
These Lectures were delivered in St. James' Church, Piccadilly, during the Lent of 1870. They were, at the time, through God's mercy, of service at least to some minds,—anxious, if it might be, to escape from perplexities which beset an age of feverish scepticism. It was accordingly difficult to resist the practical reasons which were urged in favour of publishing the Lectures; but the announcement of their intended publication was, perhaps, made, before the drawbacks which must necessarily accompany the rhetorical treatment of such a subject as the present, in a permanent form, had been sufficiently considered. Moreover, a fulness and method of discussion which satisfies the purposes of a Lecture, and which indeed is all that an audience will bear, must fall altogether below the standard which may be reasonably looked for in a book, supposed to make any pretension whatever to the character of a formal treatise upon a wide and very serious sub-
ject. Of this, upon further reflection, the writer became so strongly convinced, as to have entertained the design of expanding these fragments into a larger work. But, apart from the pressure of other duties, he could not but feel that such an attempt would destroy, together with the identity of the Lectures, any moral or spiritual associations that might cling to them; and, in working for the cause of faith, as in other matters,

"Un sou, quand il est assuré,
Vaut mieux, que cinq en espérance."

The Lectures are therefore published as they stand. It will be borne in mind that they suggest only a few thoughts on each of the points of which they treat; that they cannot but raise some difficulties which they leave unanswered; and, in a word, that their limits are not in any sense determined by those of the general subject, but only by the number of Sundays in Lent.

Whitsuntide, 1872.

A FRIENDLY reviewer has expressed his opinion that the point of the "scientific" objection to prayer on the ground of the idea of law is missed in the fifth of these Lectures.

"That objection," he says, "we understand to be that a certain absolute universality in the physical order of the universe is now well ascertained to be a part of the Divine Rule, and consequently that to pray for anything which involves a violation of that order is to pray for what it is unreasonable, arrogant, and even irreverent to ask. For example, for a man to pray that a sword thrust into the body of his friend shall not wound him, that deadly poison if drunk by him should not injure him, that a stone thrown from a tower should be suspended in mid-air, that a body in which decomposition has set in should be restored to life, that a leafless tree should blossom months before its season, that a ship should perform in two days a voyage never yet performed in less than ten,—to pray for these things, with however holy an aim or purpose, would seem we say arrogant, unreasonable, irreverent, as assuming that God had no higher or larger purpose in laying out the plan of the universe than one which any pious finite wish might overset."

The "scientific" objection which is here stated so vividly, is, it would seem, only such an objec-

1 Spectator, Sept. 21, 1872.  
2 Pages 187-190.
tion as a sincere believer in God's existence could entertain. 'Scientific objectors' to prayer on the ground of a supposed invariability of natural law, are not, generally speaking, Theists at all. Whether they dogmatically deny that God exists, or, as is more common, decline to affirm His existence, on the ground that they cannot prove it experimentally, they alike conceive of Nature in a manner which is irreconcilable with the ideas of a Creator and a Providence. For them the laws of Nature are existing forces, of whose origin they can give no account,—forces which, as they conceive, act fatally, inevitably, and in accordance with an observed order. My reviewer too understands by natural law an ascertained order governing the Universe. But for him law is so far from constraining God's liberty, or usurping His throne, that it only expresses the regularity of His action, which is perfectly and always free. God freely wills to work regularly; and the result is what we call law. Yet since natural law is the product or expression of the*Highest Love and Wisdom, it is, says my reviewer, irrational and irreverent to ask for its suspension, at any rate on what might be deemed a considerable scale.

This objection to prayer appears to be rather theological than "scientific," if we understand the
latter word in the narrow sense which is now so commonly assigned to it. It is an appeal ad verecundiam—an appeal to our creaturely sense of ignorance and nothingness in presence of the Wisdom and Greatness of the Author and Ruler of the Universe. But the objection which is contemplated in the passage referred to does not take any account of God: my reviewer reads his own deeply religious convictions into the objection, and makes it substantially a distinct one. Still, as it issues from his hands, it is entitled to respectful attention, and certainly not less so, because it is advanced in the name of a higher truth than any science of created things can claim to represent.

