abyss[1] (cf. Jon. ii. 3, 4), it was probably understood to mean "the depth which lets no man return" (בְּלִי יַעֲלֶה), as Baethgen explains in his note on Ps. xviii. 5.[2] Cf. the Babylonian title of the under-world, *irçit lâ târat*, "the land whence there is no return." How early the idea of the great abyss existed, is a question which it would take too long to discuss here.

T. K. CHEYNE.

OUR LORD'S IDEAL OF PRAYER.

IN His discourse on the Mount, after warning against the prayer that is wrong in motive, Jesus goes on to inhibit the prayer that is mistaken in method. Prayer may sometimes bring down but a stinted blessing, or, indeed, be entirely barren, because it is defective in aim, temper, knowledge. The prayer of the secret chamber must be informed by right views of God and of the freeness of His grace, unless it is to be as disappointing as the ostentatious prayer of the synagogue or of the street corner. The spirit of pietistic pride did not flaunt itself before men only, but courted God's favour by a redundant religiousness. Men's prayers, no less than their characters, need the pruning knife, and morbid excesses must be thinned away if there is to be a due degree of fragrant and satisfying fruitfulness. "Use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do."

Our Lord's familiarity with the genius of heathen worship suggests questions which admit only of conjectural answers. Did He draw His information from the Old Testament Scriptures, and have we here a reminiscence of the frantic cry on Carmel, "O Baal, hear us, O Baal, hear us"?

[1] Since the abyss is the proper abode of Satan, he may well be designated Belial (2 Cor. vi. 15, Βελιαρ).

[2] Similarly Halévy. The true derivation may be irrecoverable.

Did the sojourn of Joseph and Mary in Egypt bring them into contact with Egyptian idolatries or with the idolatries of the colonists settled there, and were stories of these days sometimes told in the family circle at Nazareth? Had glimpses of Phœnician temples caught the eye of His eager boyhood as He wandered on the Galilean highlands and strained His vision to north and north-west, and had He asked about the services celebrated there? Had Greek and Roman temples on the western horizon, backed by the thread of silver sea, awakened a pitiful interest in His young heart, and had the characteristic rites observed there been described to Him? To what extent had our Lord been a student of comparative religion? He had never entered as a curious visitor even a heathen temple, for He was restrained by the strictness of those Jewish customs to which He was always loyal when no principle was sacrificed. After taking up His abode in Capernaum, he must many a time have looked with pain and humiliation to the roof of a heathen temple which rose high in one of the towns immediately across the lake. From the mixed populations of Galilee He may have heard something of the rites practised there, and of the terms in which the pity of these unheeding images was invoked. At any rate, He had correctly interpreted not only the characteristic note of the worship offered in temples upon which He sometimes looked from afar, but one of the most conspicuous traits of heathen worship through the length and breadth of the known and unknown world. In every Pagan religion the repetition of some prescribed form of invocation has been made the rigid condition of power and spiritual efficacy.

There are some things in the devotional life which the great Teacher could not intend to discourage in these words. The same elementary needs recur day by day, and He Himself taught us to pray for the providential gifts which meet them. Prayer offered under a new sense of

need, although it may sound like an echo of the prayer of yesterday, cannot possibly come under the condemnation of Christ's words. In many cases the repeated use of the same phrases may be an intellectual necessity, and the kind friend and comrade of all classes was incapable of reproaching any man because of the poverty of his vocabulary. And we are graciously permitted to repeat those prayers to which no obvious response has come in the way of guidance, illumination, fulfilment. It is only by reverentially reiterated supplication that we can be brought to know God's will and won into patient accord with its behests. Paul prayed thrice for the removal of the thorn in the flesh. On the night of His passion, our Lord prayed thrice, using substantially the same words. The prophet on the mountain in Galilee is not discrediting the pale, overwrought suppliant under the gloomy olives of Gethsemane. Not infrequently we may have to repeat our prayers, so that through successive stages of spiritual struggle we may attain the intense earnestness and the prevailing faith which are the conditions of victory. In all such cases, however, the struggle is with our own torpor, and selfishness, and unbelief, and with the shadows they project upon our conception of God, rather than with God Himself. Groans, and struggles, and oft-urged cries are not blamed in our Master's words, and yet it is well to remember that these do not enter into the deepest essence of prevailing prayer. Victory is attained by the climactic moment of faith reached through the steps of repeated and persistent wrestling.

