

THE WEIGHT OF PRAYER

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FOR WANT OF A NAIL, the shoe was lost; for loss of the shoe, the horse was lost; for loss of the horse, the rider was lost; for loss of the rider, the message was lost; for loss of the message, the battle was lost; for loss of the battle, the kingdom was lost. For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost.

A great philosopher who died a few years ago was fond of remarking how momentous events may hang on very inconsiderable actions. We have an urge to find a weighty cause to answer for a weighty effect, but history and experience and instinct do not always confirm it. In the anonymous wisdom of myth and legend the great good fortune usually hangs on a lucky trifle, and a cold draft on his feet can end an emperor's career. A chance word, a chance meeting changes a lifetime. When that apple was picked in the Garden of Eden, who could have foretold what followed?

It is the foolish man who despises little things while wisdom sees the oak in the acorn, and it is indeed a sign of genius, to recognize hidden talent. Opportunities are the seeds of fortune and the man is wise who has never missed one.

It is not easy to sift the varied importance in every passing event for the sake of finding the gold in the gravel, nor do we quickly condemn a man for letting here and there a nugget slip through his fingers. What, however, of the man who sees the gleam of gold and idly lets it lie? What of the man who knows that all things are bought with gold and lets the precious pieces dribble back into the gravel heap? Even if they are small, each one saved is pure gain; each one lost, pure loss.

Gold cannot compare with prayer. Gold does not really buy everything and it is particularly valueless in regard to things that are priceless, but there is nothing apparently that prayer cannot obtain. It would be more sensible to let nuggets of gold slip through the hand than to neglect an inspiration to pray. It would seem to be as easy to understand the fortune-hunter who neglects his gold as the Christian who neglects to pray.

Yet apparently the Christian is harder to understand. A

level-headed prospector never hunches over his campfire and ponders the question: Is it useful to collect gold? But a level-headed Christian did hunch over his desk and write in his book the question: Is it useful to pray? He must have been considering some difficult point in the proposition.

The Christian under observation was St. Thomas Aquinas, and being a good Christian, he found his answer readily, where St. Luke records that Jesus spoke a parable "that we ought always to pray and not to faint." That answer is straightforward enough. However, the philosopher in the Saint was curious to probe more deeply, for from his point of view, he had a problem. Why is it useful to pray? Does not God know our wants? Is it not more generous to give freely before being asked, and is God not most generous? Moreover, can anyone change God's mind, which is unchangeable from eternity? And if we cannot change it, why pray, for what He has planned will come to pass, prayer or no prayer? How then is it useful to pray?

There are some who deny the existence of God. "The fool says in his heart, there is no God": this was written centuries before Christ came. In Christ's time St. Paul wrote of those "who seeing the manifest things of God, denied Him Who made them." How they arrived at that state is not the problem here. They see creation around them, the universe ordered in purposiveness. They have probably at some time in their lives known that He exists, for the evidence is everywhere, but they have elected to deny, and now perhaps they are abandoned and cannot affirm. In any event, their conclusion about prayer is easy to deduce; they do not hold that prayer is useful.

There are others who admit the existence of God and still do not pray. They imagine a remote Being, a distant and impersonal intellect beyond the call of human affairs. The evidence of His existence is too conclusive to be denied, but faith in His Providence is too good to be true. He created the world and washed His hands of the whole business. He is not available for help. This is a cold philosophy and not a little proud, and it kills prayers like a quick poison.

This way of thinking feeds faith so lean a diet that it starves to death. On the opposite extreme stands another error which, far from making God remote, makes Him as understandable as our next-door neighbor. It draws God in the image and likeness of man. Conceding Him His almighty power, it tries to bend and sway His will to tap this power for, as it were, private consump-

tion. God must be cajoled into helping us and we must please and persuade Him willy-nilly. Certainly He plans the course of events, but if the course is not in our favor, we must get Him to change His plan. When He is trying to decide what to do, a few petitions might swing the balance. This superstition (that is its category) misses the fact that God's will is from all eternity absolutely unchangeable.

Wherefore St. Thomas sought to understand the usefulness of prayer, scarcely regarding on the one hand the error that does not see Divine Providence at all but also rejecting the notion that makes God subject to persuasion or demand.

To understand prayer it is necessary to consider the total sweep of Providence. God not only brings to pass every event that does occur and all the elements in the event—persons, things, times, places—but He also causes all the remote and distant past events that came before and led up to this event, and He caused them to occur in the order they did occur. In the almost infinitely complex interworking of cause and effect, He plans and brings to pass each move. Ultimately all things work to the glory of His Name, in which some things are immediate causes, others remote.

Among the multitude of moves are the multitude of human acts, the free, deliberate actions of men and women for a fore-known purpose. These acts, in God's plan, have certain effects, and God does not will those effects except through those acts. He might have, but He did not. He might have created churches ready built, but He has never done so; He has brought them to be through the planning and labor of man. He might have raised harvests by an act of creation, as He multiplied loaves, but He in fact willed them through plowing, sowing, and reaping. He might have framed national constitutions in thunder and lightning, as He gave the Law on Sinai, but in fact He willed them through the debate and experiment of politicians.

Now the human agents did not change God's mind in regard to churches, harvests and constitutions, as though, because men worked so well, God, Who was not planning to have them, suddenly decided to reward the efforts. The contrary is true: by the very acts, as willed by God, man produced the effects, as willed by God.

This leads directly into the point of prayer. For many events to come to pass, God has placed prayer in the order of preparation. If the church cannot be built without foundations,

neither can it be built without prayer. He need not have worked this way, but in fact He has and still does. He gives many goods without prayer but many others He will not give until men pray.

This is then the primary purpose and the usefulness of prayer. By our prayer we merit to receive what God before the beginning of the world planned to give. Prayer completes the list of requirements that must be fulfilled. Where God has made prayer an essential condition, prayer must be offered, or the good result cannot follow.

If we pray to God for strength and rise strengthened, He gave us the strength. If we pray: "God, if Thou wilt, grant me strength," and a voice replies from heaven, "I will. Be strengthened," who would doubt the power of prayer? Yet both that prayer and that miraculous answer would have been planned from eternity and without the prayer the miracle would not have happened. When Peter cried out of the waters "Lord, save me, I perish," and he was saved, he did not doubt the power of his prayer although his saving had been foreseen from before the beginning of the world.

This is the reasoning of St. Thomas on the value of prayers, that is, on their primary usefulness. But, he adds, the value of prayer is more than the good things it obtains from God. It not only obtains good things for men, but it also makes men good. While we do not need to tell God of our wants, since He knows them already, we do need to remind ourselves that He is the source of all good. It is not a small matter that we learn to trust Him. Again, prayer is the root of the great virtue of gratitude. Not the least of the goods that a good prayer produces is to make men prayerful.

Cardinal Cajetan, commenting on the words of St. Thomas, draws out a sharp moral. "Now consider," he says, "and see how much stupidity there is in some Christian actions. In every other work that they plan, they use every means supplied by art and nature to obtain the effect they hope for; otherwise they realize that their hope is empty. But for the fruits to be obtained only by prayer, they sleep away, as though prayers were not causes of good things, or only very distant causes. So it happens that, fast asleep, they harvest no fruit."