

The Gospel Witness

PUBLISHED WEEKLY

IN THE INTEREST OF JARVIS STREET BAPTIST
CHURCH, TORONTO, AND OF EVANGELICAL TRUTH.

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PASTOR AND EDITOR

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ."—Romans 1:16.

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Vol. I.

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The Jarvis Street Pulpit

THE ABUSE OF PRAYER.

A Sermon by the Pastor.

Preached in Jarvis St. Church, Toronto, Sunday Morning, October 15, 1922.
(Stenographically reported).

"And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul."—Psalm 106:15.

IT is profoundly true that salvation is wholly of grace. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, while grace assumes full responsibility for the salvation of the soul committed to its care, it puts upon the individual believer a greater responsibility than ever. If there were an infinitesimal element of works, of human merit, conditioning salvation, it might afford to the spiritually bankrupt soul a semblance of an excuse for continuing in an unsaved state; but inasmuch as everything requisite to salvation is divinely provided, it leaves the rejector of Christ, and of His grace, absolutely defenceless, "condemned already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God." And that principle persists through all the stages of the Christian life; and is an element entering into our experience of divine grace everywhere and at all times. The grace that exalts us to high and holy privileges, imposes upon us responsibilities which are incalculably great.

Among the privileges of the Christian life is the privilege of prayer—the privilege of making our requests known unto God; and that privilege carries with it responsibilities that may well make us afraid. "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest—there is the privilege—any of you should seem to come short of it."

Now the text, which I have read to you this morning, relates to a chapter of history which records the folly of certain people who did not fully appreciate the principle I have suggested to you—that there is always involved heavy responsibilities where privileges are granted. I think I might entitle my sermon this morning, "The abuse of the privilege of prayer." It is possible to abuse the privilege of prayer; it is possible to ask for wrong things; to pray lightly, and carelessly, without due regard to the consequences which must follow if God hears our prayer.

"He gave them their request." He let them have exactly what they asked for. He heard their prayers, He allowed them to have their own way, "but sent leanness into their souls." And that is still true—that God may hear our prayer, and send leanness into our soul! When God's children ask for bread, He never gives them a stone; when they ask for a fish, He never gives them a serpent. But if they persist in asking for a stone, He will sometimes let them have it to break their teeth on; and if in desperate rebellion they petulantly cry for a scorpion, He lets them have a scorpion to play with, that He may teach them the folly of self will.

Let us then look into this ancient story, for we have been asking God to teach us how to pray. We have been seeking to exercise ourselves in this ministry of prayer; and I want this morning to remind you that it is the most solemn undertaking in which a Christian can engage. It is a privilege which admits us to the possibility of possessing great riches; but let us see that we use the privilege aright.

I. First of all, then, consider, **How this request, to which the Lord refers, was preferred.** How was the prayer offered? I suppose there are few families in which the children have not at some time or another complained of the food spread upon the table. Hungry as they may be, appetizing as the meals generally are, in most families there is a boy or a girl who is not easily pleased, and who is disposed to complain when the family is assembled about the table—"And why have we got this for dinner to-day?" Well, the Lord has a family of grumbling children. Many of them have a very bad habit of finding fault with the food; and it is to that habit of murmuring the text before us this morning refers.

I would remind you at the outset that these people **did not formally pray at all.** They did not bow their knees and formally and deliberately complain into the ear of God that they did not like this light bread; that their soul loathed the manna from the skies. They did not know they were praying to God. They grumbled to Moses: they said to their human leader, "Give us flesh, that we may eat." But we read that the Lord heard their complaint. They talked into the ear of Moses; but long before the world knew anything of radio, the desire of their hearts went heavenward, and God heard their complaint; and He interpreted it as a real prayer—as the desire of the life.

Thus we may pray in a very orthodox fashion; the words we utter may be an expression of desire which is quite in agreement with the principle of revealed truth: or, we may hear others pray in prayer-meetings; and we may say we greatly enjoyed their prayer—we were able to breathe a fervent Amen to the petition; and yet that may not be the man's real prayer at all,—neither his nor ours. It may be that the prayer he offers when on his feet is far more effectual than the prayer he utters when on his knees. It is the prayer that is an expression of the whole man that God hears; and it may be that we are praying, some of us, in some other way than by the lip. It may be that, unconsciously to ourselves, our whole life is just a cry to God for the things that are not promised us in this Book. It is a terrible responsibility which rests upon us when we come to realize that every expression of life is taken cognizance of by God; and that He may answer the prayer of the life, instead of the prayer of the lip.

