

THE
POWER OF PRAYER,

ILLUSTRATED IN THE

WONDERFUL DISPLAYS

OF DIVINE GRACE AT THE FULTON STREET AND OTHER MEETINGS
IN NEW YORK AND ELSEWHERE, IN 1857 AND 1858.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "TRAVELS IN EUROPE AND THE EAST," "THOUGHTS ON THE DEATH OF
CHILDREN," "HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE, ABRIDGED," ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER XXI.

NARRATIVE OF FACTS.

BY REV. N. MURRAY, D.D.

Prayer-meeting at Aunt Betsy's—Power of Prayer remarkably Illustrated—A Visit to the Sing-Sing Prison—The Contrast—Luther and Melancthon—Examples of Prevailing Prayer—The Church awaking—Understanding the Subject—A Mother's Faith—A Revival predicted.

It was my first visit to the prayer-meeting in Fulton street, where God has so signally manifested his presence. The room on the first story was full, and I made my way up to that on the second. I found a seat in the middle of the room, from which I had a good view of the persons around the pulpit, and could look out of the windows in its rear. And as I glanced upon the high brick stores in Ann street, the memories of other days rushed in upon me. Where those brick stores now rise, upwards of thirty years ago there stood some wooden buildings, of very lowly pretensions. In an upper room of one of them, there dwelt an old colored woman, then widely known as Aunt Betsy, or Sarah

—which, I now forget. She was very old and very feeble, and remarkably pious. To what church she belonged, I do not remember, nor is it necessary to my present purpose to know. She was dependent upon the hand of charity for her daily bread; nor was she neglected. Some ladies, not now unknown in the religious circles of New York, were sent to her room by their parents, on their first errands of mercy to the poor. And some young men, mostly from the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, held a prayer-meeting in her room on each Sabbath afternoon, as she was too infirm to attend on any of the public means of grace. She lay on her lowly bed during these meetings of prayer; and as we retired, she took each of us by the hand, and gave us her parting blessing.

That meeting in the upper room of that poor disciple had passed away from my recollection, although it was in it I offered the first prayer I ever uttered in the hearing of man. But now, in a meeting for prayer, and in sight of the very place, it came up in all its freshness before me. The old buildings took the place of the lofty stores. I could go round the room of Aunt Betsy, and count its chairs, and almost talk with the young men that sat on them. I could hear them pray, and see them retire, each receiving, in his turn, the blessings of the ‘aged disciple.’ And as I was busy with my own thoughts, scarcely hear-

ing the singing and praying that occupied all in the room, I was waked from my revery by a voice from behind me. It was that of a merchant exhorting his brother merchants to a deeper interest, and a warmer zeal, in the salvation of men. As the voice seemed familiar, I turned round to see who was the fervid and fluent speaker. He is now one of the princely merchants of New York, but in his youth he was one of the young men who met for prayer in the room of Aunt Betsy, and his wife was one of the little girls, who, as the ravens did to Elijah, carried to her daily food!

Those young men were not the sons of wealth; if not poor, they supplied their own resources by their daily employment, and all of them were too young to have made for themselves position or character. They were Sabbath school teachers, most of them were communicants of churches, and all of them professed to love the Bible, and the place where prayer was wont to be made. And what has become of the young men that met weekly in the room of Aunt Betsy? Of the subsequent history of some of them, I have no knowledge. It is to be hoped, that, having commenced aright, they held on the even tenor of their way—that they have finished their course with joy, or yet live to be useful. But as to others of them, my knowledge is distinct and full.

One of them rose to eminence as an accomplished writer and editor. He became an honorable politician, and for years has served his country and the cause of Protestantism, with distinction, as a minister at a foreign court.

Another of them is an ex-mayor of the city of New York, whose hand has never been withheld from any work of religion or philanthropy.

Another is the honored partner of one of the largest publishing houses of the city of his residence.

Another of them has held on the even tenor of his way; has risen to eminence as a merchant, has acquired a large fortune, and is a pillar in one of the most important congregations and one of the best known in the British Isles.

Another was the merchant behind me in the room of prayer, so affectionately addressing the audience, and now the head of one of the largest mercantile houses of the Union.

Another is also a well-known merchant of New York, who has a heart for every good work; and who has never withdrawn his hand from the plough.

Another is a useful minister in the western States, whose labors have been eminently blessed in turning many to righteousness.