It is not sufficient to say that it is heathenish repetition our Lord condemned, or the repetition of those merit-making forms of prayer which had such vogue amongst the contemporary Pharisees. Such practices could only be denounced because of some false principle they embodied.

Why do men repeat themselves in their converse with each other? What thoughts are in the mind of the man

who falls into this irritating infirmity in common life? A speaker repeats himself because he assumes his hearers are ignorant and inappreciative, or because of the undue sense he has of his own importance, or because of morbid timidity, which, after all, has the closest possible relation to vanity and personal pride. The nervous stutterer sometimes has to thank his own unhealthy and inordinate self-consciousness for the unhappy affliction to which he has become subject. These facts define the lines upon which the interpretation of Christ's words must proceed.

Repetition conveys an insinuation of ignorance or in appreciation against the man who is compelled to listen to it. The laboured tautologies and much speaking of heathen worship are suggested by the character of the gods addressed. There are the voluptuous and self-occupied gods who are absorbed in the excitements of hunting, and harping, and love-making, and need to be recalled to the needs of their suppliants by piteous and unceasing cries. And there are the impassive gods of the higher Pagan philosophies, the gods whose existence is like a vague opium dream—sparks of half-faded consciousness needing to be fanned into fervent and sympathetic sensibility by the worship of unceasing clamour. And there are also gods personifying wrath, malevolence, destruction, gods hard to appease, and needing to be softened, conciliated, won by perpetual rounds of service. In the worship of such beings, it is inevitable that repetition should have a significant place. Ignorant and unheeding gods must be instructed, apathetic gods must be stimulated, merit must be patiently built up before implacable, despotic, and extortionate gods.

Jesus felt that worship with this heathenish taint in its methods was an insult to the character of His Divine Father. It implied that the Infinite and Eternal love was slow to apprehend, unwilling to sympathise, unready to help. The prayer of vain repetition covertly accused the

prayer-hearing God of imperfect knowledge, imperfect sympathy, imperfect grace.

Closely connected with this misconception of God which gave rise to the prayer of vain repetition, there is the pride of the worshipper in the intrinsic worth of his own prayers. The man who perpetually repeats himself has an exaggerated sense of the value of his own utterances. And the redundancies of a self-righteous worship betray a desire to exalt self and a sense of the worshipper's own competence in the long run to conciliate God. In the prayer of vain repetition there was no room for grace, sacrificial vicariousness, mediation, the Father's redeeming love in the Son. It assumed that the worshipper, by the patient and punctilious observance of multifarious forms, could put value and saving efficacy into his own service.

Empty reiterations not only ignore the doctrine of grace, but are inconsistent with the serenity of faith. The man who has said something, and tries to say it over again, does so because he imagines at the first attempt he has not said it effectually and well. And there is something not unlike that in heathen worship and in that semi-heathen mood of soul into which even Christian worshippers are prone to fall. Heathen prayer, with its never-ceasing repetitions, is what the etymology of the word our Lord used implies—a painful and age-long stammer which never succeeds in saying what it desires to say and is entirely contenting to the soul. The faith that perfectly pleases God soars into the high assurance that we are heard and accepted, and then there is no need to repeat the prayer. Much speaking is the sign that the highest ranges of confidence have not been reached. Our Lord seems to say, If you can brace yourself to the great spiritual achievement, ask once, and then fix the hope on an all-faithful Father, and steadfastly watch till the answer comes.

The Lord's prayer is almost immediately given as a con-

crete illustration of this perfect ideal. In those few quiet sentences, colossal in their strength and child-like in their simplicity, there is no sign of fevered struggle, no trace of noisy reiteration, no word caught up and echoed again and yet again, as though it had not quite done its work. We start our children with that prayer, and rightly so, but it needs a rare maturity of faith if it is to be used in complete sincerity and appreciation. Every succeeding sentence is like a sceptre of superhuman conquest wielded over some new domain of life. To us it seems that we must needs traverse much ground and review many truths before we can come into complete and believing communion with God. But when prevalency is at last reached, it is reached by the gracious inspiration of a moment, and much speaking embarrassed rather than invigorated the decisive act of faith.

Our Lord's short prayers were the products of His own vivid and unbroken fellowship with the Father. His prayer, as He stood before the rock sepulchre of Lazarus, is the best comment we can have upon His own ideal as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always." Prayer never reached a sublimer altitude than that, and to such an assured habit of soul repetition would have been a blemish and a backsliding.