When it is maintained that God knows, and that knowing He does what is best; that the laws of nature shew what is His settled plan of governing His creation; and that we cannot plead our particular and finite wishes before Him without implying that He ought to change His all-comprehending purpose at our entreaty; it is clear that such a line of objection might be made to cover a great deal more ground than my reviewer at least would desire. It has indeed been urged, that since every specific petition involves something like an attempt at interference with Perfect Wisdom and Perfect Love, the only legitimate devotion is one
continuous act of resignation and of praise. Prayer however, as mankind have everywhere understood it, means a great deal more than resignation. No one will affirm that the Bible only means resignation when it prescribes prayer: or that, according to the Mind of our Lord, it is irreverent or unreasonable to say, not merely, "Thy Will be done," but, "Give us this day our daily bread," "Lead us not into temptation," "Deliver us from evil." Yet these are petitions for blessings which may or may not be granted to us when and as we ask. Nor do such petitions involve an irreverent claim that God should oversee the plan of His general government in the interests of one of His creatures. It is maintained in these Lectures that prayer is a human act, which, together with its results, is already embraced in the eternal predestination of God: and that real answers to prayer are no more inconsistent with God's Wisdom and Sovereignty than any other real consequences of human free-will. Correspondingly to this, in asking God for specific and personal blessings, we are not asking Him to suspend the general principles of His government in our particular interests; we assume that these principles of His and our own deepest interests, as we conceive of them, are reconcileable by His Wisdom: we refuse to believe that He is
in such sense the slave of His own rules, as to become the author of anarchy, because He supersedes a lower rule of working by a higher one. Whether He can do this or not in a given case we leave to Him: but we are not restrained from asking Him to grant our petitions, because we know that in His wise Love He may refuse to do so.

My reviewer will rejoin that he only objects to prayers which ask God to work "miracles;" he contends that "no miracle, properly so called, could be properly prayed for, for a private purpose, at all." But what does he mean by a private purpose? If he is thinking of a temporal blessing, granted to an individual, such as an increase of family, or of income, with no moral or spiritual aim beyond, we must all agree with him. But if the object of a given prayer be sincerely spiritual and moral, it is difficult to see why the moral Ruler of the Universe should not grant it, even although to do so involves one of those physical occurrences which we term miraculous, and benefits only a single soul. The distinction between individual and public interests, which is so legitimate and familiar in human legislation, is unknown to the spiritual world. There is no reason for supposing that a number of souls
interest Almighty God because of their number, while a single soul does not interest Him, at any rate sufficiently to be redeemed or sanctified. If our Lord says, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son" to save it; an Apostle cries "He loved me, and gave Himself for me." It belongs to God's Infinity to be as interested in units as in multitudes; while it belongs to His essentially moral nature to give precedence to the least moral interests over the largest material interests. Although then a specific petition be urged with a private or individual object, it may surely, if the object be moral, be so preferred without immodesty or irreverence, considering the absolute morality and the all-embracing tenderness of God.

But is it right under any circumstances to pray for what we popularly term a miracle? On this subject the reviewer observes:—

"We can only pray for physical benefits when we fully believe that they might be granted without miracle, that they might be granted, for instance, through that providential guidance of our own or other hearts and wills, which may, as Mr. Galton has himself admitted, materially alter the physical facts of the world without any real interference with physical law. The legitimacy of such prayers as that for rain seems to us to depend on the possibility that the conditions of rain are not absolutely determined by fixed laws of creation—that the conditions of rain are not as purely physical as the conditions of an eclipse. All the world would quite rightly protest against the blasphemy of praying that we might be spared an eclipse at the time
astronomers predicted, one, however detrimental it might conceivably be to human interests. On the other hand, it is possible, though hardly probable, that rain, like human health and the health of cattle, may depend on laws not purely physical,—not absolutely invariable; and so long as this is possible, there is no harm in praying for rain under the ordinary reserves of Christian prayer. But Dr. Liddon himself would hardly justify a prayer against an eclipse, even though it could be shewn to be apparently in the highest degree injurious to us."