Two others who gave fair promise of usefulness

in the more secluded walks of life, were early removed to their home in heaven. I was, myself, among the youngest of the company, and when I was first invited to join the circle in the room of Aunt Betsy, was not a communicant of the church.

On a subsequent day I made the above statement at the prayer-meeting in Fulton street, and based upon it an appeal to young men to make the religion of Christ the law and the rule of their life; and as they valued their prosperity in this life and the life to come, not to neglect the place of prayer.

When I sat down, a man rose in another part of the room, his tremulous accents showing the feelings that were within him. 'I have,' said he, 'recently visited the prison at Sing Sing. As I went from cell to cell, I met with an old man who told me a very different story from that just narrated. He said that when young he was one of a company of young men who formed an infidel club, and who met once a week for talking infidelity, gambling and drinking, not very far from the upper room of Aunt Betsy. And I was shocked as he told me of the end to which his companions came. 'One,' said he, 'died by his own hand; another by the hand of violence; some in State Prison; some of *delirium tremens*; and as far as I know, I am the only one of them surviving; and here am I in the garb, and

daily at the work of a felon.' And he also ended his narrative with a most striking and touching appeal to young men, to remember their Creator in the days of their youth.

The contrast which the two narratives presented was most striking. All felt it to be so. No doubt the room of Aunt Betsy, and the gambling hell, were very differently furnished. The companies that met in each were very different in character, and in their governing objects and principles. And their end was very different. Religion has the promise of the life which now is, and of that which is to come. Nor are there any youth more likely to become men, than those who first seek the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness. Even now do I feel the warm pressure of the hand of Aunt Betsy, although for thirty or more years she has been with her Lord; and it may be that the blessings which have followed those who met for prayer in her room, have been in answer to her benedictions and prayers. True religion, early embraced, is a great element of success, even as to the life that now is."

On a certain occasion, a messenger was sent to Luther to inform him that Melanchthon was dying. He at once hastened to his sick-bed, and found him presenting the usual premonitory symptoms of death. He mournfully bent over him; and, sobbing, gave

utterance to a sorrowful exclamation. It roused Melanchthon from his stupor; he looked into the face of Luther, and said, "O, Luther, is this you? Why don't you let me depart in peace?" "We can't spare you yet, Philip," was the reply. And turning round, he threw himself upon his knees, and wrestled with God for his recovery, for upwards of an hour. He went from his knees to the bed, and took his friend by the hand. Again, he said, "Dear Luther, why don't you let me depart in peace?" "No, no, Philip, we cannot spare you yet from the field of labor," was the reply. He then ordered some soup, and when pressed to take it, he declined, again saying: "Dear Luther, why will you not let me go home, and be at rest?" "We cannot spare you yet, Philip," was the reply. He then added: "Philip, take this soup, or I will excommunicate you." He took the soup, he soon commenced to grow better, he soon regained his wonted health, and labored for years afterwards, in the blessed cause of the Reformation. And when Luther returned home, he said to his wife, with abounding joy: "God gave me my brother Melanchthon back in direct answer to prayer."

And this is but one of the multitudes of instances which prove the power of prayer. By prayer Abraham healed Abimelech—Moses prevailed in the land of Ham, and in the wilderness—Joshua arrested the

sun—Hannah obtained Samuel—Elijah shut and opened heaven—Asa put to flight a million of Arabians—Hezekiah secured the destruction of the Assyrians—Esther saved her people from ruin—the disciples obtained the descent of the Spirit—and Paul and Silas shook the prison at Philippi. Prayer is the power that moves the hand that moves the world; and, perhaps, never in the history of the church, has this great truth been more frequently or signally illustrated than within the past year in this land. Prayer secures the baptism of the Spirit. It is the key which opens the windows of heaven. It is weakness going to Infinite Power for aid. It is emptiness going to Infinite Fullness for supply.

Perhaps never in the history of the church, has there been such a call to prayer as now. “God is now on the giving hand,” said a venerable patriarch at one of the New York prayer-meetings, during the summer, “and now is the time to open our mouths wide.” The hopes of multitudes are excited, and they are expecting great things. China is opened, India is pacified, and these people, with trumpet tongue, are imploring us to send them the gospel. Paganism is tottering everywhere, the crescent is dying out in the sky, like the waning moon. Popery is dead at heart, however alive in its distant members. Sectarian jealousies are fast ebbing.

