

LET US PRAY

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by

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I

PRAYER, DISCOVERY OF POWER

Chapter 1

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO I BEGAN TO pray in earnest. The results of that fifteen-year following of the most difficult of all human undertakings, the path of prayer, I am trying to set down here. But even before I begin I must state as forcibly as I know how that this is only a personal record. Any individual's account of spiritual adventure possesses for other people both a great peril and a great incentive. Because I am confining myself to my own experience, the reader may miss all the measureless uplift that might come if I were able to gather and condense for him the experience of others, and could thus search out and describe the prayer methods and the prayer achievements of the high and holy men and women who down through the

ages have learned how to talk to God. But any such garnering of spiritual treasure would mean an effort too vast and too difficult for the years left me of earth-sojourn. So all I shall attempt is to tell something of my own personal knowledge of prayer, in the hope that others, each one striving, solitary, toward intimacy with God, may here find by witnessing another's climb, fresh and individual stimulus.

Discovery—I wish that all of us who pray might make discovery the key-word of that spiritual advance we are all so hungry to attain. Perhaps the sole purpose of existence for each one of us is to discover God. Possibly we have each one of us no other reason for being placed upon this earth than to ascertain God's will for his universe, no better excuse for being than to try to guess, and guessing try to follow, God's special design for creating into strength each puny personality, and no finer purpose for our being thus created than to discover God's hidden plan for righting this disordered world we are commissioned to rebuild. If we stop and soberly gaze into the

strange blackness that actually surrounds each bewildered soul among us, we must surely admit that our richest significance, our noblest excuse for existence, is to discover God shaping out of mystery. Prayer is that path into engulfing darkness which reveals God, waiting.

All discovery that is worth attempting has to be individual and it has to be solitary. The discovery of God, like the investigations of physics, chemistry, geography, can never become a mass movement. On the other hand, all exploration, however lonely, is undertaken in order that its findings may be ultimately given to others. Nobody ever sets forth, all alone, to discover anything, without the burning desire to share whatever he may find. Can we think of any explorers of any place or of any substance or of any hidden facts, who have wished to keep their secrets to themselves? Consider Livingstone journeying to Africa, the Curies investigating radium, Jesus trying to verify a new relationship of man to God—was not the urge to find equalled only by the urge to give to others

what might be found? If our motive in penetrating the secret path of prayer be primarily to obtain blessing for our selves, we shall not find a Father waiting. All discoverers of prayer know that prayer has to be first solitary, only in order that it may afterwards become profoundly social.

Now in all actual physical areas, investigation may be doomed to an ultimate finality, for the simple reason that there may be nothing at last left to investigate. It has not yet happened, but it is at least conceivable that we may some day know the stars exhaustively, or may penetrate to the uttermost all earth's jungles, or all earth's arctic ice, or it may in some far future come about that man shall ascertain all the secrets of the mysterious cells of which his body is composed. It is even faintly possible that we may in some future still infinitely remote have laid bare all the hidden properties of our finite flesh and all the riddles of that material universe we briefly inhabit. But there can never be any limit set to our exploration of the God outside of us, nor of that God He set burning inside of us.

Both go crying for each other in a yearning that is infinite, so that the area for personal discovery of God's soul and of man's soul remains for each individual also infinite. Surely there is an all-empowering incentive for even the feeblest personality in a search that is so clearly limitless.

Discovery is the keynote word for all prayer because there is no foretelling what treasure the humblest seeker after God may find if he shall set forth audaciously alone. Power from the Unknown has failed the world just in proportion as people have failed to realize the importance of personal prayer,—your morning adoration and mine, your evening psalm and mine, your noonday supplication and mine. For some reason that we are as yet too rudimentary to fathom, God has chosen to work his omnipotent will only through our cooperation. Only as we go out alone to discover, can we ascertain God's desires and bring back our new-found treasure to enrich our church-life, and to refresh the fainting aspiration of today's bewildered world. The greatness of the whole depends on the

single greatness of each part; therefore, each Christian owes to his church and to his nation that vision of God which he has gained within the secret chamber of his own soul. The prayers of the church must be undergirded by the private prayers of each humblest member, or it becomes deprived of its stoutest foundation. I repeat that it is the first law of all progress that each discoverer go forth alone, and that it is the second law that he give his discoveries to others. Each of us climbs his own prayer-path so that each may be enabled to point it out to others, saying, "That is the way I found to God."

