity and consistency with one another. What is required is a central and controlling thought of God and of His relationship to, and purpose with, men, which shall impart to every aspect and form of prayer a specifically Christian character, and at the same time hold them in such organic balance and co-ordination with one another, that they together express and sustain a life with God lacking nothing of the riches which are ours in Christ, and in Christ alone.

Where, then, shall we go for the answer to the question? Clearly we must go to the Biblical revelation. To set forth the Biblical revelation concerning God and His relations with men is, however, plainly impossible here, and fortunately it is not necessary. What we want, I repeat, is a controlling and regulative thought of God in relation to prayer. And that being so, we need only go, I suggest, to one place to get what we want. We need only ask, what view of God and His relations with men governs the prayer, and the teaching about prayer, of Him in whom the Biblical revelation reaches its climax and consummation, even Jesus Christ our Lord? So formulated the answer to the question is not difficult to find, however difficult it may be, and indeed most certainly is, to live

and to pray in the light of it. The thought of God and of His relations with men which governs the whole life and teaching of the Master, and in particular the concentration and focusing of His whole being, towards God and towards man, in prayer, is this: that God, the one, personal, holy, almighty Father is now savingly at work in the world and in the hearts and lives of men. It is God's redemptive activity in this present world of sinful and suffering humanity, God's redemptive activity particularly as now manifested in Jesus Himself, that is at the heart and centre of all His life and all His praying—God *active* savingly; God *at work* redeemingly; God summoning men through Him to find their true life in penitent surrender to, and co-operation with, that same saving activity, that same redeeming work. "My Father worketh hitherto and I work." That is the clue.

Ménégoz, and others, have shown how this apprehension of God does govern the prayer of Jesus at every point. The records indeed are scanty, but they all point in the same direction, and, taken in their whole Biblical context, taken, that is to say, in the context of what may be called the distinctively Biblical thought of God, they are enough. Thus we see Him at prayer at every critical point in the prosecution of His own unique task and vocation as the mysteriously appointed and predestined agent of God's saving purpose with men—when crowds flock around Him in dangerous enthusiasm and threaten to turn the current of His life in the wrong direction; at the momentous choice of His disciples; on the mount of Transfiguration when He was wrestling with the thought of "the decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem"; in the garden of Gethsemane. We see Him at prayer in the very midst of those healing works which He Himself described as the coming of God's rule, God's Kingdom, amongst men—"looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto the deaf

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man, Ephatha, that is, be opened." Were not the look and the sigh a prayer? We see Him at prayer for the disciples, both individually and collectively, whom He is sending forth as collaborators in the divine work of redemption. We see Him at prayer for the multitudes who moved His heart with compassion "because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest," He cries, "that he will send forth *labourers* into his harvest." Did He who thus exhorted not Himself so pray? We see Him too, and this is specially significant for us, in a moment of prayer of adoration and thanksgiving. Whence came the impulse to give thanks and adore? It came from the realization that the redeeming work of the Most High was in very truth being accomplished through His disciples. The disciples returned in excitement because the devils were subject to them. "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes; even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight." Finally, there is His own explicit instruction as to what should be the content of prayer, given, be it observed, out of the very midst of his own praying; so that we are doubly sure that it is a transcript of His own practice. "And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray. And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven." The Lord's prayer, and, I repeat, that must mean the Lord's own praying, is wholly centred in the accomplishment of God's will, God's rule, in the world.

This, then, is the clue to distinctively Christian prayer, this is that central and controlling thought of God which alone can impart and preserve to every form and aspect

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of praying a specifically Christian character—that God is active savingly in the world, supremely, uniquely, through Christ, and man is called to find his true life in co-operating with that same active, saving purpose of God. "Thy will be done in earth as it is done in heaven." "Thy Kingdom come." No doubt such a statement still needs to be given content, if it is to afford the guidance in prayer which we need. We need to know what this saving will of God is, what its character and end. To affirm the will of God at large amounts to little. But it is not our business to answer such questions now, except perhaps to say that the fuller content of the petition is not to be known apart from the person and life of Him who has supremely taught us to pray it. The point for us is that, assuming that we can know sufficiently what the content of the Divine will is, it is the earnest desire and petition for its accomplishment which must control and govern all our praying.