The many things in which Evangelical Christians agree are fast throwing into the shade the few things in which they differ. All are beginning to see that a simple resting on Christ by faith, is of infinitely more importance than is the sectarian path in which we walk, after having professed our faith. If the sheep are only inclosed in the fold of the "Good Shepherd," it is of little importance whether they have been led there through this or that door, or by the hand of prelate, presbyter, parent, or Sabbath-school teacher. The fires of fanaticism are also rapidly burning down, and all good men are beginning to see that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Everything seems to be tending to a greater union among good people, and especially to a greater union in prayer. Let that heroic confidence in God be ours which induced Luther to say, 'We can't spare you yet, Philip,' and what we have yet experienced will be but as 'the handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains,' to the harvest waving on the banks of the river of Egypt.

It is very obvious, from facts already stated, that PRAYER is rising, in the church, to the place it occupies in the Scriptures; and that it is as able to prevail with God now, as when offered by holy men of old. And, addressing ourselves to the high and lofty

One, we can say now, as when Moses, and Samuel, and David, and Daniel, and Paul wrestled in supplications, "Verily, thou art a God that hearest prayer." I have a few things to say, very briefly, on the subject of prayer.

1. The church is beginning better to understand the nature of prayer. It is not the posture. A man may kneel until he wears the stones, and bow at the name of Jesus, until his body becomes permanently curved; he may put on sackcloth and ashes, like Ahab, and yet never pray. Nor is it the mere recitation, in solemn tones, of a neatly prepared ritual. A person may hourly repeat the Lord's Prayer, and all the suffixes and affixes that may be appended to it, and never pray. Nor is it the mere act of uniting in family, social, and public worship; as God abhors the sacrifice where not the heart is found. All these may be as the mere husk and shell without the kernel, as an altar without a sacrifice, or as a sacrifice without the heavenly fire to consume it. "Prayer," says Hannah More, "is the application of want to Him only who can relieve it. It is the urgency of poverty; the prostration of humility; the fervency of penitence; the confidence of truth. It is not eloquence, but earnestness; not figures of speech, but the compunction of the soul. It is the 'Lord save, or we perish' of Peter; 'the cry of faith to

the ear of mercy.' ” And that the church is beginning better to understand the nature of prayer, is perfectly obvious from those meetings for prayer, where good men meet and mingle together, and with one heart and voice press their supplications before the throne of mercy. “Union for the sake of the union” has become a political watchword; union in prayer for the sake of a world lying in wickedness, should become the watchword of the entire church of God. When God's people are of one accord, and of one mind on this subject, we will have pentecostal seasons, such as Jerusalem never witnessed, and as apostles never enjoyed.

The church is beginning better to understand the connection between prayer and the blessings promised. We hear not now of objections made to pray drawn from the immutability of God—that he is of one mind, and that none can turn him. That God is unchangeable, is a great truth—is the foundation of all our confidence in the divine administration. But, if prayer is useless, because it cannot change the divine purpose, then are all means to obtain any end useless. All means, without the divine blessing, can no more change the divine purpose, than can prayer. Everything in the past, present, and future, is known to God. He is beyond the reach of all contingencies. He is without

variableness or shadow of turning. But his unchanging system is inclusive of the means, as of the ends—of the ploughing and sowing, as of the crop—of the rain and sunshine, as of the growth; of the asking, equally as of the giving. Were God changeable, then everything in the universe would be unsettled; but that he is immutable is the greatest possible inducement to pray, because he has immutably determined that every humble, faithful prayer shall be heard, accepted, and answered.

A warm, earnest, humble spirit of prayer, is a part of God's purpose to obtain the end prayed for. A spirit of prayer is a forerunner of coming mercies. When the prophet foretold the end of the captivity, he also predicted the prayers that would open the gates of Babylon. Jer. xxix. 12. The glory of the latter days was foretold; but then the Lord must be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them. Ezekiel xxxvi. 37. Divine grace kindles these ardent affections, when the blessings promised are upon the wing. Prayer is the chain which draws the soul to God, and that brings down promised mercies to us; or, like the hook which draws the boat to the shore, though the shore itself is immovable. Prayer is to the church what the breath of spring, and the sun, the rain, the dew of summer, are to the earth. Without them, the church and the earth

must remain in their wintry shrouds. And all the indications are, that the church is beginning to feel, to an unwonted degree, the connection between true prayer, and its true prosperity.