These people, I say, whose request with such terrible consequences to themselves was granted, did not formally pray for the things that were given them. Their prayer, or the mood which God recognized as prayer, **was inspired by the lusting of the mixt multitude that was among them.** Did you notice that in our reading this morning, when Israel went up out of Egypt, there went up with them "a mixt multitude"—people who were not Hebrews—people

who were not of Israel, and yet associated with them? And when they found themselves in straightened circumstances, they forthwith began to complain, and to hunger for the flesh pots of Egypt, for the things they had left behind. Because of their association with the "mixt multitude," Israel began to pray the same prayer, and to long for the same things.

That principle holds to-day. Certain contact with the world is absolutely necessary to the Christian. We are in the world: we cannot live a monastic existence; we cannot shut ourselves within stone walls, and with firmly bolted doors shut the world the flesh and the devil without. And yet there is a very real separation possible to the Christian: "The world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." But my brethren, if it be so that in our business, and social relations, in our recreations, in our pleasures, in every expression of the life we live, we are not only associated with, but identified with the world, governed by its maxims, our conduct regulated by its standards, our purposes directed toward the same ends—if we are living essentially worldly lives, it does not make much difference how we pray. No one of us has ever asked God, "Let me live a worldly life. Lord make me successful according to the standards of the world. Give me a place and standing in the estimation of worldly men. Help me to appear great in the eyes of men who know not God. Make me popular with the world which cries, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!'" We never pray like that with the lips—never think of praying after that fashion. We should be shocked if we did; and yet the influence of the "mixt multitude" may be so real in our lives, may be so determining a factor in the moulding of our ambitions, that every throb of our hearts may just telegraph that message heavenward—"Make me a full grown, successful, worldly man." And God may answer your prayer.

If you examine the story you will find that the life they lived was a protest against divine government; a protest against the provisions of divine Providence. "And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it." "Man did eat angels' food." And God let down a little bit of heaven for a redeemed nation to live upon, and enjoy. And they rebelled against the divine order; they protested against the provision which God had made. And Moses, interpreting the life of protest they lived, uttered these wonderfully significant words:—listen! "Ye have wept in the ears of the Lord." No, they did not pray, but they wept; and God heard their tears. It was the most effectual kind of prayer.

"Wherefore did Sarah laugh?" said the angel. "Then Sarah denied, saying, 'I laughed not.' 'Nay; but thou didst laugh,' said the angel." He might have said: "Thou hast laughed in the ears of the Lord; thou hast laughed at a promise of grace; thou hast ridiculed the possibility of God's doing what He hath said." "It is all very well for these doctrinaires to talk about the life of faith; all very well for people to say the Old Book is true, and that God will keep His Word in this late day; all very well for these partially educated and stupid preachers, who cannot keep up with the times, to say that God—the God of the Bible—is living to-day! But the thing is really absurd." You never heard a man stand up in a prayer-meeting and say that; or pretend to pray, and say, "O Lord, I do not believe Thy Word; I believe that half the Bible is not true; I do not believe that Thou hast spoken in any reliable fashion; I do not believe that it is possible to-day just to be touched by the finger of God, and to be made a new creature, and to have the whole life revolutionized and transformed." You never heard a man say that in so many words; but that is what the Church of Christ is saying to-day: "It is no use preaching the old

gospel. Let us turn aside to some other thing." And I tell you, my brethren, the councils of the Christian Church which pour contempt upon the word of divine revelation is a cry of unbelief, going up into the ears of the Lord God. And He may give the Church their request—let them have their own way—and send leanness into their souls! O may God preserve us from that!

I point out to you that it is not what we say in prayer-meeting—not what we say in private on our knees; but it is the prayer that has the energy of our whole life behind it—it is what the man really is before God—that He answers.

II. Well, now, **Of What Did That Prayer Consist?** What, in a word, was their request? Well, in the first place, it was a request to be permitted to return to the old life. They said, "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic—but now, now,—there is nothing but this manna before us. We see nothing but manna—the thing which God gave us; but we remember what Egypt gave us; and if we had our way, we would go back again." And so they asked for permission: in their hearts they turned back again into Egypt.