It may perhaps be questioned whether every real answer to prayer is not miraculous. Every such answer disturbs the normal operation of existing laws, whether by procuring the intervention of a higher law, or otherwise. Or, to speak more accurately, every such answer involves a certain departure from what, as we presume, would otherwise have been His mode of working, Who works everywhere in the physical as in the moral world. The difference between a resurrection from the dead at a prophet’s prayer, and the increase of clear-sightedness or of love through an infusion of grace, in the soul of a cottager, is a difference of degree. It is not a difference of kind. Each result is the product of a Divine interference with the normal course of things. And if this be the case, the distinction between what we think great and striking answers to prayer, because they impress our human imaginations so powerfully, and ordinary answers, does not exist for Him, to Whose
Intelligence the least among created things are as the greatest,—before Whom all that He has made is in the aggregate so infinitely little.

But if I rightly understand this passage, it practically divides the universe, when considered with a view to determining the legitimate range of prayer, into three districts. In one district, the purely physical, everything is regarded as irrevocably fixed. Here prayer is held to be out of the question. On the other hand, in the province of human will and destiny—the moral and spiritual sphere,—the fact of human free-will opens the widest scope to the agency of prayer. In an intermediate region,—which affects human life very directly and powerfully,—“rain and human health may depend on laws not purely physical, not absolutely invariable.” Here, although prayer is less at home than in the sphere of spiritual blessings, it is not “irrational” or “irreverent,” as it would be in the reviewer’s judgment, if it should invade the sphere of astronomy.

The objections to such a theory would appear to be twofold. In the first place, it implies that the reign of law is confined to certain districts of the universe, and in particular that it does not obtain in the spiritual sphere. This assumption appears to involve philosophical as well as theolo-
gical difficulties. Theological difficulties; because those attributes of the Divine Being which lead Him to work anywhere according to that order, of what law is an expression, would lead Him to do so everywhere. And philosophical difficulties; because recognition of the existence of law is the result of an ever-widening induction; and there are no adequate grounds for supposing that the frontier of the material universe is also the frontier of the empire of law. In particular, the phenomenon of free-will does not appear to constitute such a ground. It is true that the activity of free-will in the moral sphere makes the laws which govern that sphere much more intricate and difficult to trace than are physical laws. But it cannot be held to annihilate all law in the highest region of created life, and therefore, if the presence of law is an objection to prayer anywhere, it is an objection to it everywhere. If it is an impertinence to ask God to vary His ordinary working in the lower region of physics, it must be an impertinence to ask Him to do so in the higher region of spiritual being—of morals.

Accordingly, it seems to be difficult to follow the reviewer in the sharp distinction which he draws between prayers for rain, and prayers against an eclipse, predicted by the astronomers. The
rainfall, he says, is determined by laws less purely physical than are the motions of the heavenly bodies. Is this certainly the case? May it not be that the only real difference lies in our power of recognizing the presence of law in these two departments of the natural world? If men knew more than they do know, they would probably be able to predict rain as accurately as they predict eclipses. But the laws which govern the rainfall being more complex than astronomical laws, human knowledge is at present able to trace the latter unerringly, while it is at fault about the former. Can we suppose that the empire of law is only conterminous with our knowledge of it? Does not all that we already know of it lead us on to the inference that it extends as perfectly into spheres where we cannot as yet trace it, as it does into the regions through which we can; that it governs the weather and the health of human beings or animals as truly as the movements of the suns and stars? Certainly human health and even the rainfall are not beyond the influence of the human will. A shower has been suddenly brought down by a discharge of artillery, and health is affected by human energy in ways too numerous to mention. Still, as has been already said, this efficacy of will does not arrest the reign of law. We are not here
dealing with a purely capricious force, which defies all attempts to measure it. Will makes the operations of law more complex. Probably at the most human will can only arrest or precipitate the working of one law by bringing another into the field.

