

PRAYER REASONABLE.

A CHAIRMAN, presiding in one of the meetings of the late Evangelical Alliance, remarked that the cavils of infidels had had no effect in arresting the prayers of the church. Nor can they, in the nature of things, have such effect. Prayer is the most universal rational function of the human soul, in all ages and under all religions. However men differ about other things—about the objects of desire, about the divinities to be worshipped, about the mode in which they should be approached—they all agree in praying. Not even the skeptics themselves will prove exceptions in the day when “the sorrows of death compass them, and the pains of hell get hold upon them.”

About Mr. Tyndall's prayer-test, by which he hoped to demonstrate the folly of prayer, much has been written, but we have not seen the truest and shortest answers. They are these: First, the objects we pray for fall into two classes, the innocent, natural good, and the spiritual good pertaining to redemption. The healing of the bodies of sick men in a hospital falls under the former class. But God has only given an explicit promise as to the latter class. It is proper to pray for bodily health, our daily bread, and other lawful, worldly goods; our Saviour has expressly authorized us to do so. But he has, with equal clearness, told us that there are often circumstances in which these seeming goods cease to be real goods, and then he will refuse the gift to his dearest and most accepted saint. He has also refused to disclose to us in advance when those circumstances exist. Hence, for these objects, the intelligent Christian always prays with submission, and in ignorance of the issue. They do not fall in the class which we know to be “things according to his will.” It is only of this latter class that we are authorized to say, “We have confidence that he heareth us.” (1 John v. 14, 15.)

But second, and more conclusively, the proposed prayer-test

is preposterous. If there is an answer to prayer, the thing proposed to be tested, there is a personal God—a being of will, wisdom, power, and majesty. When such a test is applied, he must be a party to the response. But if there is such a God, it is the Christian's God, who has already graciously told us that he does answer prayer; who has already given us a great deal of condescending instruction on that very point in his word. Hence, that the petitioners should apply a further test to his fidelity cannot but be superfluous, and, therefore, impertinent. There must, therefore, always be a powerful motive in the mind of the Divine Sovereign for declining to respond to the test, however he may be disposed, on other terms, to answer the humble petitioner. That motive is a regard to his own honor. It would always be conceivable, yea, probable, in such a case, that this motive would prevail; so that the proposed test would test nothing, and reveal nothing, as to God's faithfulness in answering prayer, except its own impiety.

Infidel physicists make a mighty difficulty nowadays about an answer to prayer, from the uniformity of second causes, and the absolute stability of their laws. They tell us that it is the law of man's reason—if they acknowledge that reason has any fundamental laws—that we expect "like causes always to produce like effects." They tell us also, that experience shows us absolutely nothing in nature save regular laws. The widest observation of the heavenly bodies and the earthly organisms, only confirms the truth that, in nature, second causes always produce their appointed, natural effects, and interruption is unknown. Now, when we pray to God for a thing, we must expect him to give it, either by a miracle, a supernatural intervention over the natural laws which were going to bring on us some other thing, or we must expect him to bring it to pass by some modification of the second causes within the laws of nature. But either expectation, say they, is irrational.

As to the first horn of the dilemma they have made for us, they tell us that the known uniformity of nature leaves no place for the supernatural. Thus, says Mr. Baden Powell, the histories of the miracles, which were once the glory of Christianity, are now her chief embarrassment.

The first remark we make upon this supposed difficulty is, that it is but a sorry resuscitation of the ghost of Hume's once