For if our praying is not so controlled and governed, then the danger is always present that it will move in one or other of two directions; in either case it loses its distinctive Christian quality. On the one hand, it may move in the direction of that blasphemous eudaemonism, which lies so near to all our hearts, of seeking in prayer to make God primarily the ally and reinforcement of our own desires and purposes in the world. How subtle and serious this danger is, how much it needs the constant check of this controlling thought that we are called upon, in prayer as in other things, to affirm and further *God's* will and not to seek a way of promoting our own, no one who has any capacity to read his own heart will not know. The danger is the greater, because it is no part of the Christian revelation to ask us to think that the necessities of our natural life—food, raiment, home—to the acquirement and enjoyment of which so much of our energy has

perforce to be given, are of no account to God. On the contrary, we are bidden to believe that God knoweth that we have need of these things; we are bidden to pray for our daily bread; and whenever the Master Himself ate bread His custom was to give God thanks. Yet the injunction is the more explicit and firm, that all these things must be kept in subordination to the furtherance of God's will in the world. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you." Though it is God who gives and sustains life, nay *because* it is God who gives and sustains life, the one thing we must *not* put first is our life; the one person we must not fear is he who can take away that life, and after that hath no more that he can do.

On the other hand, if the control of this thought of which we have been speaking is lost, we may move in the opposite direction, to a sort of mysticism, if I may use such an ambiguous word, wherein the supreme end and achievement of prayer are thought of as a withdrawn and absorbed state of contemplation and adoration of God. Prayer may then come to be a way of cultivating and enjoying a certain state of mind of our own. The subtle and dangerous self-reference and self-interest of this are masked by the fact that we suppose that we are losing *ourselves* in the contemplation and adoration of God, but they are there none the less. Reacting from the grosser eudaemonism of seeking through God the good things of life, or what we deem to be such, we fall into another of the more refined sort, namely, seeking through God the enjoyment of a certain state of mind. The danger is all the greater because the adoring and worshipful contemplation of God's infinite being has an important and indispensable part to play in Christian prayer. The danger can only be avoided by the prayer, in this its form as adoration and thanksgiving, as in its other forms, being

steadily directed towards this one supreme end, the accomplishment of God's saving purpose in the world.

What, then, is the part which adoration and thanksgiving must play in Christian praying? In attempting now to say one or two things in answer to this question, we must guard ourselves against possible misunderstandings. When we lift up our hearts in adoration and thanksgiving to God, it is to God Himself we lift them up. We do not lift them up to truths or statements about God. The importance of this is, that in speaking of these matters we cannot set forth what we have to say except in the form of truths or statements about God. It is inevitable, but it must not mislead us. Preaching on prayer is, after all, not itself praying. It is *about* prayer and therefore must express itself under the form of statements *about* the source and object of prayer, namely, God. Yet, I repeat, in worship we are not concerned with statements and truths about God. We are concerned with God. Moreover, the motive of adoration and thanksgiving must not be their reflex good effects upon us; for then they would not be true adoration and thanksgiving and would not in fact have these good effects. Nevertheless, true adoration and thanksgiving do have such effects, and it cannot be unimportant to take note of them when we reflect upon prayer and its central place in the Christian life. This being clear, we are free without risk of misunderstanding to say that the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving has to do with certain *truths* concerning God and His relationship with us which can be summed up in the phrase in the Epistle to the Ephesians, though we take it perhaps in a somewhat wider meaning than was there intended. "One God and Father of all, who is above all." *The God who is above all.*

It is not difficult to see that the part that adoration and thanksgiving so defined must play in Christian prayer

is quite indispensable. For if, as we have said, the regulative aim of Christian prayer is the affirmation of God's redemptive will, the furthering of God's saving work, in the world, it is most necessary always in such prayer to be deeply possessed with the sense that it is the will and purpose of God, the most high God, the God who is above all, with which we are concerned and which is concerned with us. Without that, the prayer will go astray, and we shall go astray with it. We shall in fact be the wrong sort of people to pray, and indeed to serve God's saving purpose in the world very effectively at all.

Thus, first, in the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving the Christian lifts up his heart to the God who is above all, in that He it is upon whom all things utterly depend. He is Creator; without Him we and our world would vanish away. From Him, and from Him alone, comes down every blessing of this life. Yea, even the evil of life is held within the grip of His manifold wisdom, His steadfast and saving purpose of good. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge.

Now observe how the sense, continually renewed in worship, of everything hanging thus "suspended from the wrist of God" puts the Christian man in the way of becoming at once very humble and very strong, a combination of qualities as difficult to achieve as it is most necessary to the effective service of God. He is taught humility by the daily penetration of his soul in worship with the truth that he is nothing and has nothing, nothing whatever, in his own right; that even for the bare fact of existence he is a dependent and derivative being. How much more then for every gift and power for which men, in their folly, are accustomed to praise, not God, but one another? In the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving, he accepts everything from the hand of God and gives everything back into the hand of God for the service of

His kingdom. On the other hand, he becomes strong, very strong, in that service. For by this truth also his soul is possessed, that these high and critical issues of God's kingdom, while they demand his service, do not depend upon it. They depend not on his working and contriving, but upon the God who is above all, and outside the orbit of whose wisdom and power nothing can fall. It is, indeed, not difficult to recognize the Christian man who has been deeply shaped by these thoughts of God through adoration and thanksgiving. He has an unshakable and undefeatable quietness and steadiness and strength and peace. And it is not difficult to recognize the Christian man who has not been so shaped. He worries about God's cause in the world. He has an irreligious solicitude for God. He denounces bitterly the sins of his time. He clamours for campaigns of feverish revival. He fuses round the ark of God, and wants to steady it at every jolt in the road. He is the anxious, striving Christian. His heart is not garrisoned by the peace of God. He needs a clearer vision of the God who is above all. He needs to learn the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving.