But all access to God is beset by obstacles the nature of which we need to recognize far more clearly. Before taking one step of the upward climb we must perceive the crucial fact that all our vision of God is blurred more by familiarity than by strangeness. Certain expressions to describe spiritual experience have been repeated until they have become almost meaningless. The words of our worship are frozen with long usage. Living terms of liturgy have been

uttered so often that they fail to quicken. It is therefore the first duty of the discoverer of God to vivify for himself the words that throughout the ages have been employed to point the upward way. Since God is new for everyone who seeks Him alone, it is possible for each one of us to revitalize for himself time-worn phrases. A homely method is to repeat the articles of the creed, one by one, and quietly to consider how we would explain each to some converted savage to whom the Deliverer Christ was as fresh a fact as would be a new sun in the sky. Another practice helpful in penetrating the too familiar, is to say over slowly the supplications of the Lord's Prayer, and try to imagine what each phrase signified for Jesus himself, and what he hoped each phrase might come to signify for his disciples, who stood listening, hungry to learn what those selected petitions had contributed to the incredible serenity daily witnessed in their Master's prayer life. The man or woman who has resolved to discover God may also try not only to revitalize for himself old terms, but to formu-

late new ones to express the ever-climbing aspiration of the human soul. For example, what specific intercessions might we utter against the evils of today expressed in the terms of today? Let us quicken our vision of God by imagining it put into words perfectly intelligible to the man or woman hurrying past us in the street. Christ will never remain with you or me in the closet, even though we must retire to that closet to find him. Let us bring him back with us to the marketplace and practice thinking about him in sentences that might be listened to on any street corner,—even as was his own message so long ago.

No one shall ever reach the end in his discovery of God. In any age a Pharisee can be defined as one who believes man's search for God can be completed,—has in fact already been completed—and encased in an ark for man's safeguarding. The burning incentive of the prayer life is that its revelations are forever fresh, making it hard sometimes, as for me now, to pause long enough to describe a path incessantly hastening to new heights, day by day, hour by

hour. Yet in one respect the disclosures of prayer are forever the same. One always discovers power, power greater and more convincing all the time. God is there, reaching toward us out of the dark, waiting only for each of us to find Him in order that He may put into our outstretched faith, this very day, that power we may each contribute even now toward remaking earth for our fellow man.

As I look back upon a fifteen-year prayer-progress it is at first difficult to recall the outworn practices I abandoned in order to ascertain in deeper seriousness the farther reaches of prayer. I experienced no sudden conversion, but I found myself steadily becoming more and more conscious of the triteness and inadequacy of my prayer experience. As I studied the four biographies of Jesus, I was more and more astonished as I witnessed his bold penetration into the presence of God, and observed the practical results in his teaching and his healing that were obviously due to his constant and resolute intercourse with his Father. Jesus, I could not help seeing, employed methods

of prayer very different from the dulled half-hearted manner of my own approach. Like all exploration of spiritual areas and all testing of spiritual faculties, the prayer-life of Jesus provides exhaustless study. From the homely and universal appeal of the Lord's Prayer all the way to the fathomless secrets of his final intercession, the prayer-life of Jesus blazes with its indication of the unused power within us and of the unused power outside of us.

Surely Jesus would never have been satisfied with a few sleepy petitions, mumbled on going to bed, as I had been satisfied. Never would Jesus have been content with these drowsy suggestions to God that I was permitting myself to call prayer. The first thing I endeavored to abandon, therefore, was the fatal complacency with which I was offering to God's attention only the sordid remnants of my mentality fatigued by all the fussy occupations of my day. Jesus, I found, as I watched him, gave to his prayers his finest faculties and his freshest vitality.

Next I began to see how many of my

petitions had degenerated into being time-worn and many-mouthed. Jesus, I observed, while he was profoundly loyal to shared ritual, uttering with others the age-old ineffable prayers of his people, lifting praise to God in psalms rich with a thousand years of aspiration, yet never let public prayer take the place of private prayer. Jehovah of the Jews was first for him his near and instant Father. Jesus won for himself a deeper benediction from shared ritual because he had begun his day in solitude somewhere within his soul, which was his Father's house. Therefore I resolved never to let church instruction or any form of public worship become for me a substitute for my own daily and secret coming to my Father-God in prayer.

The next thing I tried to relinquish as I set forth upon a braver, holier way of praying, was the curious compromise I was permitting myself. Since I had not yet prayed with really blazing conviction I had become infected by that popular distrust which keeps whispering, "A good God—would do good without being asked, so