famous sophism against the credibility of miracles, so thoroughly slain by the logic of Dr. George Campbell and other divines. How do we know that the operations of nature are always and everywhere uniform? Our own limited observation is not enough to teach us this. If we are sure of it, it must be by the testimony of others. So that we come just to Hume's exploded argument. Next, it is obvious that, if the difficulty is consistently urged, it is atheistic. Certainly creation was a miracle. The almighty acts out of which nature first arose were certainly supernatural; and it would be a queer philosophy which set the effect above its own cause, which regarded the omnipotence which produced nature and endowed it with all these regular properties as too feeble to interfere with its own work. But to deny a creation is practically to deny a creator. The truth is, nature implies the supernatural. Nature shows us herself the signs that she cannot be eternal and self-existent. She had, therefore, her origin in a creation. But what can be more supernatural than the act which originated nature? If it were indeed impossible that there could be a miracle, then this nature herself would be non-existent, whose uniformities give the pretext for this denial of the miraculous. Nature confesses that her causes are second causes—they suggest their origin in a first cause. Just as the stream suggests its fountain, so do the laws of nature, now flowing in so regular a current, point us upward to the Source who instituted them, and can, therefore, control them.

But the easiest refutation is in this exceedingly familiar fact, that our own free agency is continually originating effects outside of material forces, and is continually reversing natural forces up to a certain extent. We know, at least as well as we know the things testified by our senses, that we have a true spontaneity; that this cause does absolutely originate many effects. Take a familiar instance: the natural laws of liquids require water to seek its own level everywhere and always. But any peasant, by the intervention of his free agency of mind, produces absolutely the opposite effect; he causes it to ascend above its level in the tube of his pump. Let us trace this "anti-natural" effect in the simplest and most practical manner. This peasant observes that this rise of the water against nature is caused by the intervention of a lever moving a piston; that this

lever, however, is not the true cause, for it is moved by his arm; that the arm, itself a lever of bone and muscle, is moved by his nerves, and, finally, that these nerves are but the conductors of a volition which, his consciousness tells him, originated in his mind. Here, then, is an effect upon matter above material nature, originated by the spontaneity of a spirit! But now, when this peasant is thus simply and clearly taught that the volition of his own spirit is an original fountain of effects outside of and above material nature, and when he lifts his eyes to the heavens and sees in their wise and wondrous frame the evidences of another spiritual intelligence there like his own, but immeasurably grander, how can he doubt that this superior mind has also in its will another primary source of effects above nature? If there is a Creator; if he is a personal, intelligent, and voluntary being, governing the world he has made—the denial of either of these postulates is virtual atheism—then, since he may at any time possibly see a motive for intervening with his own possessions, our experience of our own free agency makes it every way probable that he may, on occasion, intervene. Every rational man customarily conducts his own affairs on regular methods, and occasionally, upon sufficient motive, uses unusual expedients. It is absurd for him to make any difficulty about conceding a similar free agency, upon proper occasion, to God—if there is a God. This pretended argument of infidelity is a “vicious circle.” It excludes a God because it cannot admit a supernatural, and lo! its only ground for rejecting the supernatural is its uncertainty of the existence of a personal God. This pretended profundity is thus exploded by the simplest experience of every plain mind.

But while the Christian miracles are thus proved to be entirely credible, we have no need to claim that God now answers prayer by miracle. The doctrine of the Bible is that he answers prayers for spiritual good by grace in the hearts of men, and for natural good by that perpetual and special providence through which he regulates the working of every second cause in accordance with its natural law. It is against this customary providence the cavil is mainly objected. There is no room, says the modern infidel, for the divine will to introduce an answer to prayer. Here, for instance, is a company of Christians in a leaking ship amidst a storm. On smooth water the crippled vessel might float to her desired haven, but if the tempest con-

tinues, she cannot outlive it. So the people assemble in the cabin and pray to God to arrest the storm. "Now that prayer," says the infidel, "is absurd. This storm is the natural effect of physical causes, in air and water, already established. These causes were, in turn, effects of previous physical causes. Hence, when those earlier causes were once established, the ulterior effect—namely, this storm—was potentially present in them already. And since natural causes are invariable, the whole result was naturally inevitable days or months before the prayer began. Do these foolish Christians expect their God to work a miracle now to stay the storm, as they pretend Christ once did on the Sea of Galilee? No! they disclaim that expectation. Then their prayer is senseless. They might as reasonably pray to the winds and waves. Natural law takes its course. If the continuance of the storm was in its natural causes, it will continue; if not, it will terminate. But, in that event, the termination can have no possible connection with the prayer; the natural causes had spent their force. The effect would have ceased just the same without the prayer." Such is the cavil.