We never pray, "O Lord, let me live as though I had never seen Jesus; let me live as though I had never been cleansed by the precious blood; let me find pleasure among those who never bow the knee to God." We never pray like that in word; but alas! alas! how many there are who continually remember Egypt; and whose desires are still on that low plane! And they are making their requests known unto God.

Their request was that they might be fed with some other than spiritual food. They said, "We have had altogether too much manna; we should like now to have a change; we want something else than the thing which God has ordered for us." The New Testament is full of that. The multitude gathered around Jesus, and when He said to them, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." And went on to say, "My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." They said, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. Thou hast the manna, and it is the manna we want; and we will stay with Thee for the sake of getting the manna."

Alas! there is a demand to-day for something else than the spiritual food. May I venture to say that a year or so ago, when the pastor was offering the morning invocation—just simply asking the blessing of God, and for the descent of the manna—someone arriving late, but who is not with us now, remarked to one of the ushers in the vestibule. "And what is this? Some more of this spiritual stuff, I suppose?" Ah yes, there are some who do not want the spiritual "stuff"; who do not want to know what God has said; what God has planned; what God has promised; what God proposes. "O no, let us have something else than the manna." And so they pray, and they get what they pray for in the end.

If you study the narrative of the eleventh chapter of Numbers, which we read this morning—and if you have no other course prescribed, and have leisure this afternoon, it might be profitable to read that chapter over again—if you study the narrative you will find that their request consisted of a desire to live on the carnal plane, to just live like natural men, to live on the things that other people lived on, to live without commerce with the skies. "No, none of that manna—give us flesh that we may eat; gratify our carnal desires; let our palates be pleased, even if our souls are starved; let our imaginations be stimulated; let us live in the realm of the temporal and the seen; and do not talk to

us about that upper and unseen realm. We will have none of it." That is the way too many have been praying; that is the way a large part of the Christian Church has been praying.

I remember a talk with a friend. He was a godly man, but I think wholly mistaken in his emphasis. He was a leader of one of our missionary enterprises. And he said, "You know, when I was young, I used to hear ministers appealing to their hearers to surrender to Christ, to receive Him, to trust Him, for the sake of being saved for the future life. And I used to hear missionary appeals based on the same ground. We were asked to send the gospel to the heathen in order to save their souls, in order that they might know Christ, with a view to dwelling happily with Him in the future. But," he said, "it always seemed to me that the future was so remote; and that that argument was not the most weighty. Now we urge men to come to Christ because of the profitableness of godliness to the life that now is. We tell young men if they have Christ as their guide and helper, they are likely to succeed; and we appeal to men to give of their means for our educational work, and for the sake of the social uplift it gives. We tell people now, when the gospel comes, they become better clothed, better fed, and better educated, and better citizens." And in half the missionary meetings of to-day you hear men here in Canada appealing for money for the purpose, not of making citizens of the New Jerusalem; but for the sake of making good Canadians. That has its place, and will come as a by-product of the other; for he who is a citizen of heaven will be a good citizen, and subject to the powers that be, that are ordained of God.

But what is our prayer? The prayer expressed by our lives? Is it a prayer that surveys merely the realm of the temporal, of the material? Or is it a prayer which transcends the things of time and sense, which asks "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God."

III. The Lord granted their request. "He gave them their request." He answers the prayer of the full heart. "He giveth to the beast his food." Mark! "He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry." And if you want to come down to that plane, and pray like a beast, and cry like a raven; you will get what the beasts get, and you will get what the ravens are provided. It is a solemn truth that God does allow men to have their own way; that he does sometimes grant their request.

And you will notice that this prayer was supernaturally answered. The quails were just as much a miracle as the manna. Moses said, "Shall the flocks and herds be slain to suffice them—six thousand in all—or shall the fish of the sea be gathered together for them? And the Lord said unto Moses, Is the Lord's hand waxed short?—thou shalt see whether My word shall come to pass unto thee or not." You will remember how the quails came; and how by His outstretched arm, and the exercise of supernatural providential power, God granted their request on the low, material, temporal plane! He gave them flesh to eat. And I suppose in the beginning they would have been inclined to hold a thanksgiving service. "Ha, Ha, Moses, now we have the kind of religion we want. No more of this manna—we have the flesh; and if the God you taught us to trust in can do that for us, very well; we will go on praying to Him."