God is now, as in days of old, showing himself to be a God that hears prayer. The prayer of Abraham healed Abimelech; the prayers of Moses prevailed in Egypt and in the wilderness; the prayers of Daniel quelled the ferocity of the lions. "Prayer," says Jeremy Taylor, "can obtain everything: can open the windows of heaven and shut the gates of hell; can put a holy constraint upon God, and detain an angel till he leave a blessing; can open the treasures of rain and soften the iron ribs of rocks till they melt into a flowing river; can arrest the sun in his course, and send the winds upon our errands." Nor is there a church, nor a true Christian, who cannot from their own history record instances of the power of prayer. A spy upon Luther followed him to a hotel, and slept in a room adjacent to that of the Reformer. He told his employer next day that Luther prayed nearly all night, and that he could never conquer a man that prayed so earnestly. Latimer prayed earnestly for three things: that he might be enabled to maintain the truth until death; that the gospel might be given to all England; that God might spare Elizabeth until

the Reformation was established. And his prayers were granted.

A widowed mother who walked with God had an only son, the son of her vows and prayers. He entered college and graduated, moral and lovely, but without repentance. She ordered his furniture to a room in an adjacent theological seminary, saying that he was going to enter it at the opening of the next session. She was supposed by some to be unduly excited, and they sought to dissuade her from her purpose. But the furniture was sent as she desired, and her son went home. In a very short time a blessed revival commenced in the church of which she was a member. Her son was among the first converts; he became a communicant of it, and entered the seminary at the appointed time. That son yet lives to preach the gospel, a learned, honored, and very useful man. Here is a case like unto that of Hannah and Samuel, and there are multitudes of cases like it.

Late on a cold November night, I was retiring to rest. There was a knock at my door, and an aged member of the church, a simple, praying, warm-hearted man was introduced. After a brief silence he thus addressed me: "My dear pastor, I have come to tell you that God is about to revive his work among us." I asked him why he so felt? "I went

into the stable," said he, "to take care of my cattle two hours ago, and there the Lord has kept me in prayer until now. And I feel that we are going to be revived." There could be no doubt as to his sincerity. And that was the commencement of the first revival under my ministry.

A few years afterwards, and in another field of labor, an aged man, venerated for piety, came to my study. Though poor in this world, he was rich in faith. In prayer he seemed to converse with God. "I have called to say to you, my dear pastor," said he, "that the Lord is in the midst of us, and we shall all soon see the effect of his presence." I had observed a marked solemnity in the congregation, but nothing more. I asked the venerable man why he felt so? His reply was as follows: "Since twelve o'clock last night the Spirit of God has been so upon me that I have been unable to do anything but pray, and to rejoice in the prospect of a blessed refreshing from the presence of the Lord." And that was the commencement of the first revival in my present field of labor; a field which has been very often watered with the rain and dew of heaven, from the days of Whitefield until now. And many similar instances are treasured up in my memory as proofs of the glorious truth that God hears prayer now as in days of old.

And why should it not be so? Is not the same God in heaven? Prayer now is what it has ever been, and is as prevalent with God now as in the days of Abraham, and Joseph—as on the first descent of the Spirit. And were there another pen equally inspired and eloquent, to place in the history of the church another such chapter as is the eleventh of Hebrews, there could be collected an array of holy men and women from the church of our own day, who, in the strength and triumph of faith and prayer, fall but little below the noble company of worthies placed in such glorious array by the apostle of the Gentiles. And why should it not be so? There have been years of great excitement in the church, and of high controversy, and of bold enterprise; but it is very doubtful whether in any one year since its foundations were laid, God has more signally vouchsafed himself to be a prayer-hearing God than during the year whose suns are now waning in the sky. Men of the highest intellect, and open in their rebellion, who mocked at religion and laughed at every earthly check, as leviathan mocks at a straw, have been brought, with the simplicity of little children, and in answer to prayer, to rest upon the atonement of Jesus Christ for salvation.

Prayer is the power of the church; and could I speak as loud as the trumpet which is to wake the

dead, I would thus call upon the church in all its branches and in all lands—"Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem. Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, reformers, were mighty in prayer. It was to prayer that Henry IV. of France ascribed his crown, and Gustavus his victories. Milton thought he wrote best when he prayed most. The ministers who pray most are the most successful. The churches which are most prayerful are the most useful. The heathen are to be given to Christ for an inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession, in answer to prayer.