The answer is, that our inability to explain *how* an all-wise God modifies natural effects in accordance with natural causes is no proof whatever that he cannot do it. The peasant sends his message with confidence by Morse's electric telegraph. He has sufficient evidence that it can be done, but *how it can be done* he can neither imagine nor explain. Now, we presume there is more difference between God's knowledge and ours than between Professor Morse's and the peasant's. We presume that Mr. Tyndall and the rest of the "scientists" would be very much outraged were we to refuse to believe that they could perform their beautiful experiments because we common folk cannot conceive how they do them!

We answer again, that we are able to regulate and employ our mechanisms, in strict accordance with their structure, to execute our special purposes. Shall we deny to the great God a similar power? What more regular and exact than a railroad? The motive power is a mechanical one, blind, senseless, and tremendous. The machinery is of iron. What more unyielding than iron? The track consists of two horizontal and parallel bars of iron, immovable, and of inexorably uniform position and distance. The trains must all run by a "time-table," whose exact-

ness imitates that of the planetary motions. The rigid rules of the road could not be infringed without the risk of a terrific crash. Yet this railroad train can be easily made to hear prayer. Its every motion is as completely under the hand of the engineer as the horse under the rein of the rider; and at the cry of a sick child, the conductor may stop the whole. Now, is God less able to manage his machine? Are his resources less than those of his creature, man?

May not this be the point of our Saviour's question in Matthew vii. 11: "If ye, then, though evil, *know how* to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father in heaven give good things to them that ask him"? We are sinful and weak, yet we have knowledge and power to give answers to our children's petitions, through natural means, without violating their nature. Is not this an argument by the stronger reason for the Almighty God's having that knowledge and power?

In conclusion, we argue that the perfect adjustment of this machinery of nature gives us the clearest proof at once of the existence and the skill of the creative mind. The more complete the machine, the more cunning the maker. Do they tell us of the unvarying regularity with which the forces of nature act through all recorded time and over all known space amidst their almost boundless complexity? Well, just so much do they exalt our conception of the resources and wisdom of the divine Architect. And shall they then tell us that the machinery of nature is so complete that the very Maker of it cannot intervene without violating its structure? This is precisely as though one should say, "There was a clock-maker of extraordinary skill, who made so perfect a clock that he himself could not regulate its motions." He was, forsooth, so thoroughly successful that the result of his very success in clock-making was to banish him in impotency from the control of his own handiwork! And yet that success in the construction is the practical evidence that he possessed boundless skill and power as to such machines. Such is the simple *residuum* of this much-vaunted scientific skepticism.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES.¹

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”—MAL. iv. 6.

“And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”—LUKE i. 17.

THE religious importance of parental obligation may be inferred from many scriptural truths; and, among others, from the place it occupies at the end of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new. Historians tell us that from the prophesying of Malachi to the Christian era was an interval of more than four hundred years. During all these ages the heavens were silent, and the church received oracle neither by “Urim and Thummim,” nor by prophetic voice. Malachi, in his last chapter, prepares the people for this long silence of revelation by two words, of which one is a promise, and the other a precept. The command is (chap. iv. 4) to walk by the law of Moses, God’s servant, and to keep the statutes and judgments given, through him, for all Israel. The promise is, that in due time the Messiah’s forerunner, coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, shall usher in the solemn, yet glorious day of Christ, by his preparatory ministry. This was to be, therefore, the next prophet whom the church was entitled to expect. But his work was to be prominently a revival of parental fidelity and domestic piety. “He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

The next recorded message from the skies is that of the Angel Gabriel to Zacharias, given in Luke i. 11–20. The heavenly herald begins just where the earthly prophet had ended, with the promise and work of the forerunner, who was to be Zacharias’ son. “And he shall go before him (the Lord) in the spirit

¹ A sermon preached before the Synod of Virginia, at Danville, Va., October, 1879.