

ABSENCE OF GOD IN PRAYER.

"O that I knew where I might find him!"—Job. xxiii. 3.

"If God had not said, 'Blessed are those that hunger,' I know not what could keep weak Christians from sinking in despair. Many times, all I can do is to complain that I want him, and wish to recover him."

Bishop Hall, in uttering this lament two centuries and a half ago, only echoed the wail which had come down, through living hearts, from the patriarch, whose story is the oldest known literature in any language. A consciousness of the *absence of God* is one of the standard incidents of religious life. Even when the forms of devotion are observed conscientiously, the sense of the presence of God, as an invisible friend, whose society is a joy, is by no means unintermittent.

The truth of this will not be questioned by one who is familiar with those phases of religious experience which are so often the burden of Christian confession. In no single feature of "inner life," probably, is the experience of many minds less satisfactory to them than in this. They seem to themselves, in prayer, to have little, if any, effluent emotion. They can speak of little in their devotional life that seems to them *like life*; of little that appears like the communion of a living soul with a living God. Are there not many "closet hours," in which the chief feeling of the worshipper is an oppressed consciousness of the absence of reality from his own exercises? He has no words which are, as George Herbert says, "heart deep."—He not only experiences no ecstacy, but no joy, no peace, no repose. He has no sense of being at home with God. The stillness of the hour is the stillness of a dead calm at sea. The heart rocks monotonously on the surface of the great thoughts of God, of Christ, of eternity, of heaven,—

"As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean."

Such experiences in prayer are often startling in the contrast with those of certain Christians, whose communion with God, as the hints of it are recorded in their biographies, seems to realize, in actual being, the spiritual conception of a life which is hid with Christ in God.

We read of Payson, that his mind, at times almost lost its sense of the external world, in the mellow thoughts of God's glory which rolled like a sea of light around him, at the throne of grace.

We read of Cowper, that in one of the few lucid hours of his religious life, such was the experience of God's presence which he enjoyed in prayer, that, as he tells us, he thought he should have died with joy, if special strength had not been imparted to him to bear the disclosure.

We read of one of the Tennants, that on one occasion, when he was engaged in secret devotion, so overpowering was the revelation of God which opened upon his soul, and with augmenting intensity of fulfillment as he prayed, that at length he

recoiled from the intolerable joy as from a pain, and besought God to withhold from him further manifestations of his glory. He said, "Shall thy servant see thee and live?"

We read of the "sweet hours" which Edwards enjoyed "on the banks of Hudson's River, in sweet converse with God;" and hear his own description of the inward sense of Christ which at times came into his heart, and which he "knows not how to express otherwise than by a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world; and sometimes a kind of vision . . . of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and rapt and swallowed up in God."

We read of such instances of the fruits of prayer, in the blessedness of the suppliant, and are not reminded by them of the transfiguration of our Lord, of whom we read, "As he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became white and glistening?" Who of us is not oppressed by the contrast between such an experience and his own? Does not the cry of the patriarch come unbidden to our lips, "O that I knew where I might find him?"

Much of even the ordinary language of Christians, respecting the joy of communion with God,—language which is stereotyped in our dialect of prayer—many cannot honestly apply to the history of their own minds. A calm, fearless self-examination finds no counterpart to it in anything they have ever known. In the view of an honest conscience, it is not the vernacular speech of their experience. As compared with the joy which such language indicates, prayer is, in all that they know of it, a dull duty. Perhaps the characteristic of the feelings of many about it is expressed in the single fact, that it is to them a duty as distinct from a privilege. It is a duty which they cannot deny, is often uninviting, even irksome.

If some of us should attempt to define the advantage we derive from a performance of the duty, we might be surprised, perhaps shocked, as one after another of the folds of a deceived heart should be taken off, at the discovery of the littleness of the residuum, in an honest judgment of ourselves. Why did we pray this morning? Do we often derive *any* other profit from prayer, than that of satisfying convictions of conscience, of which we could not rid ourselves if we wished to do so, and which will not permit us to be at ease with ourselves, if all forms of prayer are abandoned? Perhaps even so slight a thing as the pain of resistance to the momentum of a habit will be found to be the most distinct reason we can honestly give for having prayed yesterday or today.

There may be periods, also, when the experiences of the closet enable some of us to understand that manical cry of Cowper, when his friends requested him to prepare some hymns for the Olney Collection:—

"How can you ask of me such a service! I seem to myself to be banished to a remoteness from God's presence, in comparison with which the distance from east to west is vicinity, is cohesion."

If such language is too strong to be truthful to the common experience of the class of professing Christians to which those whom it represents belong, many will still discern in it, as an expression of joylessness in prayer, a sufficient approximation to their own experience, to awaken interest in some thoughts upon the CAUSES OF A WANT OF ENJOYMENT IN PRAYER.

The evil of such an experience in prayer is too obvious to need illustration. If any light can be thrown upon the causes of it, there is no man living, whatever may be his religious state, who has not an interest in making it the theme of inquiry.—"Never any more wonder," says an old writer, "that men pray so seldom. For there are very few that feel the *relish*, and are enriched with the *deliciousness*, and refreshed with the *comforts*, acquainted with the *secrets*, of a holy prayer." Yet, who is it that has said, "I will make them joyful in my house of prayer?"—*Still Hour*.

PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED.

French Christ crucified! Turn not aside from this, under the temptation of meeting some question of the day, or some bearing of the public mind. There is much mystic verbiage, which some esteem to be of transcendental depth. There is much pantheism which some regard as *original and sublime*. Your versatility will often be urged to follow after these conceits. You will be told of their amazing influence. They really are nothing. They are the bubbles of the hour. They cannot boast even a novelty. I conjure you, care little for them. Yours is not a discretionary theme. It is unchanging. Keep to it. Abide by it. It is one, but it is an infinite one! It is the word of Christ, divinely true! Its rigidity can never hamper your thought. Its reiteration can never weary your inquiry. At no point can it restrict you. It is a large place. It is a boundless range. It is a mine of wealth. It is a firmament of power. Whither would ye go from it? It is the unwinding of all the great principles. It is the expansion of all glorious thoughts. It is the capacity of all blessed emotions.

O Calvary, we turn to thee! Our nature, a wreck, a chaos, only canst thou adjust! We have an aching void which thou canst only fill! We have pantings and longings which only thou canst satisfy! Be thou the strength and the charm of our inward life! Be thou the earnestness of our deepest interest! Be thou inspiration, impulsion, divinity, and all! Our tears never relieved us until thou taughtest us to weep! Our smiles only mocked us until thou badeest us rejoice! We knew no way of peace until we found our way to thee! Hope was banished from us until its dove flew downwards from thee upon our heart! All was dormant until thou didst stir; all was dull until thou didst excite us! Our eyes are still lifted to thee as to the hill from which cometh our help! Our feet shall stand upon thee, O high mountain! and thou shalt make them beautiful while we publish the glad tidings of "Christ crucified."—*Rev. W. R. Hamilton, D.D.*