But this theory would further seem to suggest, that the lawful subjects of prayer will be constantly diminishing with the increasing progress of our knowledge. Science is continually enlarging our conceptions of the range of law. With this progressive enlargement the frontier within which prayer is possible will recede, if prayer is only possible in the region of "the unsettled," where we cannot recognize law. "If," it has been said, "we still pray for rain and health, we shall probably find that rain and health are just as much regulated by law as are eclipses of the sun and moon, and that prayer for either is equally irrational." Thus it may happen that prayer for any physical blessing will ultimately be pronounced unscientific. But if this conclusion be accepted, can it be supposed that men will continue to recognize the reasonableness of prayer for purely spiritual blessings? Are we right in thinking that law has no sway in the spiritual world, only because we have not yet made a survey of its dominion? Does it not seem probable that the recognition of
law will be carried through psychology as clearly and certainly as it is being carried through physics? And when this has been achieved, if the recognized presence of law is to check or forbid prayer; will it not become just as ‘arrogant’ to ask for peace of soul, with the idea that any Power independent of ourselves will interfere to give it us, as to pray for safety from lightning and thunder, from plague and pestilence?

Certainly it would appear to the present writer that if the scientific ‘idea of law’ is fatal to the practice of prayer in any department of human interest, it must, sooner or later, be fatal to that practice, in any serious sense, altogether. And therefore he cannot allow that the admitted government of the physical world by laws which God has ordained, and which science has traced, and is tracing every day with increasing accuracy, makes prayers for objects within the recognized jurisdiction of these laws irrational or irreverent. If God is omnipotent, He can vary the laws, that is, He can vary His accustomed methods of working, when He wills. If He is a moral Being, He is likely to do so, supposing moral interests to be really at stake. Whether a prayer for a physical object, say for the suspension of an eclipse, be irrational or irreverent, would surely depend upon the motive
of such a prayer. It would be shocking to pray against an eclipse only in order to gratify the curiosity of scientific association: no serious Theist can conceive that such a prayer as that would be granted. Nay, the bodily distress of millions of human beings might perhaps be no sufficient reason for asking God to work so complex and gigantic a miracle as is here in question, in order to avert it. But let us suppose an eclipse to lead inevitably to some great moral evil, which there were no human means of preventing, such as, for instance, missionary enterprise, which might prevent savage tribes from perpetrating great acts of cruelty. In that case prayer against an eclipse would at least be rational and reverent. Rational, because God might arrest eclipses, and a great deal else, if He willed to do so; and reverent, because God is essentially a Moral Being, and such a prayer would be an acknowledgment of His Morality. Of course He might not under any circumstances answer such a prayer. But it is inconceivable that, being what He is, He should be angry with His suppliant.

Happily, the practical question is easily settled, for all who believe that God is really Almighty, and that He is not merely a Force or an Intellect, but a Father. As His children, whom He loves dearly, and for whom He has done and is ever doing
so much, and doing it so wonderfully, we can have no cold distrust of Him. We must indeed watch, anxiously and reverently, His ways of working in nature as elsewhere; we may not lightly ask Him to reverse what we believe to be His rules of working: we dare not ask Him capriciously to vary His action in the physical world, or even to take our judgment of the needs of the moral world for granted. All our prayer must be accompanied by the reserves which His Wisdom imposes upon our shortsightedness; and the more filial our spirit, the less likely shall we ever be to feel disappointment at His decisions, be they what they may. But this temper of resignation, incessantly present to religious minds, will not lead us practically to treat the Living God as a helpless Fate, nor will it dry up the springs of prayer, by stripping of their power and encouragement the undying words,—as fresh now as they were eighteen centuries ago,—“Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My Name, He will give it you.”

St. Paul’s, September 1873.