Ideal prayer is suggested by the announcement of a fact to which it must correspond rather than directly described. "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him." There is a link of inviolable sacredness between the lowly suppliant and the loftiest heaven. He is no spiritual claimant of uncertain antecedents whose rights must be urged through weeks of argument and persuasion. And the Fatherhood to be invoked is a Fatherhood of adequate knowledge and sympathy. The Divine pity anticipates the first cry for help. Did the primitive

transgressor request the coming of a promised seed to bruise the serpent's head, or were the accents of Love's evangel heard before a single prayer for mercy had rent the air? Where is the supplication, for spiritual gifts at least, which outruns God's promise? The Divine Father abounds in knowledge, wisdom, sympathy, eager and timely inclination to help and to save. An apprehension of these facts is the staple of ideal prayer.

The great practical end to which Jesus is seeking to lead his disciples by this protest against much speaking is an active and a present faith. He seeks to take them away from the superfluities of prayer, lest they should be tempted to trust therein. Acts of piety must not be so magnified as to be made substitutes for God's all-sufficient grace. The Master is seeking to constrain His disciples to a conclusion of immediate and whole-hearted trust. If prayer gains no effectuality through its cumulative reiterations, it must prevail through the intenseness of its present faith, and the sublime fact of God's wise and pitiful Fatherhood, which inspires faith, is always with us and in us, if we will but receive it. In the kingdom of grace the possibilities of to-morrow are the equal possibilities of to-day. Much speaking will not create a better God than He who reigns for our help and salvation in the passing hour. Prayers are heard in virtue of something we are led to recognise in God, and they may reach the climax of their prevalency even now.

It is said to be the property of a crystal to assume precisely the same form into however many fragments it may be broken up. The infinitesimal particle, for the study of which a magnifying glass must be used, is a precise facsimile of the parent crystal from which it came. If we could take God's eternity and break it up into æons, if we could take the æons and break them up into ages, and the ages into centuries, and the centuries into years, and the

years into days, and the days into hours, and the hours into moments, we should find each separate moment of God's life to be just as resplendent with benignity, compassion, redeeming grace and helpfulness, as His sublime eternity itself. God's moment is the perfect miniature of His everlasting days.

If that be so, whatever gift prayer can win from God's free mercy it can win at once. It is true, there may be difficulties in ourselves needing time to subdue, but not in God. Looked at from the Divine view-point, faith may reach its meridian now. Before the beat of the next moment has come, it may attain its culminating victory. Our Lord's teaching on prayer is a veiled declaration of the doctrine of present forgiveness, present renewal, present sanctity, present heaven.

It had been said God would answer His people while they yet called, and hear while they were yet speaking. The prayer of vain repetition emptied that evangelical promise of its meaning, and practically made God forswear Himself. It was in the order of God's grace that blessing should come before the hour of prayer had struck. But the Pharisee put the finger on the dial backwards, saying that the blessing would come at a fixed point after supplication, with due thanksgiving, had been presented and repeated a prearranged number of times. This idea of laboured and merit-making reiteration pushed the moment of blessing into a dim and uncertain future. A systematically measured repetition and much speaking is the devil's doctrine of procrastination engrossed on vellum, bravely illuminated, and smuggled into the ark which is before the mercy-seat.

But does not the fact that the Divine Father knoweth what things we have need of before we ask Him prove too much? Does it not imply that prayer is needless, and tend to an ignoble and stupefying quietism? The temptation to restrain prayer because God anticipates our needs can only

come to one who thinks of God in much the same light as the pupils in a famous training school of pickpockets thought of the dummy suspended from the ceiling, out of whose pockets they were to extract as many things as possible whilst minimising to the finest degree their contact with the figure itself. If our object is to possess ourselves of God's gifts, and to have as little as possible to do with God Himself, our Lord's words may perhaps tempt us into languor and spiritual supineness. But prayer is something more than the process by which we make our requests known unto God and God sends doles down to us. The truth that God knows our need before we ask Him, and is prepared to meet it, is announced for the express purpose of quickening the activity of human faith, and not to stultify and displace it. Indeed, by the want of faith we forego our claim for the time being upon the noblest bounties of God's Fatherhood. When our sense of need is penetrated by a sense of God's vivid, practical sympathy with it, perfect prayer has been achieved. True prayer is the vision of an open heaven from which stream down supplies that never fail, rest from every care, help for every frailty, cleansing baptism for every spot, munificent satisfaction for every need.

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