Then, second, in the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving the Christian lifts up his heart to the God who is above all in the infinite, unfathomable mystery of His being. Of this, it is difficult to speak. The religious man, the worshipping man, knows what is meant; the irreligious man does not, and the most carefully chosen words cannot bridge the gulf. It is enough to say that this is not a matter of merely acknowledging, because we must and with regret, that there is much we do not know, and perhaps cannot know. Such agnosticism, which need in itself be hardly more than a bald statement of fact, can go, as we are all aware, with a jaunty and self-confident humanism, which, however, is always on the brink of profound despair. No, the agnosticism of the Christian in

the presence of God has joy in it. He would not have it otherwise. There is praise in it. There is worship. *Deus cognitus, deus nullus*—known God, no God. So you have the exalted, almost excited tones of the Apostle's great agnostic doxology at the end of the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever and ever."

Observe, once again, the reflex effect of such worship on the Christian, the servant of God's saving purpose in the world. By such prayer of adoration, and perhaps only by it, he is saved from that which has so often manifested itself in certain types of intense Christian piety and service—a certain "palliness" with God and a certain readiness to confine Him, as it were, within the narrow dimensions of our own ecclesiastical forms and enterprises. This is the more easy because such forms and enterprises are in all sincerity dedicated to the service of His purpose in the world. By such prayer the Christian is saved, too, from being overwhelmed by the dark inscrutabilities of man's existence in the world. The dread mystery of much in our life is continually taken up, and in a measure lost in, the worshipful mystery of God. A sceptic once said to a saint, "I cannot believe in God in face of a cholera microbe." To which the saint replied, "Don't be flippant." The sceptic is probably still wondering what he meant.

Third, in the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving the Christian lifts up his heart to the God who is above all in His utter holiness, in His infinite and inexhaustible goodness and majesty and truth. Here, again, words

become a poor vehicle of meaning. But here again the worshipping man knows what is meant, even though but dimly and in a way that cannot be expressed. And from such worship he goes forth to the service of God in the world a humbler and a bigger man. Humbler, because without the least affectation and make-believe he knows that his best righteousness, set against the splendour of God, is as filthy rags. Bigger, because of an abiding sense of the illimitable Goodness which overarches and interpenetrates our otherwise so little life—for ever beyond us, yet for ever offering itself to us to share. The basis of all great living is reverence. But reverence must have an adequate object, otherwise it grows idolatrous and corrupt. The only adequate object of reverence for man is God, known to be now and eternally all that a man could ever dream or desire of perfection, and infinitely more.

Finally, in the prayer of adoration and thanksgiving the Christian man lifts up his heart to the God who is above all in the height and depth and length and breadth of His love, His saving love, towards us in Jesus Christ our Lord. The Christian man knows the love of God in Christ, which nevertheless passes knowledge. At this point adoration and thanksgiving, no matter how far they may range in contemplation of, and obeisance before, the infinite mystery and majesty of the Most High, are firmly brought back again to their distinctively Christian centre, namely, God's nature as Love and the redemption that love has wrought in Jesus Christ. It is brought back again to that which is the climax of all right Christian worship, namely, the offering which the worshipper makes of himself to God.

For that same love has reached down and redeemed me at so great cost. Therefore, I must give myself without questioning or reserve to its service, in prayer as in all else. The inference is not a logical inference, but it is

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certainly cogent—to the redeemed and worshipping man; the more cogent because it penetrates deeper than thought to the profoundest springs of feeling in the human soul.

“Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.” This is *the* supreme Christian motive, giving the Christian life in all its aspects its distinctive and incommunicable quality—a profound sense of indebtedness issuing in ever-renewed wonder, love, and praise, an ever-renewed endeavour to repay what in fact never can be repaid.

Yes, the ultimate Christian secret is in that paradox, as someone has said—the paradox that a man has made the one supreme discovery when he realizes that there is only one good thing in life, and that is a bad debt, a debt he cannot repay and has no hope of repaying. Yet because he cannot pay it, he will for ever be paying it, for ever throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks.

Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.