Here is a man who would not be regarded as an irreligious man at all: he has a deep religious interest, and he prays; and if you talk to him, he says, "You know I put all my business affairs before the Lord; and I have been prospered in my business marvellously. Everything I touch succeeds; and I

believe it is because I pray about it. Strangely enough, difficulties are removed; and I have an abundant measure of material prosperity. I am able to send my children to school. I am able to set before them the possibilities of a university education. I tell them that they ought to occupy a more honorable position than their father. I tell you, sir, we are getting on! we are getting on! You ought to hear my boys: they are just fired with an ambition to succeed; and I tell them, 'Go on, go on! There is plenty of money; and I will help you all the way through.' O yes, sir, I have great reason for thankfulness. My wife and I just pray about these things; and the more we pray, the more material prosperity we have. And we are getting on. The quails are just being piled up all the time, night and day; and we go on gathering them, abundant in labor, and more and more prosperous." But no manna—nothing that belongs to that unseen realm! They ask for none, and none is given.

Do you know what they said of the manna? Do you know what the word means? They gathered, and they said, "What is this?" Ah, there was a bit of mystery about it. It belonged to another realm: it belonged to the spiritual. But as for the quails, they never asked, "What is it?" They knew what it was. "Now Moses, we are at home, if you please; now we are among our own folk. We know all about this."

I would not have anybody be unthankful for material prosperity. I believe it is possible for a man to take Jesus Christ into partnership with him in his business, and in his family affairs; and I believe that the blessing of God does result sometimes, when it is His will that it shall be so, in material prosperity. But I charge you not to assume too readily that you are favored of heaven because you are getting on. It may be that your view of life has been material; the boundaries of life have been temporal; it may be that you have been praying for flesh instead of manna; and it may be that the children of whom you are so proud, by and by will show a stronger appetite for the flesh, and the things of the flesh, than for the things of the Spirit. It may be possible that God is just granting your request, because that is the prayer of your whole life.

IV. But what followed? He "sent leanness into their soul." For the moment they were satisfied, but only for a moment. They were soon surfeited. What a terrible figure the Lord uses there! He said, "I will give you what you want. You ask me for flesh, you shall have it—ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; but even for a whole month—I will give you flesh—flesh—flesh—until it comes out at your nostrils. I will let you have enough of your own way"—and He did. Yonder was the land of promise; yonder the fortresses of the giants; yonder the milk and the honey; yonder the enemies of the Lord, which were to be dispossessed! There was a kind of spiritual strength in the manna that was not to be found in the flesh. And when they ate of the flesh, they had no strength for conquest, for further progress. God gave them their request; and it resulted in spiritual stagnation.

As though a boy should say to his father, "Father, you have ordered me to go to school; but I do not want to go to school. May I stay at home?" "Yes, my son, you may stay home." "You have set me many a lesson; but I would rather shut the book. I do not want to learn the lesson. May I cease from application to my task?" "Yes, if that is what you want." "Father, the boys are playing in the sunshine: may I run out to play instead of applying myself to the work of the day?" "Yes, you may go out to play." The days swiftly succeed each other, and the years roll on, until he comes to manhood's estate, a dwarfed, and stunted, and unenlightened human creature, who has no place among true men.

These are our school days, my brethren. "For our conversation is in

heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change the bodies of our humiliation, that they may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." And He bids us go to school. He bids us face the hard task, and apply ourselves to difficult lessons; "for precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little," because He would "present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." He would say yonder in the presence of God, "Behold here am I, and the children whom Thou hast given Me." But instead of desiring to "grow up into Him in all things;" instead of praying God to take everything away from me that would prevent my growth in grace, and to deal with me according to His infinite mercy, that I may learn more and more of Christ, and that some day I may meet Him "with joy, and not with grief;" instead of begging, give me strength to say 'No' to the world—"I cannot go out to play with you;" Instead of praying, "Give me strength to refuse to respond to all the seductive voices that call me away from the path of duty, and the school of Christ; for I am living for the day when these temporalities have gone, and when I shall stand in the presence of the Holy One, like unto Him,"—instead of going to school, some of us say, "Let us play; let us live on this lower plane! Let us alone that we may live according to our own desires." The most terrible judgment that can befall some of us perhaps, would be for God to answer our prayer; to let us have our own way. How terrible that would be! It brought "leanness into their souls."

I remember some years ago a certain church that seemed to be at the high tide of spiritual prosperity. There were in it a body of praying men and women, who had a spiritual conception of the Church's mission. And there were in it, at the same time, a company of men and women who were like unto the "mixt multitude," who had no thought of the spiritual mission of the Church. And in a certain crisis of that church's history the "mixt multitude" prevailed. A certain person wrote to me about their condition—one of the praying women—and I wrote back to say, "You must trust the great Head of the Church, and believe that He will have His way." She replied, "Yes, I believe that Jesus Christ is sovereign; but I have been pondering lately a text in the 106th Psalm: 'He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.'" And she added, "I am terribly afraid that God may grant this church's request." That is many years ago; but He did; and from that day until this it has been continually declining, until it has ceased to be a place where God is glorified in the salvation of souls.

My brethren, as I bring you this message this morning, I confess I am afraid of the operation of its principles; and the only thing that I can suggest to you is that we had better let God choose for us: we had better learn the wisdom of being content with that which He gives.

What is faith? O, says somebody, "I believe God." You believe God? And in what does your faith consist? What kind of God do you believe in? "O, I believe in His power. I believe God can do anything." Yes: what else do you believe in? "Well, I believe in His willingness. I believe He stands ready to help His children." Faith in power! Faith in the willingness of God to respond to your prayer! "Yes." What else do you believe in, please? "I believe in the love of God. I believe God loves us; and that He loves to enrich His children." Yes: that is very good. Faith in the love of God! But what else do you believe in? "Well I believe He will do what I ask Him to do." And what do you ask Him to do? "O, I have set my heart on a certain thing; and I put it before the Lord; and I believe He will grant my request." You believe in the power, and willingness, and love, and faithfulness of God? Do

you believe in the wisdom of God? If, in answer to your prayer, God emphatically says, "No—not that, but something else,—can you bow and say, "Even so, Father; for so it seemeth good in Thy sight,—I had rather walk in the dark with Thee, than go alone in the light?"

How far does your prayer project itself into the future? Right up to the day of judgment? "I am seeking for grace that I may be right then." Yes? "For thou knowest not what a day may bring forth;" and you and I are not competent to pray for to-morrow. Now mark it! We are not competent to pray for to-morrow; we do not know what the morrow will bring; and the only safe way is to abide by the promises of God—to abide by such a revelation of His will as we have. To leave the choice of the future not only to the love and power, but to His wisdom too.

"Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
However dark it be!
Lead me by Thine own hand,
Choose out the path for me,

"Not mine, not mine the choice,
In things or great or small;
Be Thou my Guide, my Strength,
My Wisdom, and my All."

CHURCH NOTICES.

Women's Mission Circle. The Annual Meeting of the Women's Mission Circle will be held on Wednesday afternoon, November 1st, in the church parlor. Reports of the year's work will be given and election of officers held. This will be an excellent opportunity for all new women members of the church to learn of the mission work, and identify themselves with it. Delegates will be appointed for the coming Women's Convention in Peterborough, and an interesting programme presented. Come and bring others with you. Collectors please bring in the monthly mission offerings.

First Dorcas Meeting. The first Dorcas Meeting will be held on Thursday, November 2nd, at 2.30. All ladies invited to make this first meeting the best we have ever had. Tea will be served at 6.30. Everybody is invited. A collection is taken at the table to defray expenses. The tea will be provided by the Junior Dorcas Society.

The Church Calendar

For the week beginning Sunday, October 29th, 1922.

SUNDAY

10.00—Prayer Service in the Church Parlor, Mr. George Greenway.

10.30—Communion Service.

11.00—Public Worship. The Pastor will preach.

3.00—The Bible School will meet.

6.00—Prayer Meeting in Church Parlor.

7.00—Public Worship—The Pastor will preach.

TUESDAY, THURSDAY and SATURDAY—8.00—Prayer Service.

WEDNESDAY—Junior Mid-Week Service—7.15.

First Dorcas Meeting, Thursday, 2.30; Tea, 6.30.

The Parliament St. Branch, 250 Parliament St. Sunday: Bible School, 3.00;

Evangelistic Service, conducted by Mr. W. L. McKay, 7.00;

Wednesday, 8.00, Prayer Meeting. Friday, 7.15, Junior Service.